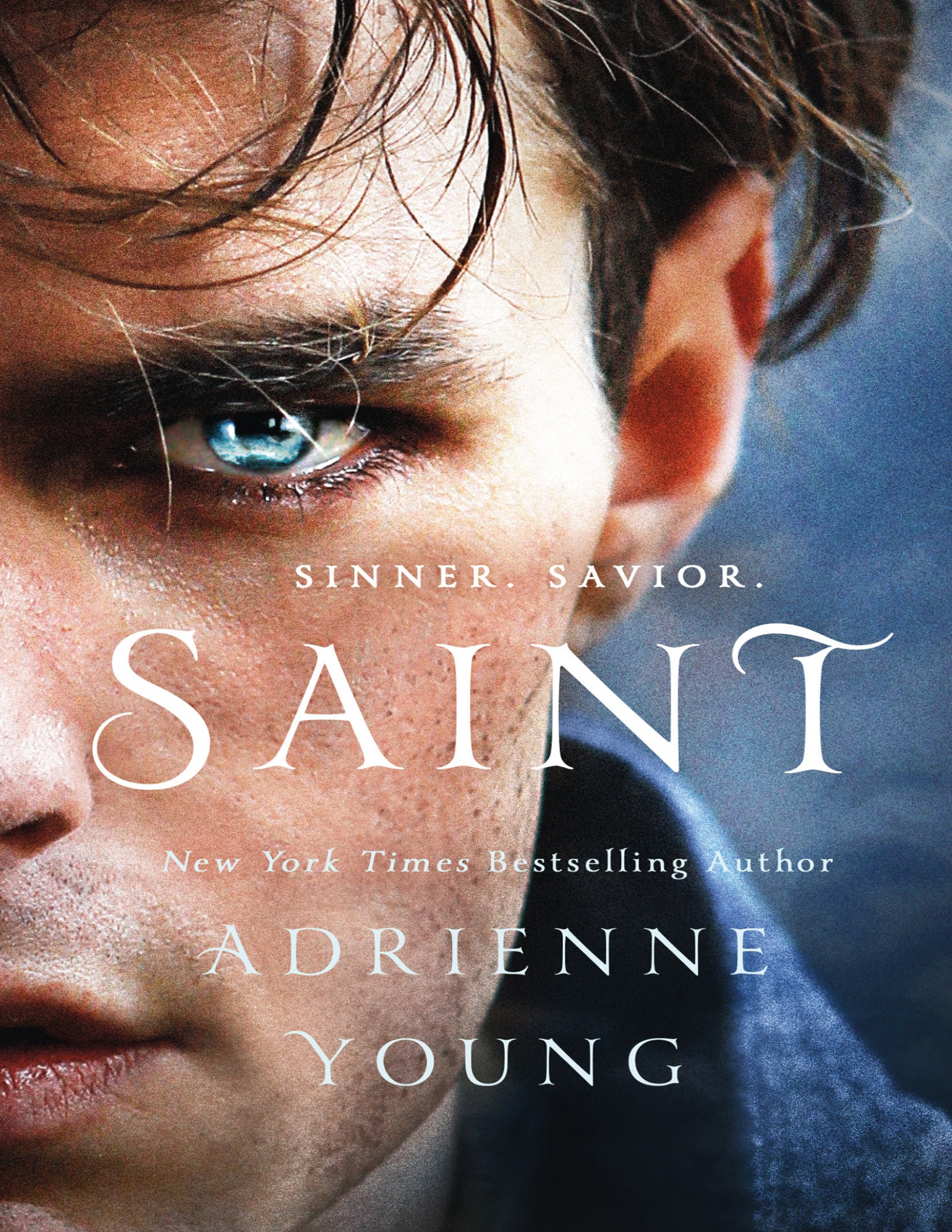


A close-up, high-contrast photograph of a man's face, focusing on his intense blue eyes and dark, slightly messy hair. The lighting is dramatic, with one side of his face in shadow. The background is a soft, out-of-focus blue.

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A NOVEL

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For Kristin,
The very first soul I ever trusted with my imagination. This one's for you.

John B!

PROLOGUE

ISOLDE

There was a blue door with a black lantern on Forsyth Street.

Behind it was a man who could make me disappear.

My hand dragged over the uneven brick wall as I paced up the walk, the heels of my boots a sharp clip in the night. Rain still dripped from the edges of the rooftops, beading down the single-pane windows, and the damask silk of my skirts was heavy with the damp.

North End's intricate tangle of alleys and streets unfurled into the wet corners of a city that had just seen a storm. It was a labyrinth I didn't know. Bastian was my home, but I'd never been to North End, not even with my father. A girl like me had no reason to. I was the daughter of a merchant who'd lived every day of her life to please her mother, even if I'd left that version of me back at Azimuth House. But there was no betrayal like the one I carried in my pocket. Now, I was no more than a traitor.

"Blue door. Black lantern," I whispered to myself again.

My eyes skipped over the buildings and I squinted, trying to make out their shapes and colors in the dark. The helmsman of the *Craven* was a man I'd seen many times at my mother's house and on her ships, but he'd kept his distance from me like most of her traders did. No one wanted to touch the flame that burned at the center of my mother's hands. She protected her precious things.

But the helmsman had been my father's friend. So, when I'd pulled him behind the gauze curtains that looked out over the candlelit gala and whispered to him that I needed to leave the city, he'd told me how. I could hardly pick out his deep voice over the sound of the music, and now I wondered if I'd heard him right at all.

North End. Look for the blue door with the black lantern on Forsyth Street.

That warm light at my mother's gala was still alive around me, as if it were clinging to my edges as I slipped through the dark. But I could feel it bleeding from me, like the slow smear of ink in water. Threads of color that stretched until they disappeared. The glint of the gold wallpaper of my mother's study. My father's portrait looking down at me. The way the midnight's song had filled the room until my ears were ringing with it.

In a matter of seconds, that world had come crashing down with only three words spoken from Holland's lips: *a necessary sacrifice*.

It had taken me the length of a breath to decide to open the gem case. To walk out that door. And I was never, ever going back.

I wiped the tear from my numb cheek, walking faster as the street curved deeper into the borough. When the glossy blue door of the row house finally appeared, it was easy to spot. The paint looked

fresh, almost wet, and the black lantern that hung over the threshold was fitted with not one flame, but two, illuminating the alcove that sat hollow at the top of the steps.

I glanced over my shoulder before I climbed them, knocking softly with a trembling hand. It was the middle of the night, but if what I'd heard about North End was true, it wouldn't be so unusual to have a visitor at this hour. The work on these streets was done in shadow, out of view of the guilds and the harbor watch and the Trade Council. I suspected that was why the helmsman of the *Craven* had sent me there.

I raised my fist to knock again before the door's lock turned and it opened, revealing the face of a girl not much older than me. One long braid was pinned over the crown of her head and the color of her simple frock matched it, made notable only by the bright silver chain of a pocket watch tucked into her belt. Her dark, owlsh eyes raked over my gown before they shot to the street behind me.

"I think you knocked on the wrong door." There was a cutting edge to her voice that hardened the soft curves of her face.

My hands clenched tighter in my skirts, a bead of sweat sliding down my spine, and the hair beginning to unravel from its pins blew across my cheek as another rain-soaked gust of wind swallowed the street.

"I'm looking for Simon," I said.

The name the helmsman of the *Craven* had given me seemed to surprise her, but the look on her face quickly turned into curiosity. She studied me another moment, the set of her mouth steady as her gaze tightened on my face. She was looking for something there, I realized, and once she found it, she let the door swing open.

I glanced once more at the empty street before I stepped over the threshold, into the amber light that filled the narrow hallway. The floorboards popped beneath the soles of my boots, the windows of the house rattling in the wind, but the sound buzzing in my chest was a different one. Gemstone.

The hum hovered between the walls in a chorus that reverberated in my bones. It was everywhere, coming from all around me.

There was a moment, a fleeting one, when I wanted to reach for the door before it closed and run from that feeling that had haunted me since the day my mother first realized what I was. But as quickly as the thought came, it was gone again. There was no going back. Not now.

The door's heavy bolt slid into place and the girl turned to face me. There was a beat of silence that made me think that she, too, was reconsidering whether she should have let me inside.

Her chin lifted. "Follow me."

The fabric of my thick skirts brushed along the walls of the cramped hallway, making me feel like it was growing narrower by the second. The familiar sounds of garnet and emerald and diamond caught my ear, interlaced with a dozen others, but they didn't belong here. The tiny, run-down row house wasn't the home of someone who wore a merchant's ring from the Gem Guild, which would deem the trade inventory under this roof a legitimate one. North End was famous for its criminals, and they'd made my mother's life very difficult over the last few years. I could only hope that meant this was the last place she'd come looking for me.

The hall came to an end, and I followed the girl down a winding staircase, catching sight of her face only briefly as she looked back at me. "You're lucky you didn't have those jewels and that

ridiculous frock ripped off of you in the street.”

The words weren’t laced with a threat or even any kind of reproach. In fact, she sounded as if she was genuinely marveling at the fact that I’d made it there in one piece. And she was probably right. I’d walked all the way from the merchants’ district, keeping to the alleys so I wouldn’t be spotted. My mother would have already noticed I was gone, and that wasn’t entirely unusual. But when she saw what I’d taken with me, she’d have the whole city combing the streets and the harbor.

The girl opened another door and we entered a large, dark cellar lit only by a small fireplace tucked into one corner. The walls were almost entirely hidden by stacks of closed crates that reached to the ceiling, marked with port seals I recognized. They stretched from the Unnamed Sea to the Narrows.

It took me a moment to spot the man sitting at the long wooden table on the other side of the room. Simon, I hoped. He looked up from a stack of parchment, eyes struggling to focus on me. His light brown hair was a wild sweep across his forehead, the buttons of his shirt half undone.

“She’s looking for you.” The girl’s fingers slipped from the door handle as she watched me.

I finally let go of my skirts, wiping my slick palms against the smooth fabric. “You’re Simon?”

“I am.” The man’s voice was measured, as unreadable as his face, but I saw his gaze pause on the pearl-and-sapphire earrings that still hung from my ears.

“My name is—”

“I know who you are,” he interrupted. “The question is, what are you doing here?”

I hadn’t planned to give him my real name, but the fact that he knew my face woke a sinking feeling in the center of my chest. I’d been raised among the likes of the guild, but I’d lived most of my days with my mother’s ship crews. This man was neither. And I was sure I’d never seen him before.

“I was told you can get me out of the city,” I said.

His hands moved from the parchment, folding it on the table before him, and his attention drifted back to the girl in the doorway. It was only a moment before it found me again.

“If you want to leave Bastian, all you have to do is walk down to the harbor and pay for passage.”

“No. I can’t.” I swallowed, thinking of Holland. She saw every manifest. Every inventory list. The harbor master himself answered to her. “I need to ... disappear.”

Simon finally stood, letting the stool scrape against the uneven floor behind him. The sound made me shift on my feet. When he came around the table to face me, I took an involuntary step backward.

“To where?”

“Ceros,” I answered, hands twisting into the fabric of my skirts again.

It would take no time at all for Holland to find me in Nimsmire or Sagsay Holm. There wasn’t a single port in the Unnamed Sea she didn’t have eyes on. And if I was going to cut her the only place she could feel, I had to get to the Narrows.

“Who sent you here?” he asked.

“The helmsman of the *Craven*.”

Simon seemed to consider that a moment. He paced the floor, arms crossed over his chest, but beside me, the girl looked wary. They weren’t fools. If they knew who I was then they knew who I was running from, and no one in their right mind would go against my mother. But this man and Holland were probably already on opposite sides of a line.

“Won’t take her long to look through the passenger lists,” he thought aloud, and I was grateful he didn’t call Holland by name. “And there’s only one way to leave Bastian—the sea.”

“A crew, then,” I said.

“Crew?” One of his eyebrows lifted. “You want to crew on a ship headed to the Narrows?”

“If you know who I am, then you know I’m a dredger.”

He stopped his pacing then, staring at me. Holland’s dredger daughter was a source of entertainment for the guilds. Freediving the coral reefs that snaked through the Unnamed Sea to excavate gemstone wasn’t exactly a refined trade. But it wasn’t just the dredging my mother used me for, and that was the reason her empire had stretched the entire coast of the Unnamed Sea. In a way, I’d raised and fed the dragon that had all but devoured me.

My father hadn’t been so lucky. He’d had the sense to keep my gift as a gem sage a family matter. It was only in the last few years that it had become all but impossible to do. And his worry for me had eventually become his end.

“Put me on a crew. As long as they’re going to Ceros, I don’t care which one.”

I had no intention of diving for anyone ever again. Not unless it was my own pockets I was filling with coin. But I needed a ship. One my mother wouldn’t look twice at.

Simon’s head tilted to one side, considering it. “Not the worst idea.” He pulled a fresh sheet of parchment from the stack on the table. “There’s a ship in the harbor that’s scheduled to leave at dawn. It’s called the *Luna*.”

I exhaled, so heavy with relief that I felt as if I might fall through the floor.

He kept his back to me and took his time, dipping the quill into the inkpot between lines of words and sanding the ink. When he was finished, he folded the parchment carefully and sealed it with a deep violet wax the color of opaque amethyst.

“You’re sure?” The girl’s quiet voice was heavy as she eyed Simon. I’d almost forgotten she was standing there.

He answered with only a brief glance in her direction before he gestured to me.

“Those should do it.”

It took a moment for me to realize he was talking about the earrings he’d been inspecting when I walked through the door. I hesitated before I reached up, unclasping each one and dropping them into his hand. They were worth over a hundred coppers each, but I’d expected to pay more.

He tucked them into the pocket of his vest, jerking his chin toward the door, where the young woman was still patiently waiting.

“Get her something to wear, Eden.” He handed her the parchment. “And have the seamstress cut up that frock. The silk should fetch something.”

She vanished without another word, leaving us alone in the dark cellar.

Simon leaned into the edge of the table, watching me as her steps faded up the staircase. It was only then I could feel just how far I was from the protective reach and scrutinizing gaze of my mother. And instead of that knowledge bringing me fear, there was only fury burning inside of me.

“Looks like fate is smiling on me tonight,” he said, almost to himself.

My hand slipped into my pocket, finding the small purse that held the midnight stone. It was the only thing that had the power to pierce Holland’s iron skin. The only thing I’d ever seen put a flash of

terror in her eyes, bright behind that look of hunger.

Simon's attention seemed to narrow on me the moment I thought it. "What exactly is it you're you running from, Isolde?"

I didn't like hearing my name on a stranger's tongue, but there was more than one answer to that question. My mother. Her empire. Her blood that ran through my veins. It wasn't the first time I'd wanted to escape, but when I heard those words leave her mouth, the cold had wrapped around my heart and squeezed until I couldn't breathe.

A necessary sacrifice.

It had been almost a year since my father died on Yuri's Constellation, the system of reefs I'd grown up diving. The helmsman who'd run the dive for my mother arrived at the harbor with the news. A terrible accident, he'd called it. A sudden turn of tide in an unexpected storm.

It wasn't until the night of the gala, almost a year later, as I stood in my mother's study listening to her hushed words entangled with the voice of the Unnamed Sea's Gem Guild master, that I understood. She'd called my father a necessary sacrifice.

The pieces clicked together one at a time until the picture formed in my mind. It took only minutes to find the ship logs. To find no mention of the storm that had swallowed my father and my heart in a single moment.

He'd wanted to leave Bastian with me. To take me away from my mother's growing shadows. I would have followed him anywhere, but Holland had made sure I had no one to follow. No one but her.

My hand squeezed the purse of gemstone in my pocket so hard that my knuckles ached. I wasn't just going to set fire to everything she'd built. I was going to throw her into the flames too.

Simon took a step toward me. "I said, what are you running from?"

My eyes lifted to meet his, the midnight burning like a hot ember in the center of my palm. "A monster."

1

SAINT

My father told me once that the only fools who sailed the Narrows were the dead and the dying. Sometimes, I think I'm both.

I leaned into the railing of the *Riven* with both hands, watching the lanterns in the harbor flicker to life one by one in the distance. Water dripped from the sails overhead and the meager crew on the deck was still white-faced from the swells we'd carved down only an hour before we spotted land.

Behind them, Clove stood at the helm, the spokes light in his fingers as it spun. His stained shirt was rolled up to his elbows, and most of his blond hair was now unraveled from its knot, blowing across his face as we turned into the wind.

We'd chosen Dern for two reasons. The first was because there was little cause for anyone to come here, other than the traders from the Unnamed Sea who bought grain from the crofters for less than it cost to grow it. The second was because Rosamund was the only shipwright willing to risk taking the coin off two fishermen's sons from Cragsmouth who had no legitimate way to explain where they got it.

There was an explanation, of course. Just not one I was willing to give.

The fading daylight painted the sails over our heads a brilliant amber and the intricately stitched canvas glistened with droplets of rain. They were more patchwork than anything these days, having been repaired by the sailmaker so many times that he'd flat-out refused to take a needle to them again.

He wasn't the only one who thought I was mad, tempting the sea demons by sailing the rickety old ship into deep waters. But I'd come out the other side of enough black, tangled clouds to stop asking whether a storm would kill me. The sea had had her chance enough times. She'd never taken it.

I unfolded my hand, eyeing the fresh cut across my palm beside a stack of healed scars. It was still raw and red from the last port we'd left, stinging as the skin stretched.

"Take us in," I murmured to Clove, ducking into the narrow passage behind him.

His voice called out the orders to our sorry excuse for a crew as I pushed into the sorry excuse for a helmsman's quarters. The cramped room smelled like mold and years-old mullein smoke seeping from the damp wood, but it had been my home for the last two and a half years and it had stayed afloat, which was more than most bastards got.

I hadn't had oil for the lantern in weeks—another luxury we couldn't afford—so when the sun went down it was damn near impossible to see anything. I felt my way along the bulkhead to the chest against the wall and lifted the lid. The stiff hinges creaked as the trunk opened and I reached inside. I didn't bother hiding copper on this ship because there wasn't anyone stupid enough to steal from me.

That was where the stories they told about us had served us well.

My reflection appeared on the round, cracked mirror beside the window as I stood. Blue eyes stared back at me, set beneath thick, dark brows. The angles of my face were deeper than usual, and my jaw was shadowed with scruff. But there wasn't a single coin in our coffers that hadn't already been spent. The lowest on the list was a full belly or a clean shave or lanterns we could actually light. I wouldn't have any of those things until well after Rosamund was paid.

I took the long, cylindrical map case from the wall and pulled the strap over my head so that the case rested against my back. Then I raked one hand through my almost-black hair, tucking it behind one ear and pulling up the collar of my jacket. The purse was heavy in my palm as I stowed it in my pocket, and the ship creaked perilously around me as it began to slow. I wasn't sure how many more voyages across the Narrows the *Riven* could take, but I wouldn't have to find out either.

I caught my own gaze in the mirror for a moment more, brushing off the shoulders of my jacket. I didn't look anything like the Saltbloods who sailed their fancy ships from the Unnamed Sea and plucked what little the Narrows had from our starving hands. Even so, in a month's time, we'd be hocking the *Riven* to whoever wanted the scrap iron and salvageable wood. Then we'd be sailing from Dern under a real trader's crest.

Clove was already waiting beside the ladder when I came back out onto the deck. He leaned into the railing, eyeing Julian as he tied off the lines of the foremast with a hard set to his mouth. The young deckhand's fingers faltered under Clove's gaze, and he pulled at its length, starting again. There was no impressing the *Riven*'s navigator, and with a helmsman who steered them into storms that were the stuff of nightmares, the crew we picked up at each port never lasted long. A few times, they'd disappeared without even waiting to collect the coin they were owed.

It was just as well. There was no shortage of bastards in the Narrows who thought they were willing to die for copper. I usually got at least a few crossings out of them before they realized they weren't.

"Ready?" Clove pulled on his cap as the deckhand finished, swinging one leg over the railing.

"Ready."

I followed him down to the dock, where the harbor master was already waiting. Gerik studied the ship with a scrutinizing gaze, his lip curled under his pointed nose. The *Riven* was nothing much to look at, but I'd stopped being ashamed of her a long time ago.

"You know, every time you leave, I'm sure it's the last time I'll see this ship," Gerik muttered, scratching at a page in his log with a feathered quill. His gaze lifted to the crate of rye being lowered from the railing behind us.

"Messages?" I asked, eyeing the opening of his jacket, where a stack of folded parchment was tucked against his chest.

"No," he answered.

I clenched my teeth, the weight on my chest pressing just a little heavier. Every time we made port, I was sure the summons to the Trade Council would be waiting.

"I guess that means you still don't have that license you keep promising?"

"I don't."

Gerik's eyes squinted. "Then why are you unloading rye on my dock?"

I reached into my vest for the smaller purse of coin I'd known I would need. Now that the Narrows had its own legitimate Trade Council, every helmsman who sailed its waters was vying for a license to compete with the Saltbloods. Us included. But it took copper to get a license—a lot of it—and the only way to get that much coin was to trade *without* a license first and hope that everyone kept their mouths shut.

Gerik could be paid to look the other way, but he could also be paid to snitch. So far, we'd been lucky.

"It's coming," I grunted, handing the purse over.

"Says you and every other fool with a ship." He took it, immediately turning on his heel. "We'll see, won't we?"

"Bastard," Clove muttered.

He hated Gerik even more than I did. He hated most people, in fact. We'd grown up on the wide-bellied fishing boats in Cragsmouth and we'd each pulled the other from churning waters more times than I could count, but that wasn't the reason he was the only soul in the Narrows I trusted. Anyone could throw a drowning man a line. Finding someone who would catch hold of you before you fell overboard in the first place was harder, if not impossible.

I pulled the watch from my pocket, tilting it toward the lantern light. "Need to make this quick."

Clove scanned the docks around us as I started toward the stairs, and a moment later, his footsteps sounded behind me. Dern was no more than a cluster of stone buildings along the rocky shore. It was an outpost of sorts that had slowly become a port when the ships from the Unnamed Sea started showing up here for grain, but the village hadn't caught much attention from the new Trade Council in Ceros. Not yet anyway.

I climbed the steps and took the winding path that led up the hill, away from the busy main thoroughfare. Rosamund didn't like being in the mix of things, but the longer our arrangement dragged on, the more likely it was that someone would get wind of what I was up to. It would come out eventually. But controlling *when* was the key.

The shore grew steep as we reached the little cove, where a few piers reached out over the water. One of them had never been repaired after the storm that took its roof a few years ago, but the other two were still standing, and Rosamund's seal adorned both.

I rapped on the door with my fist twice, and the lock turned a moment later. Ros's apprentice, Nash, didn't look happy to see us. He never did.

His eyes dragged over me from head to toe. "Back already?"

I leaned into the doorframe. "She here?"

Nash's lips pursed as he inspected my shirt, and I ignored him. Not all of us had the steady place of an apprenticeship to keep our clothes mended and our hair trimmed. Not all of us wanted one either. I'd sooner find my death in the deep than live under a guild's crooked thumb.

Nash pushed the door open, letting us in, and he locked it behind us. Inside, lantern light washed over the warm, golden-hued hull of a ship.

The *Aster*.

She was a schooner with two masts and a hull that would hold more than enough cargo for us to get our trade off the ground. Most important, she was ours. Or she would be once I handed this purse of

coin over.

The last time we'd seen her, the masts hadn't been standing. Now they reached up into the rafters that arched over our heads, where a few silver-feathered pigeons were perched in crumbling straw nests. The ship was set onto braces that stretched out over the open black water below. In a few weeks, she would be lowered into the sea for the first time and we'd be raising the sails.

I met Clove's eyes. There was the faint shadow of a smirk on his lips. He was thinking the same thing. Somehow, we'd pulled this thing off. To be honest, I wasn't even sure how.

"Thought I heard coin jingling," Rosamund's rasping voice called out from the deck above. She peered down at us over the railing of the starboard side before climbing down to the platform.

Nash crossed his arms over his chest, still sneering. "You sure you can handle a ship like this one? I'd hate to see it sail away just to hear it's sunk a week later."

"We do the building, not the sailing, Nash," Rosamund said, jumping down from the ladder with a grunt. "What do you care, as long as you get paid?"

She pulled the straps of her heavy tool belt from her shoulders and loosened the buckle at her waist. When she was free of it, she reached up, kneading the tight muscles at the back of her neck. Rosamund wasn't a slight woman, but the bulky shipwright's gear made her look it.

"All right. Get on with it." She wasn't a gentle woman either.

I reached into my jacket and pulled the purse free, setting it into her open hand. She felt its weight before she passed it to Nash, and he found a seat at the small table against the wall to begin counting right away.

"How many days?" I asked, watching him carefully as he opened the purse.

Rosamund turned the merchant's ring on her finger, thinking. The silver was dinged and bent up from the work she did, but the stone at its center marked her as an approved merchant by the Shipwrights Guild. If Nash was lucky, one day he'd wear one too.

"I'd say we'll have her sea ready by the next full moon, give or take a few days."

Clove took a step toward the edge of the platform and reached up, running a hand over the smooth wood planks that stretched to the bow. There was a rare tenderness in the touch. He'd waited a long time for this. We both had.

"But I gotta say," Ros sighed, "those fools up at the tavern are gettin' more curious by the day."

Clove's gaze slid to meet mine. That was a problem. We weren't the only ones trying to establish a Narrows-born trading operation, and there was no shortage of helmsmen who'd see this ship burn before they let us get ahead of them in that line. We'd managed to keep the *Aster* a secret while it was being built, but if people in Dern found out Rosamund was building a ship for us, that would catch attention. And not just from the helmsmen of the Narrows who stopped here. The Saltbloods didn't want to lose their hold on trade, and one more ship sailing wouldn't do them any favors. We didn't need anyone sniffing around and finding out just how close we were.

Rosamund set her hands on her hips impatiently. "How're we lookin', Nash?"

"So far so good," he grunted, taking his time with each stack of coin.

When I realized he was only halfway through the purse, I pulled the watch from my pocket to check the time again. It was nearly half past the hour, and I knew what happened when I was late. My next appointment wouldn't wait for me, no matter how long we'd been doing business.

“Go.” Clove jerked a chin toward the door. “I’ll finish up here and meet you at the tavern for the count.”

I nodded, snapping the watch closed and dropping it back into my jacket. I pulled my cap on and started toward the door, but I looked back once more before I pushed out into the rain.

The *Aster* glowed in the lantern light, the gleaming wood as smooth as the morning sea. She wasn’t just a ship. She was an idea. She was the thing I’d risked my neck for a hundred times over the last two years and my chance at a trade license, along with a crest of my own. But the *Aster* wasn’t just going to change things for me and Clove. She was going to change things for the Narrows.

SAINT

Three chimneys rose from the mist over the only tavern in Dern, smoke billowing from their narrow, blackened mouths.

In the two years I'd been stopping in the village, I'd never seen the tavern empty. There was no merchant's house here, even though there was a growing trade, and that meant the tavern was the place of business for anyone stopping through, including me.

The roar of voices came tumbling out onto the street as I opened the doors, and the humid warmth of the fire in the stone fireplace at the back hit me like a wall. I was never on dry land long enough to rid my bones of the chill or fully dry the damp from my clothes, but the smell of burning wood reminded me of the days before I'd given my life to the sea.

The door closed behind me and I instinctively rolled my shoulders. I didn't like being closed in by four walls and I didn't like the feeling of solid earth beneath my feet. I preferred the openness of the water, where you could at least see what was coming for you on the horizon.

The barkeeper gave me a nod in greeting when he spotted me, immediately turning toward the wall of bottles behind him and reaching for the one that quite literally had my name on it. Barkeepers made a nice side profit on pouring watered-down rye for patrons once they were a few drinks in, pocketing the excess coin. The first time I'd caught him filling my glass with it, I'd drawn my knife from my belt so quickly that he didn't even have time to stopper it.

I could see that look—the one that flashed in the eyes of the people who'd heard the stories about the helmsman of the *Riven*. In those tales, I'd made a pact with sea demons to spare my ship from storms and offered my own crew as sacrifices to the sea. I was mad. Reckless. Just asking to meet my death out on the water.

The barkeeper hadn't tried cutting my rye again, and I doubted he would since I kept him stocked with Sowan's best bottle. I couldn't blame him for trying, but Clove and I weren't just two kids from a fishing village who'd washed up in the harbor. And I counted on him to make sure I didn't look cheap in front of my guest.

I leaned on the counter with both hands, waiting as he pulled the bottle from its place on the wall. He set it down, followed by two small green glasses.

"Your luck never ceases to amaze me, Saint." He grunted. "Just missed a hell of a storm."

I smirked to myself. We hadn't missed it. And luck had nothing to do with it. "Our room ready?"

He gave me a nod and I lifted the map case from my shoulder, handing it to him. One of the kitchen maids was already climbing the stairs with it when I picked up the bottle and the glasses, heading for

the row of wooden booths that lined the wall.

The toe of a shined leather boot stuck out from under one of the tables and when I rounded the high back of the seat, Henrik Roth didn't even bother looking up from his ledger.

His mouth moved silently around the numbers he was writing along the right-hand column of the open page as I slid into the seat across from him. His pocket watch was open on the table, the second hand quietly ticking around the face. I waited for him to finish before I set the two glasses between us.

Henrik dropped the quill, looking up. He was only four or five years older than me, but something about the look in his eyes always made me forget that. His light brown hair had the slightest tinge of red and it was somehow always freshly cut and expertly combed, as if whatever ship he came in on had a barber on board. His tailored jacket and spotless white shirt made him stand out among the grimy traders that filled the tavern, but I'd always gotten the impression that he liked it that way. He was the most smartly dressed criminal I'd ever met.

"Could smell you as soon as you came through the door." He sat back, giving me a wry grin. "You're more fish guts than human these days."

I unstopped the bottle, pouring his rye before I poured my own. "You're probably right about that." I set it down and picked up my glass.

Henrik followed, lifting his to meet mine at the center of the table, and they clinked before we shot them back in one swallow. The taste burned in the back of my throat, warming my belly as Henrik took it upon himself to pour the second round.

"When are you going to tell me where you get this stuff?" He lifted one eyebrow.

I swirled the rye in my glass. The bottles Clove and I sold illegally at each port had no maker's mark, and that was intentional. If we were caught selling it, I didn't want it falling back on the crofter who made it. But I also didn't want anyone knowing where it came from because when we finally had our license, we'd be the only ones trading the stuff.

"I'll tell you where the rye comes from if you tell me how you get those gem fakes to weigh out," I said.

Henrik smiled at that, his brown eyes sparkling. The Roths had built their business on gem fakes that were more than convincing, but the real mystery was how they'd been able to get their stones to pass the scales. According to the accounts I'd heard in the Narrows taverns, it had been more than thirty years since the Roths' fakes had first started appearing in the merchant's houses, and no one had been able to crack it. Not even the few gem sages who were left.

Between our rye and Henrik's stones, we'd started a risky but mutually beneficial enterprise in the Narrows. Almost two years in, Clove and I had finally been able to fund the build of the *Aster* and our petition for a license in one sweep.

Henrik reached into his vest, producing a small blue velvet pouch and setting it down in front of me. I finished my glass before opening it and pouring the faceted crimson pieces into my palm. Their faces caught the lantern light, sparkling, and the sight made me swallow hard. It was the largest haul we'd ever traded for him, and if I played it right, it could be the last. Now that the *Aster* and our trade license was paid for, the coin we cut from this deal would go to launch our first official route through the Narrows. It was the kind of coin that spilled blood. Ours, if we weren't careful.

"Red beryl, ranging from about a quarter to a third of a carat each. The cuts are clean and the color

is some of the best I've done. These'll pass anyone's inspection as long as you steer clear of a gem sage."

"Lucky for you those aren't so easy to find these days," I said, holding one of the stones up to the light.

The ratio of real to fake was at least one to three, but I wouldn't be able to tell them apart if my life depended on it. Even the gem merchants' most sophisticated gem lamps rarely detected them.

"I'm definitely not complaining."

I poured the stones back into the pouch, cinching it closed and tucking it into my jacket before I pulled my final purse of coin free. Henrik didn't even bother counting it. We'd traded enough times for him to know I was good for it, and I knew him well enough now to understand that if I crossed the Roths, I'd pay with my life.

"Happy to be rid of them. Most of the gem sages in Bastian are gone. Sagsay Holm too."

"Where are they headed?"

Henrik shrugged. "Don't know. Don't care. But my job is getting a lot easier without them."

There was a time when gem sages had been in high demand in both Bastian and Ceros for their unparalleled skills with the gems. But when they started out-earning the merchants who relied upon them, there were bounties put out and no shortage of people who were willing to collect that coin. People like the Roths, whose business relied on the production and trade of fakes, had benefited.

"I've heard there are merchants in the Narrows paying top dollar to have a gem sage smuggled in. I'd be careful," he said.

That didn't surprise me. Now that the Narrows had a Trade Council, there wasn't a single guild member who wasn't trying to climb up in the world to try their hand at beating out the merchants of the Unnamed Sea. If they had to buy gem sages to do it, they would.

"Thanks for the tip."

Henrik leaned on the table with both elbows. "You lose business, I lose business."

He met my eyes, making sure I understood that it wasn't charity. It was a warning. If he didn't bring in the coin he was supposed to, his father, Felix Roth, would deal with him. That was what made getting mixed up with the Roths so dangerous. Everyone had something to lose.

Henrik was the only one involved in this arrangement who knew where the gems were going. I sold them in Sowan to a merchant named Lander who collected a percentage for bleeding them into the gem trade in Bastian, but he had no idea where they came from or how they'd gotten into the Narrows in the first place. I was just the first link in the chain.

"Anything else I should know?" I asked.

"Nothing of consequence."

He turned his empty glass on the table, the look in his eyes sharpening. The ease that had been in his demeanor, I realized, was suddenly gone. "Anything *I* should know?"

"No."

"That's funny. I could have sworn I heard talk of a shipwright here in Dern working on a new schooner for an unknown Narrows-born helmsman."

I met his eyes, taking every care not to react. He was onto me. But I couldn't risk giving him any information he didn't already have. "Something you want to ask me, Henrik?"

“You know the stories they tell about you, don’t you?” His head tilted to one side. “About a kid from nowhere who sails into storms that would make a seasoned trader piss his trousers. That you’re pious. Superstitious. A believer in the old tales. That a blood pact with sea demons is the only reason you’re still breathing.”

My fist tightened under the table, where the cut of my own blade striped my palm.

I knew the stories. They were what had given me the name I was known by outside of Cragsmouth—Saint. No one knew Elias, the boy born in a backwater fishing village who’d made a mistake that cost him everything.

“When I first heard about you, I thought to myself, that’s one smart bastard, letting the rumors do the work for him while he writes his own story. It’s one of the reasons I agreed to work with you. But this little misstep has had me wondering if I made a mistake.”

“You didn’t.”

“Good. Because I don’t make mistakes. If you want to trade with a legit license and sail under your own crest on a new ship, that’s your business. But as soon as people get wind of it, someone is going make sure you never make it to the next port. And *my* coin will be at the sea bottom with you.”

That was exactly the reason we’d been treading lightly.

“No one will get wind of it,” I said.

“You sure about that?”

Warm blood pooled in my hand where I’d torn open the cut in my palm.

“Someone in this village has a loose tongue.” Henrik leaned in closer. “Might be time for you to cut it out.”

My teeth clenched tightly as I nodded. If someone was talking, we had less time than I thought to get that license and raise our crest over the *Aster*. Only then would we have the protection of the Trade Council to keep us from getting a knife in the back.

Henrik picked up his pocket watch and closed his ledger, tucking both inside of his jacket. “See you in three weeks.”

He stood and I stared into the back of the booth, waiting until the door of the tavern opened and closed before I poured myself one more glass of rye. I’d known from the beginning that we were playing with fire by working with the Roths, but the risk had paid off. Even if I could feel the careful framework we’d built rattling around me, threatening to come crashing down.

I lifted the glass and tipped my head back, letting the rye burn in my chest. There were a hundred different ways this could still go wrong and no shortage of blades I could find at my throat. By the time we got back out onto the water, I needed to be sure I was rid of at least one of them.

ISOLDE

Being the only Saltblood on a ship had its advantages until someone left a dead rat in your hammock.

I stood in the dim light of the crew's cabin, staring down into the quilted fabric. It reeked of mildew and rye, but it was the most honest bed I'd ever slept in. Everything I'd had in Bastian was bought with someone else's blood.

I didn't miss the warm fire of my rooms, the fine quilts, or the plush rugs that covered the marble floor at Azimuth House. The only thing I missed was someone who wasn't there anymore.

I fished the poor, lifeless creature out of my hammock by the tail, holding it away from me. The bloodstain it left behind would be of little consequence, but the message was another matter. It was an old custom and I'd seen it on my mother's ships many times.

Dredgers weren't the lowest rung of a crew, but they drew the most suspicion. Accusations of pocketing gems on a dive or selling cache locations to other traders were something that every dredger had to deal with, but they were disadvantages I'd never really suffered because my mother employed every member of the crews I'd been on. Making a move against me meant making a move against the great gem merchant Holland, and that was a risk no one was willing to take.

But I wasn't on the Unnamed Sea anymore. As soon as I'd handed my earrings and my frock over, Simon had taken me down to the docks, where the *Luna* was waiting. I'd known as soon as I met its helmsman that it wouldn't be as easy as simply hitching a ride to the Narrows. But a dead rodent dangling from my fingertips was nothing to the mess I'd left behind in Bastian.

I climbed the steps of the passageway back to the deck and the sunlight hit my face, the wind clearing away the stagnant stench that hovered below. The crew was at work and the navigator, Burke, was at the helm, his eyes following my path as I crossed to the portside railing. We'd been at sea for almost a week and I hadn't earned anyone's favor. I wouldn't unless I started putting coin in the helmsman's purse with a haul of dredged gemstones.

I tossed the rat into the water, turning on my heel to scan the masts above until I spotted Yasmin, the ships' lead bosun. Her long blond hair was tied in a series of knots between her shoulder blades, and she was holding back a smile breaking on her lips. If I had to guess, I would say the rat had been her doing or maybe that of Darin, one of the deckhands who warmed her bed. They had no unwavering loyalty to the *Luna*. In fact, I was certain they were running their own side trades on the ship. The rat had been more about making sure I knew where I stood. Here, I wasn't untouchable the way I'd been in Bastian, and I liked that. I just hoped it didn't get me killed.

"What was that, dredger?" Burke eyed me over the helm.

“Just a bit of fun,” I lied, hooking my thumbs into my belt. My hips felt bare without the weight of my dredging tools. I couldn’t get used to it.

He jerked his chin to one of the deckhands, signaling for him to take over the wheel, and waved me toward the passage that led to the helmsman’s quarters. I let out a long breath, staring at the carved wood trim that adorned the door.

I’d had exactly one crew to choose from when I went to Simon and asked him to put me on a ship out of Bastian. The helmsman of the *Luna* had taken me on without question when he read Simon’s letter, and he had only one requirement: that I sign a one-year contract to dredge for him. It was a small price to pay when it wasn’t my own name at the bottom of that parchment. I wasn’t Isolde anymore. I was Eryss. And I was finished diving for anyone but me.

As soon as we got to Ceros, I’d leave the *Luna* and never look back. There was no recourse against a dredger who’d broken her contract if she didn’t actually exist. Not even in the eyes of the new Trade Council.

The work of the crew beat on the upper deck as I ducked into the passage, and I flattened myself against the wall when the stryker came barreling through with a plucked pheasant clutched in each hand. Burke was already relaying the ordeal with the rat to the helmsman when I came through the door, and he didn’t look pleased.

Zola’s black eyes lifted to me as I stepped inside, but he didn’t stand from his chair. He was a peacock with dull feathers, obviously from the Narrows, and I wasn’t sure what he’d been doing in the Unnamed Sea in the first place, much less how he’d been allowed to drop anchor there. The only explanation was that he had a scheme of some kind, one that must benefit someone who mattered. But it took guts to waltz into Bastian with no permit. I’d give him that.

“Eryss?” Zola looked to me, waiting for an explanation.

I kept my tone light, careful not to meet his eyes for too long. I didn’t like how he was always trying to hold my gaze.

“You know how crews are.”

“Yes, I do,” he said.

He set down the quill in his hand, abandoning the letter he was writing, and my eyes lingered on the humble quail feather it was crafted from. My mother gifted the loyal merchants and traders who did her bidding a quill made with the glossy, black-tipped feather of a whistling swan—a symbol of repute. A kind of imperious crown for those she deemed worthy of her attention and evidence that you had Holland’s power behind you. But this man was just a would-be trader who would not only be unlikely to recognize me, he’d never be important enough to catch my mother’s notice.

“I can’t afford to lose my new dredger,” he continued.

My new dredger.

The words made my teeth grate. The very fact that I was standing here was proof that for the first time in my life, I didn’t belong to anyone. But someone like Zola would never understand that. He’d probably only ever belonged to himself.

“Move her up here until we get to Ceros.” Zola directed the order to Burke.

My brow pinched. “What?”

“You’ll stay here in my quarters until they’ve had some time to get used to having a Saltblood on

board.”

Saltblood. The slur was a demeaning one, used to identify people from the Unnamed Sea, where the water was like a bitter brine. Here in the Narrows, the sea was diluted with the fresh water of the rivers that dumped from their shores.

“That’s *not* necessary,” I said, a little too forcefully. “And I don’t care if they get used to me. I can take care of myself.”

“You signed a contract. And if someone decides to gut you in the middle of the night, I’ll have lost a dredger before we even get to our first dive.”

The helmsman had lofty ideas about running dives once the new Narrows Trade Council granted him a trade license. But he was fooling himself. The *Luna* wasn’t equipped for gem dives and not a single preparation had been made. I hadn’t even seen a tide map among the charts in his quarters. The man had no idea what he was doing.

“I’ll sleep in the crew’s cabin. Like everyone else.” The words came out flat. I wasn’t politely declining. I’d rather get stuffed into a trunk in the cargo hold and left for a few days than sleep in Zola’s quarters.

His hands splayed on the desk as he pushed himself to standing and the length of his black coat slid from the stool, dropping to his ankles. His gaze was locked on mine as he came around the desk and stopped so close to me that when he looked down into my face, the buttons of his jacket brushed my sleeve.

His silvery eyes were cold as they held mine, and after a moment, they moved, traveling down over my mouth, to my chin.

“I can replace any deckhand or stryker or bosun with a hundred others in Ceros,” he said. “But Simon said you’re a dredger with uncommon skill. Those aren’t easy to come by.”

My eyes narrowed on him, my heartbeat ticking up just a little as I searched his eyes for any deeper meaning behind the words. But there was no way Zola could know I was a gem sage. My father had made sure of that.

“I can take care of myself,” I said again.

“Fine.” His tone soured as he drifted forward another inch, letting his height loom over me, but I didn’t budge, keeping my feet planted. He wanted me to be afraid of him, and I was. But I wasn’t going to let him see it.

His head finally swiveled to Burke. “Anyone touches her, and they’ll lose a limb of their choosing.” The words grew spines.

Zola wasn’t good at hiding his irritation, clearly bothered that I cared so little for his attentions. But I wasn’t going to stroke his ego, even if it got me what I needed. That was a door that was hard to close once it was opened.

Burke didn’t look at me, but I could feel his thoughts drifting in my direction. The crew wouldn’t be the only ones to suffer if they broke the helmsman’s decree. As second in command, Burke would bear a punishment for failing to control them, and the last thing I needed was for him to have a reason to resent me.

Zola dismissed him with a wave of his hand. “Make sure they’re ready to make port.”

Burke seemed to still be debating whether to protest Zola’s order, but he thought better of it,

shuffling out and leaving the two of us alone.

“Make port?” I asked, trying to read the open log at the corner of his desk. “I thought we wouldn’t be in Ceros for a few more days.”

He found his way back around the desk, eyes off me now. “We won’t.”

“Then where are we stopping?”

“We run routes in the Narrows, just like they do in the Unnamed Sea. We make stops.” The sarcasm changed the rhythm of his speech. The poisoned honey that had been there moments ago was gone now and the man the crew feared had returned. The rumors belowdecks were that he’d buried his knife in the chest of his last stryker only weeks before I arrived on the *Luna*.

I bit my tongue, swallowing down the argument that was climbing up my throat. Every day I was on the water was another day someone was looking for Holland’s daughter and the fabled gemstone she’d stolen. I needed to get to Ceros before someone found me.

Zola returned his eyes to the parchment in front of him. The wooden rim that skirted his desk was the only thing keeping the contents from sliding when the ship tilted under a gale. I leaned to the left, instinctively countering my own weight.

“If that’s all, I have work to do,” he said.

He was a creature that needed to feel like he was calling the shots. In more than one way, he reminded me of my mother—wheels always turning. Always plotting and scheming.

I pulled the door shut behind me and came back out onto the deck as the sound of voices lifted over the wind. The horizon was a thick line of blue that encircled us in every direction, a color that deepened before it blended seamlessly into the sea.

Burke stepped past me, walking straight for the bow, and he lifted a hand to shield his eyes from the sunlight. I squinted, trying to see what he was looking at, but it wasn’t until the low-hanging clouds cleared that I could make out the dark sliver of coastline far in the distance.

My heart jumped up into my throat when I saw it. Land. Not the red sand or craggy rocks that lined the shores of the Unnamed Sea. We’d officially crossed into the Narrows, the hovel of crofters and fishermen far north of Bastian. Its blue-green waters were haunted by storms that were the stuff of legends. It was also the last place, I hoped, that my mother would think to look for me.

“What city is this?”

Burke laughed through a grunt, leaning into the railing to spit into the water below. “City? There’s only one of those in the Narrows, if you want to call it that—Ceros. This is just Dern, a rotting crofter’s village. But there’s a tavern and more than fish and fowl to eat.” He turned back toward the helm, cupping his hands around his mouth. “Bear north six degrees! Get ready to reef the sheets!”

The crew was already moving, finding their places to start the sequence of actions that would take the ship to port. I reached up, feeling the small leather purse beneath my shirt that hung from the long gold chain around my neck.

There was no way to bring my father back or travel through the threads of time to save him. There was no way to tell the younger version of me to take his hand and run, the way I knew he wanted me to.

Leaving my mother would undercut her trade and undermine the power she was quickly amassing in the Unnamed Sea.

There was only one thing she hated more than losing, and that was the idea of losing to the Narrows. When we anchored in Ceros I would go to the Trade Council Chamber. I would ask to see the Gem Guild master who'd never be good enough for Holland. And then I'd hand him the thing that could sink her—the midnight.

The wind picked up, pushing the *Luna* toward shore, and I looked down to the splash of white water cutting around the bilge. I'd never sailed the waters of the Narrows or set foot on its shores. But there was a solid feeling in my gut as I watched the sea race beneath the ship.

I hadn't just left my mother in the Unnamed Sea. I'd left my home. The place I'd taken my first breaths. But I could feel in my bones that these unknown waters were the place I'd take my last.

SAINT

Clove sat on an overturned crate, running the sharp edge of his knife around the mouth of the jewel-blue bottle with the same calm, certain look he always had.

This wasn't a job we could do on the ship. The less our ever-changing crew knew, the better. The barkeeper at the tavern, however, owed us a hundred times over and it was in his best interest to let us have the room at the end of the hallway to work in when we came to Dern. Our payment was the unmarked Sowan rye we left behind.

Clove turned the bottle in a circle until the wax seal was broken and then he pried the cork free before handing it to me. Using the rye to trade the gem fakes had been his idea from the start, and the scheme had made us most of the coin we'd used for the *Aster*. But we hadn't counted on the fact that the rye would turn out to be so popular in the taverns, and we'd had to be careful to not let it get out of hand. If we were caught, it could cost us the license we'd been waiting for.

I set the bottle on the table beside the others. This particular crate wouldn't find its way to a tavern or the cabinet of a guild member in Ceros.

I opened the velvet pouch Henrik had given me and poured the red gemstones onto a wooden tray, counting them out in sets of twelve with the tip of my knife. There would be four bottles that would hold a dozen stones each, some of them fake and some of them genuine. The gem merchants in Ceros wouldn't be able to tell the difference unless they had a gem sage in their charge, and even then, they couldn't report it to the Trade Council. Not when they'd purchased them illegitimately in the first place. It was the kind of trade that everyone involved stood to lose from. They also stood to gain a lot of coin.

Looking at the red beryl now, the weight of the risk we were taking settled heavily in the center of my chest. We'd traded small sums many times before, but Felix Roth would sooner gut us than lose a haul this valuable. I wondered what Henrik had done to convince him it was a good idea.

"It's no different than any other deal we've done," Clove said, reading my mind. His fair eyelashes caught the light as he rolled the block of red wax over the flame of the candle on the table.

I dropped the first set of twelve into the open bottle before me. The stones were never traced back to us because, technically, we didn't exist. We weren't traders or merchants and no one knew where the rye came from, so it couldn't be tracked that way. Even so, we were stretching our luck after almost two years of being a courier for the Roths. If Henrik was right and there were rumors about the *Aster*, we were running out of time.

The gems sank down to the bottom of the rye, disappearing in the dark liquid. When I was finished

with the last of them, I replaced the corks and leaned forward, letting Clove drip the softened wax in a steady stream over the neck of each bottle. The wax lightened as it cooled on the glass, and he rotated it with a steady hand three times until the cork was resealed.

“So? Who do you think’s talking?” Clove blew out the candle, setting both elbows on his knees.

My eyes lifted to meet his. “Gerik?”

“I don’t think so. If we disappear, so does the coin we give him,” Clove said skeptically.

“Maybe someone else is willing to pay him more.”

His mouth flattened. He was likely thinking the same thing I was. Of all the helmsmen in the Narrows trying to set up their own trading operations, Zola was the only one I’d ever worried about. He was brash and quick to take whatever opportunity came his way, lacking the loyalty to these waters that other helmsmen had. That was how he’d ended up the errand boy for a handful of Saltblood traders in Bastian. It was a job I wouldn’t do for an entire cargo hold full of coin.

“Zola’s not a fool. He knows we’re up to something,” I said.

He’d been watching us more closely over the last six months and I was sure he knew we’d petitioned for a trade license. But there was no way he expected us to be able to pay for one. Not when we sailed the likes of the *Riven*. I was also sure he’d petitioned for his own license, and as long as he had the coin, he had every chance of getting it.

I’d told myself that more Narrows-born traders could only be a good thing. Without them, the Narrows Trade Council would never stand against the Unnamed Sea. But Zola’s allegiances weren’t to the Narrows. They were to himself.

Clove lifted the empty crate onto the table and marked the corner of the wood with the remaining wet wax in a straight line. It was the only identifying marker we used to track the gems among the dozens of crates we moved at each port.

“All right. Let’s get out of here.” I put the last bottle inside and stood, slinging the map case across my back.

Clove stacked one filled crate on top of the other and lifted them against his chest, waiting. The tavern had only gotten busier as the night drew on, but no one was going to look twice at a rye delivery, especially a regularly scheduled one.

I unlocked the door, letting it swing open before I picked up the other two crates and started down the hall. It was an unusually cold night and the fire was already stacked up, making the air feel dry in my throat.

As soon as we made it to the bottom of the stairs, the barkeeper drifted down the counter toward us, turning a clean glass through the towel in his hand. I set down the crates on the stool beside me and held the key to the door up between us.

He tucked it into his pocket. “Three weeks?”

“Three weeks,” Clove answered.

“That rye isn’t lasting that long these days.”

“I’m sure a little water will fix that,” Clove said under his breath.

The barkeeper ignored the accusation. He didn’t have to admit it for it to be true. There wasn’t a barkeeper in the Narrows who didn’t do the same thing.

“Rosamund says there’s talk about the build she’s working on. That true?” I asked.

“What’s it to you?”

The barkeeper’s tone didn’t change, but his grip on the glass tightened just enough for me to notice. The quickest way for him to get a knife in the back was to start repeating the rumors he heard at that counter.

“The less curious people are about what’s in that pier, the more likely it is I keep showing up with your rye,” I reminded him.

That got his attention. He set the glass on the stack behind him, tossing the rag over his shoulder.

“Who’s talking?”

His chin dipped down, his voice lowering. “That fool apprentice Ros has got.”

Clove’s gaze locked on mine, and he cursed under his breath.

Nash.

“He’s been offering to give the details of the build to anyone willing to pay a purse of copper. So far, no one has.”

People speculating was one thing. But Nash actually knew what was going on in that pier. And three weeks was too long to wait and see if he found someone who was interested in the information he was selling. We were too close to let it all come apart now.

“Start a new rumor. I don’t care what it is, as long as it has nothing to do with me,” I said.

The barkeeper gave a reluctant nod in answer. “You got it.”

“Saint!”

My name traveled across the tavern, carried on the voice of the last person I wanted to see.

Clove met my eyes and I let out a long, measured breath before I turned to see Zola leaning one shoulder into the wall beside the fire. The *Luna*’s navigator, Burke, was at his side. Zola’s long black jacket nearly touched the tops of his new boots and I could see the shine of the brass eyelets gleaming from where I stood. Over the last few months, he’d been coming and going from the Unnamed Sea on almost every round of his route. I’d been sure we would miss him.

“Must have come in early,” Clove muttered.

Zola lifted a hand into the air, waving us over, and I hesitated before hauling the crates back up into my arms. We made our way toward them as Burke filled his pipe with mullein, uninterested.

Zola, on the other hand, feigned a smile. It was no secret that he was out for our blood, but there were appearances to be kept up in the Narrows. Especially if you didn’t want someone to see your knife coming. We both had a part to play and, up until now, we’d played them very well.

I set the crates down at my feet, taking Zola’s extended hand and shaking. “How was Bastian?”

“Productive.” Zola’s smile widened.

I’d known him a long time. Long enough to recognize when he was playing games. But the thing about Zola was that to him, everything was sport. That made it difficult to pull apart the lies from the truths.

The first time we’d crossed his path, Clove and I were just getting started on what would later become our unofficial route. We’d made a stop in Ceros and, back then, Zola was nothing more than a deckhand who floated from one ship to another. Now, he was running his own unsanctioned trade route while he waited for his license, like the rest of us. We were set to be each other’s competition in the Narrows, but Clove and I weren’t much of a threat on the *Riven*. There was no doubt in my

mind that he would step in if he knew what Rosamund was building over in the pier.

“Headed to Sowan?” he asked, eyes dropping to the crates.

I nodded. “The usual.”

“I’ve told you there’s no money in rye, Saint. You should be moving gems. That’s all those guild bastards in Ceros care about. Trust me.”

“One day,” I answered, struggling to conjure up the pretense we usually exchanged.

Zola had built himself a crew and he had enough friends in the guilds to ensure he’d be granted a license, but he was the muck on the boot of every trader from the Unnamed Sea. Especially since he’d started sailing to Bastian. It was a move that had earned him the disdain of every would-be trader from Dern to Ceros and he knew it. He was Narrows-born, but he wasn’t one of us.

“You know, that’s not the only thing they’re paying good coin for. The hull of the *Luna* will be leaking copper for months once I get to Ceros.”

This was how these talks usually went. Zola drawing attention to some obscure trade. Me pretending to show interest.

“What have you got yourself into now?”

I took the bait, because that was what I was supposed to do. Whatever he’d dragged back from Bastian had put a genuine glint of light in his eye. And if he was excited enough to brag about it, it might actually be something we should take note of. That was what had worked in my favor with Zola.

He leaned forward, brushing the sleeve of my jacket before he hooked his arm around my shoulders. Clove straightened beside me, hand drifting toward the knife tucked into the back of his belt. But Zola wouldn’t make a move here. Not for everyone to see.

“The kind of goods that no one is *making*.”

My brow furrowed as I studied him. The rye in his belly was most likely twisting his words. There was a tilt to both his voice and his shoulders that wasn’t typically there.

I shoved him off and he laughed, reaching for the bottle and refilling his glass.

“You’ve never had a sense of humor, Saint.”

“Maybe not,” I said, checking my watch.

We were set to leave at dawn but there was still work to be done tonight. Work we didn’t want anyone noticing.

Zola took his time before he opened his mouth to speak again, but he fell silent when the door to the street opened and his gaze shot past me.

I turned, stopping short when a face I didn’t recognize appeared among the dozens of others that filled the tavern.

A black-haired girl with a pair of pale blue eyes rimmed in dark lashes shoved the door closed with one arm. Beneath the other, she had several long, rolled pieces of parchment that looked like maps.

“Not bad to look at either,” Zola murmured, a smile curling on his thin lips. “Eryss!” he called out, catching her attention.

It took her a moment to spot him and she hesitated before she made her way toward us, her gaze flitting from Zola to me and Clove and back again as she wove through the tables.

“Finally find someone willing to climb into your bed?” Clove gave Zola a bored look. We didn’t have time for this.

But Zola laughed again, clapping Clove awkwardly on the back. “There’s no coin to be made in love.”

The girl stopped in front of Zola, readjusting the parchments under her arm. Her long, dark hair spilled out of the opening of her jacket, and it wasn’t until she pushed her hood back to fall on her shoulders that I realized it wasn’t black. It was the darkest shade of red. The kind that looked like threads of fire when the light touched it.

The smooth fabric of her jacket was the color of the moss that clung beneath the railing of the *Riven*, but it was set with shining brass buttons and her boots were worn but not shabby. She didn’t have the weathered look everyone else in the tavern did, as if she’d been carved from ivory. She definitely wasn’t Narrows-born, and clearly no one had told her that the Saltbloods didn’t venture beyond the harbor in Dern. If Zola was going to parade her from port to port, he’d only get her the kind of attention she didn’t want.

“My new dredger,” Zola said.

Clove’s eyes found me from the corner of his gaze. Zola had been saying for years that he was going to start running dives as soon as his license came through. That didn’t explain why he was still grinning like a cat.

He took hold of the girl’s arm, pulling her beside him, but as soon as his fingers touched her, she yanked free, giving him a taut look. A quick flash of fury darkened his face before he took a step back, as if to show her off. He was saving face, but it was clear he wanted us to see his prize.

He rambled on, recounting the broader details that had brought her to his ship, but when I glanced at the girl from the corner of my eye, she had lifted a hand to the candle on the table beside us, absently flicking her fingertips over the flame dancing on the wick.

“He’s not the friendliest helmsman, is he?” Zola turned to meet my eyes again. “Come on. Where are your manners, Saint?”

My jaw clenched as I finally turned to look at her, and I almost immediately wished I hadn’t. Freckles scattered over her olive skin, tracing over her cheekbones, along her jaw, down to the opening of her shirt where the hollow of her throat was visible.

She held her hand over the flame for another moment before she lifted it between us, meeting my eyes. She didn’t so much as blink. “Eryss,” she said, waiting.

Zola worked at opening a fresh bottle of rye as I took her hand and her calloused fingers brushed over mine, sending a pool of heat swirling in my palm. From the candle, I realized. But as soon as I felt it, I pulled my hand from hers, taking a small step backward, and her head tilted as her eyes narrowed on me.

I realized she was still waiting for a response.

“Elias.” My name rolled off my tongue so easily that it made my blood run cold for just a moment. Because it wasn’t the one I was known by. I hadn’t even planned to say it. In fact, I hadn’t heard the name spoken aloud in what felt like years.

Her eyes studied my mouth, as if waiting for me to say it again, and the hand that had just been in hers instinctively found my pocket. There was something about her that made the hair on the back of

my neck stand on end.

Zola finally had the bottle open, turning back to us. “That’s better,” he said with an edge of ridicule. “You’ll find that this helmsman is the stuff of legends in these waters.” Zola took his pipe from his pocket, handing it to Burke to be filled.

He was setting my teeth on edge. I didn’t like the confidence I heard in his voice. He was up to something. Something big.

The girl shifted beside me and I turned to see her eyes locked on the crate at my feet. The one marked with the haphazard stripe of red wax. Her lips twisted to one side and I realized the hand she’d held over the candle flame was absently drifting toward the bottles. As if she hadn’t even meant to do it.

Clove shot me a look, but I watched her catch herself, her fingers curling into her palm before her eyes snapped up to me. A bloom of red lit in her cheeks, making her gray-blue eyes glow.

Zola’s voice was lost to the noise of the tavern as slowly, it clicked together, piece by piece. Maybe this girl was a dredger, like Zola said. But that wasn’t all she was. There was only one reason to look twice at that crate of rye. The gems. And the only person who could possibly know they were there was a gem sage.

Henrik’s warning echoed in my mind. If Zola was headed to Ceros to collect heavy coin, he was selling something. Or *someone*. He’d been making stops in the Unnamed Sea and keeping whatever he was doing there quiet. Even the harbor masters in the Narrows didn’t seem to know what he was running. If he was selling gem sages to merchants in Ceros, he had more powerful friends than I thought.

But if this girl was a gem sage headed to the auction block, it didn’t look like she had any idea.

I cleared my throat, tearing my eyes from the dredger. I had bigger concerns than whatever Zola had going, but if he was trading gem sages, he was about to become more than a Narrows-born trader. He could eventually fund an entire fleet with that kind of coin.

“Have a drink with us?” Zola turned his pipe in his hand as he tamped down the mullein leaves.

“Not tonight,” I answered, my eyes falling one more time on the girl before I lifted the crates from the floor. Her hand was still clutched in a tight fist, her gaze avoiding mine.

“Let’s go.” Clove’s voice was close now.

I turned, giving the girl my back and falling into step beside him.

“Well? What do you make of that?” he asked, his voice a flat line.

I glanced back once more to the dredger as we pushed through the doors. She was watching me.

“I think Zola’s bought into a new kind of trade.”

5

ISOLDE

The song of the red beryl was still ringing in my ears even after the helmsman disappeared onto the street. Those narrowed blue eyes had left a feeling like fire everywhere they'd landed and I could still feel it now, the ghost of it alive on my skin.

For a moment, I'd been sure he'd seen me. Like his gaze had held some kind of familiarity in them. Some sort of knowing. But as quickly as I'd spotted it, it vanished again.

That stone was one of the first of the gems my father taught me, a low hum that resonated in the air, and the feeling instantly conjured his face in my mind.

I blinked, trying to clear it before it could bring a lump into my throat.

"Slippery bastard," Zola muttered, sinking into the booth against the wall.

My eyes lingered on the door for another moment. Whoever the young helmsman was, he was going to get himself killed moving gems inside bottles of rye. It was clever, sure. But a trade like that only lasted so long before someone got the better of you.

"Sit," Zola ordered.

I pulled my gaze from the door, remembering why I'd come to the tavern in the first place. Burke sat beside him, hunching over the table and puffing on his pipe. The mullein smoke wrapped around me, making my eyes water.

I reluctantly found a seat across from them, setting down the charts I'd been given. They'd only confirmed my suspicions about Zola and the *Luna*. He was in over his head if he thought they were going to launch a dredging operation. There was a reason the Unnamed Sea ruled the gem trade.

A young woman with a blue scarf tied around the crown of her head appeared, plucking up an empty rye bottle before turning her attention to me. "What can I get you?"

"A pot of tea," I said, shooting a glance at Zola.

She gave me a knowing look before turning on her heel. Bleary-eyed men with too-loud voices didn't faze her, but a drunk helmsman was useless to me. Dangerous, even.

Zola drained his glass and wiped the corner of his mouth with the back of his hand. "Have you finished going over the charts?"

"I have."

"And?"

I cleared the table, sliding Zola's glass to the edge so I could unroll the first of the parchments. They were outdated and hard to read, but they were better than nothing. If getting the *Luna* ready to dive would keep his attentions off of me, I would do it. But I'd be gone before Zola ever dropped

anchor on a reef.

I set my finger on the diagram of the coral system that snaked down the center of the Narrows, with notations on the bedrock that lay beneath them. There wasn't much reef to speak of except for the ones surrounding a small island and a large cluster in an area marked as Tempest Snare, but there was enough to work with.

"Here," I said. "This is as good a place to start as any."

Burke's eyes instantly cleared of their haze and he sat up straight, clamping his teeth down on his pipe. Beside him, Zola's expression had lost some of its arrogant ease.

"What?" I looked between the two of them.

"No one sails the Snare," Burke answered. "And for good reason."

"What? Why?"

Zola sniffed. "It's a death trap. The shallows stretch for miles and the storms blow you right into them. There are dozens of ships sunk on those reefs. We might as well cut a hole in the bottom of the ship and drop anchor."

"Not even Saint sails those waters." Burke jerked his chin in the direction of the door the young helmsman had disappeared through.

Saint. That was what Zola had called the helmsman with the crates of rye, but he'd given me the name Elias. I didn't know why it surprised me. If the helmsman was anything like Zola, being a liar was the least of his flaws. And to be fair, I hadn't given him my real name either.

"We're not sailing the Snare," Zola said again, more heavily.

The tone of his voice made him sound nervous. Afraid, even.

"Fine." I sighed, turning to the next chart. "Then as far as I can tell, your best bet is going to be carnelian and zircon. Both can be found in shale, and that makes up half of what you've got in these seabeds. The gems are easy to locate and easy to dredge, and you can work the reefs to find out what else is hiding there. Once you've got updated charts, you can build out a more extensive plan. Hire more dredgers, find—"

"We." Zola tapped his ringed finger against his empty glass.

"What?"

"*We.* You keep saying *you*."

"We," I corrected myself, keeping my eyes on the parchment.

I'd dismissed Zola as a fool when I first stepped onto the *Luna*. A pawn who was likely in over his head doing favors for the likes of Simon in the Unnamed Sea. But this helmsman wasn't as simple as I'd first pegged him. He had designs of his own, and he intended to see them through.

"So, what? We just drop anchor anywhere and start bringing up gems?"

"It's not that simple. There's planning to be done, and the *Luna* will need to be outfitted with the right equipment."

"Good thing I have your expertise, then." Zola draped one arm over the back of his seat. "Get Burke a list of what we need, and he'll get it in Ceros."

I studied Burke's face, but he was distracted by the conversation of the next table, smoke trailing from his wide nostrils. He wouldn't know the first thing about the supplies they'd need for diving and that was of no consequence to me. But dredging was my best bet at making coin after I did what I

needed to do in Ceros, and I'd need a belt of tools.

"The tools I'll need to get here."

"Don't trust me?" Burke asked, catching me off guard when I realized that he was still listening.

"Not particularly," I said. He probably didn't know a fine-needle chisel from a toothpick.

One side of Zola's mouth lifted. "I don't buy my bosun's tools and I'm not going to buy yours either."

"You're also not trying to build your trade on your bosun's back."

His eyes began to clear, the lazy posture of his body straightening. "My trade is built on *my* back." His voice took on a tone I hadn't heard before. One that sent a chill up my spine.

My shoulders drew back, my jaw clenching.

"Look, I don't know what you're running from in the Unnamed Sea, and I don't care. But I do know if there was anywhere else for you to go, you wouldn't have asked Simon to put you on the *Luna*. So stop pretending like you have any cards to play."

That unsettled feeling I'd gotten in his quarters that afternoon returned as I met his eyes. I didn't like what I saw there. He was right. Even if he didn't know who my mother was or why I'd gone to Simon that night, he knew I needed him for something. And he wasn't going to let me forget it.

"It's a game, Eryss." The name I'd signed on his contract sounded hollow in his mouth. "All of it. The guilds, the councils, the traders and their coin."

I knew that better than he did. My father had known it too.

"I suggest you start figuring out how to play."

The woman returned with the pot of tea and two cups hooked on her pinky finger, but as soon as she set them down, Zola reached for the bottle of rye again.

I slid the pot toward me instead, filling one of the cups. Grounds swirled in the bottom like mud painting the porcelain, and I grimaced.

"If you want to disappear in the Narrows," Zola said, lifting his glass to touch my teacup, "then you better start blending in."

"Is that all it takes? Drown myself in the same rye I smuggle my gems in and then I'll be one of you?" It came out more bitter than I wanted it to and I didn't like that it made me sound as if I cared.

But Zola didn't seem as if he'd noticed. The glass in his hand stilled in midair the moment the words left my mouth. And though I wasn't sure why, I was immediately certain I'd done something wrong.

"What did you say?" He set down the glass.

I glanced to Burke across the table. He pulled the pipe from his mouth.

Zola leaned closer, his voice deepening. "Is that what he's doing? Saint? Smuggling gems?"

My eyes darted to the door the blue-eyed helmsman had walked through only minutes ago, that burning trail coming back to life on my skin.

A furious sneer twisted Zola's face and I pinned my gaze to the tea in my cup, taking a sip. I hadn't exactly meant to give the helmsman away, but the bastard was practically begging to be caught. I'd felt the red beryl as soon as I'd entered the tavern. My ear was tuned to even the faintest gemstone. But I was usually better at hiding it.

"And how exactly do you know he's running gems in the rye?"

For a moment, I was sure that Zola had figured me out, and the thought made my stomach drop. I'd tipped my hand more than I should have.

"He had the crate marked. I've seen others do it in Bastian and Sagsay Holm," I lied.

I was skirting far too close to the truth, but Zola seemed to buy it. He was ambitious, even if he wasn't clever or discerning. People like him were no more than mice catching crumbs. People like my mother were the ones feasting at the table. That didn't mean Zola wasn't a threat.

Burke looked between us, uneasy, and Zola's fist hit the table, making me jolt.

"That's how he's staying on the water. Paying a crew. Who knows how many stones he's moved. Of course he's not just trading rye." Zola was talking to himself now, but the sound of his voice trailed off as he drew in a long, steady breath. By the time he let it out, he was his usual, composed self again. "What does Gerik say?" he asked, turning to Burke.

"Nothing. Just that they're running some rye every few weeks. Your typical low-rung trade under the noses of the Trade Council."

It was a gamble to trust a harbor master, but no one else at a port knew more about what was moving in the ships or the merchant's houses.

Zola squinted, staring past me with a singular focus that was unnerving. "He's petitioned for a trade license, and now he's running gems."

"Even if he gets the license, that ship of his will run two or three routes before it's sunk," Burke offered.

Zola had grand ideas of operating his own trade route in the Narrows when his license came through. But all I'd seen him do since I stepped onto his ship was pretend to be anything but Narrows-born. It was my best guess at why he'd taken me on. Maybe to him, running dredging dives like they did in the Unnamed Sea and having Saltbloods on your crew made you one step closer to being one yourself.

"We need to be in Ceros in three days," he said. "Make sure the crew doesn't wander. We'll leave before sundown tomorrow."

Burke nodded.

I picked up my cup again, trying to give my fidgeting hands something to do. Now things were moving in the right direction. I didn't care about their stupid disputes and rivalries. I just needed to get to Ceros.

Zola reached into his vest, pulling a small purse of coin free. He tossed it onto the table in front of me.

I stared at it.

"For the tools."

"I thought you didn't buy tools for your crew."

"I think you've earned it." He got to his feet and Burke followed, leaving me alone at the table.

In a matter of moments, pairs of eyes were finding me from every corner of the room in quick, pointed side glances and sinister stares. The people of Dern didn't like having a Saltblood in their tavern, and they wanted me to know it.

I took the purse and abandoned the tea, buttoning up my jacket before I started toward the door. It wasn't easy for me to admit, but I might have gotten more than I bargained for with this helmsman.

SAINT

The streets of Dern were quiet after dark, but in a village this small, there was no going unnoticed.

I leaned into the brick wall at the corner of the alley, watching the lantern light in a window across the street dance over the cobblestones. The woman inside was spinning wool on a wheel and her shadow was cast onto the wall like one of the stringed-puppet shows performed on the streets of Ceros.

I'd been a boy the first time I saw one. My father had finally let me come with him to the city on his yearly trip to resupply his fishing boat with fresh lines, hooks, and nets. The buildings were taller than any I'd ever seen, and the maze of rope bridges that stretched over the rooftops was like something from a story. But what had most captured my imagination were the ships from the Unnamed Sea that were anchored in the harbor. The towering masts and crisp white canvas painted with trader's crests. The busy work of the crews on the decks.

My father made me wait outside of the merchant's house while he made his purchases, but I climbed up one of the thick, knotted vines that covered the east wall to a window so I could watch as the traders did their business below.

Even as a boy, I'd seen it—the expansive divide between the well-dressed Saltbloods and the Narrows folk selling their goods. I'd heard talk in Cragsmouth about them, but there was no reason for anyone from the Unnamed Sea to come to a village like ours. That was the first time I'd seen a breed like theirs, and by the time we were leaving the harbor, I was imagining a Narrows crest on one of those ships. Now that Ceros had their own Trade Council and the ability to grant a license, I'd be sailing one of them, just like my father wanted.

The soft slap of bare feet on stone echoed up the alley and I tore my eyes from the shadows, watching the darkness. The girl appeared a moment later, her pale face flashing in the moonlight. She tucked herself into my shadow against the wall, looking up at me with wide, dark eyes.

“Up one street, third building on the left. It's the flat on the top floor,” she said.

“Did he see you?”

She shook her head, lifting an open hand between us.

I pulled a copper from my vest, holding it up. When she tried to take it, I lifted it higher, out of her reach. “Don't give this to anyone. Use it to get some supper,” I said. “Do as I say, and I'll have another errand for you the next time I come to Dern. Understand?”

Her mouth twisted up on one side before she reluctantly nodded, and I pressed the coin into her palm. A girl like that had more worries than half this village. A sibling to feed. A mother to care for.

But if she was smart, she'd see me for what I was: a chance. No one else was going to give her one.

Her fingers closed over the coin and she took off, disappearing around the corner.

I'd been hungry enough times to know that urchins like her made the most trustworthy souls at any port, and I'd needed someone who wouldn't be noticed. The next time the *Riven* dropped anchor, the girl would probably be waiting outside the tavern and I'd keep my promise. I wasn't going to change her rotten fortune—that was a task for her alone—but she'd at least get a few hot meals out of me.

I stepped out from the alley and followed the walk to the next street. I counted three buildings before I found the door I was looking for, and I watched the windows above before I opened it. The stairs were narrow, dripping with the last bit of rain that had leaked through the roof. I climbed them with slow, silent steps, passing door after door. Behind them, I could hear voices and the sounds of spoons scraping bowls. A baby whimpering.

The stairs ended at the top floor, where a wood plank door that was once painted red was fixed into the cracked plaster wall. I slipped the knife from the back of my belt, listening. It was quiet inside, which meant he was alone, and that was simpler. Cleaner too, if it came to spilling blood. And it might.

I fit the tip of the blade into the jamb and slid it up, catching the bolt on the other side. It took two tries to get it lifted enough to push the door open, and then the light from the flat spilled out into the hall. Every corner of the tiny room was visible from the doorway. A simple cot, a small writing desk. The room was small and bare, but the evidence of someone living in it was in the patchwork blanket folded over a chair and a few books set neatly on a crudely carved shelf. The sight almost made me want to laugh. Nash liked to make a show of looking down on us when we came to Rosamund's, but his life didn't look so different from mine.

Beside the window, he was bent over the wash bowl, scrubbing his face with both hands before scooping up the water and pulling it through his hair with his fingers. His suspenders hung from his waist and his shirt was untucked, as if he'd just finished his work at the pier. In another few minutes, he'd probably have been headed to the tavern.

I stepped inside, crossing the floor with silent steps, the way my father had taught me to do when we were trapping birds in the fields. I'd always had a weight in my gut on those mornings, a guilt that didn't leave me. But it wasn't there now. It had been a long time since I'd felt it.

Nash stood, flicking his dripping fingers into the bowl, and I stopped behind him as he raked both wet hands through his hair. The moment he caught sight of my reflection in the mirror, he froze.

The slow drip out in the hall was the only sound except for the wind tapping the shutter outside. If he shouted, someone might hear him. Or they might not. In a place like Dern, the likelihood of someone racing up here to help him was slim.

He seemed to be thinking the same thing, his eyes frantic as he ran through his options. When he finally turned to face me, his voice was still riding on bravado. But I could see in his eyes that he was scared shitless. "What the hell are you doing here?" His gaze dropped to my bandaged hand.

I didn't answer. What was the point in that?

The smugness he'd had at the pier was nearly gone now. Here, he was just a fool who'd made an enemy that he was completely unmatched for.

I took a step toward him and he lifted one hand between us, his breaths coming harder than they

were seconds ago. “What is this, Saint?”

“I think you know what this is.”

His eyes widened and he drew back, closer to the window.

“I know you’ve been talking. Now we have to figure out what to do about it.”

Nash’s eyes went to the door behind me, as if someone were going to appear there and get him out of this mess. “Look, I have coin, all right? Just take whatever you want and go.”

My hand tightened on the handle of the knife. “It’s too late for that.”

It really was that uncomplicated. There were actions and reactions in the Narrows. Most of them had set, unavoidable consequences. Nash had known when he started the rumors at the tavern that they would demand an answer. If he didn’t know, then he was a dead man anyway. People who didn’t follow the rules never lived long.

His eyes darted to the dressing table, where his own knife was sitting beside his watch, but before he could make a move for it I lunged forward, catching him by the throat and shoving him backward. He crashed into the wall, nearly toppling over.

I kept my voice even and calm. “You have two choices: be left here to bleed out on this floor or come with us.”

Nash stilled, confusion replacing the panic in his eyes. “Come with you?”

“The *Riven* is always in need of someone who can make repairs. And that will keep you out of the tavern long enough for us to get back to the *Aster* and set sail.”

“I’m not going anywhere with you. Getting on that ship is as good as tying a stone around my feet and jumping into the harbor. It won’t last another crossing.”

That was the thing about the *Riven*. People were always underestimating her.

“All right.” I took a step back, turning the knife in my hand so that the blade faced his direction, and Nash’s hands flew up, his eyes wide.

“Wait! Wait!”

I paused, giving him the seconds he needed to make the right choice. And he would. Because Nash was a coward who would probably do anything to keep his throat from being cut.

He gritted his teeth, nostrils flaring. “Fine.” He finally met my eyes.

I let him go and his weight slumped against the wall, his white shirt crumpled. “Welcome to the crew of the *Riven*. Happy to have you.”

I flung my arm back and brought the butt of the knife down with the full force of my body behind it, slamming it into his temple. His head whipped to the side and he collapsed in a heap, hitting the floor hard.

The risk of him making a scene in the harbor was one I wasn’t going to take. There were only so many times Gerik would look the other way, and I didn’t have enough coin to pay him for another favor. I needed Nash to come quietly.

I returned the knife to my belt before I took the watch from his dressing table and blew out the candle. Starlight filled the small room as I sank down, throwing his arm over my shoulder so I could haul him up.

There was no one waiting on the stairs or looking out their windows as I stepped out onto the street. If anyone had heard the argument or the sound of Nash’s body hitting the floor upstairs, they

hadn't deemed it worthy of their curiosity. I had a feeling Nash didn't have a lot of friends in this village. That, or they were just smart enough to mind their own business.

I followed the alleys back the way I'd come and scaled the steep steps of the harbor, keeping to the shadows. Clove was already waiting.

His dark jacket made him melt into the darkness on the steps beneath the lantern that was usually lit this time of night. He'd seen to the harbor master and anyone else who might be lingering on the docks. When I left for Nash's, there'd been just as much chance I'd be carrying a dead body to the *Riven*, and that was a crime that could come back to haunt us when we had our trade license.

When I reached him, Clove tipped his head to one side, peering into Nash's slack face.

"I guess he's coming with us, then?" he said.

"Guess so."

When we reached the slip where the *Riven* was anchored, I let Nash slide from my shoulders, toppling his limp body onto the dock. Above us, the *Riven* was dark.

The ladder was unrolled against the hull of the ship beside a few lines Clove had let down, and we hauled Nash up onto the deck.

With Nash gone, whatever rumors he'd started at the tavern would lose clout, especially once the barkeeper changed the story. But the *Aster* would still be on stilts at the pier for another few weeks, and that was a long time to wait and see if the curiosity died down.

It would be at least a couple of days before anyone realized he was missing, which gave us plenty of time to head to Sowan. If we could stay below notice until then and the summons from the Trade Council came, we'd be sailing from Dern on our first licensed trade route. But we had several purses of coin to make before then.

We dragged Nash down the steps into the passageway and I hooked my hands beneath his arms, waiting as Clove unlocked the cargo hold. Once it was open, I lugged Nash inside and dropped him to the floor. His head rolled to one side, the thin trail of blood already dried on his cheek. He'd have a nasty headache, but he was lucky to have his life. There weren't many helmsmen who'd have given him the choice I had.

Clove snatched a coil of rope from the bulkhead and sank down, binding Nash's hands methodically in a well-tied knot. "It'll be hard to keep the crew from talking about this in Sowan."

"It doesn't matter. By the time the story catches, we'll be in Ceros." With any luck, we'd be holding a license by the time we left.

The faint pop of wood overhead made me look up, and I watched the stripe of light between the slats.

"What is it?" Clove stood.

I ducked my head into the passageway, listening. The ship was quiet, but there was a turn of the air belowdecks I didn't like. As if the *Riven* was unsettled somehow.

I climbed the ladder up to see the deck, where the moonlight washed the wood white. The harbor was still empty, but there was the lingering buzz of a presence still hanging in the air. I lowered myself back down into the passageway, pushing into the crew's cabin. Inside, the empty hammocks gently swung with the rocking of the ship. The deckhands weren't due back until morning.

Clove appeared in the open doorway of the cargo hold. "Do you hear that?"

A soft beat moved over our heads. Not the rhythmic pattern of wind knocking rigging against the mast. Something else. I could barely make it out.

The beat of my heart kicked up slightly as my eyes trailed over the corners of the claustrophobic room. I reached one hand up, touching my fingers to the wooden rafters above us. I could feel it—the faint vibration of footsteps. Someone was on the ship.

“*Shit.*”

I pulled myself through the narrow doorway and tore up the ladder, stumbling as I came back up to the deck and the sound of a splash hit the water on the other side of the jib.

“Hey!” I lunged forward, clawing my way around a stack of coiled rope, but when I slammed into the rail and peered down into the darkness, there was nothing. Only the ripple of moonlight on the water.

My breath fogged in the air as my eyes slid to the knot of rope beside my hand. A line was anchored to the iron rungs at my feet, draping over the side and disappearing into the black water.

Whoever it was, they were already gone.

When I turned back, Clove had already disappeared through the open door of the helmsman’s quarters. When I pushed inside, he stood before the desk with a coldness in his eyes.

“What?” I rasped.

“They’re gone.”

I could barely sift the sound of his deep voice from the wind outside.

“Henrik’s gems. All of them.”

I paced past him, rounding the desk and wrenching the tarp from the crates against the wall. They were unstacked neatly on the floor, only one crate missing. The one with the red wax mark.

“I haven’t left the ship,” he said. “I’ve been right here. Waiting.”

I pinched my eyes closed, swallowing down the sickness brewing in my stomach. Whoever had been here had been watching us. As soon as Clove climbed down to the docks, they’d taken their chance.

“One of the crew?” he guessed.

“No.”

There wasn’t anyone on the crew of the *Riven* who’d been around long enough to pick up on the trade of fakes we’d been running. The only people who knew were me, Clove, Henrik, and Lander, the merchant in Sowen we sold them to.

The answer seemed to come to life in Clove’s eyes the moment it settled in my mind.

Zola.

He wasn’t smart enough to figure out what we’d been up to, but his new gem sage dredger was. She’d put it together in a matter of moments.

Nearly thirty-six hundred coppers worth of gemstones and fakes were gone. And it didn’t matter how friendly I’d become with Henrik Roth. His father would gut me when he found out.

ISOLDE

The smith eyed me as I turned the pick over in my hand, pressing the tip of my finger to the point.

He hadn't taken his attention off of me since I'd walked through the door. The only business the traders and crews of the Unnamed Sea usually did in the Narrows was picking up their inventory and drinking rye on the docks before heading back to Bastian or whatever port they'd hailed from to turn a mountain of profits. A Saltblood coming into his shop for dredging tools might be a first.

This smith, tucked into a back alley of Dern, was worth his salt—I had to give him that. The tools were solid, even if they didn't have any of the frills that my gear in the Unnamed Sea had had.

My mother had given me my last set as a gift after one of the most lucrative dives we'd ever completed in Yuri's Constellation, and they were the finest dredging tools I'd ever seen. Maybe the finest ever forged, and that was exactly why I'd left them behind. Each tool in the belt had my name engraved in the iron and set with gold, along with the stamp of my mother's crest. At the time, I'd thought the gift was her way of telling me she was proud of me. But I could see now it was just another way of polishing the jewels in her own crown.

The lot of mallets and chisels and files that filled the tiny smith's shop were nothing to look at. The metal was discolored in places where nickel had been melted with the iron, likely because the merchant was cutting corners. It was a flaw that I might not have noticed right away if I couldn't hear the distinct ring of the nickel between my fingertips. Still, he'd managed to use what he had to make something that would withstand its intended purpose. That took an undeniable skill.

I set the pick onto the tray with the others I'd selected. I couldn't have cared less what they looked like. They'd get the job done. Now all I had to do was untangle myself from Zola when we got to Ceros.

The smith hauled the scales onto the counter, setting the first piece into one side. "You'll need a belt too?" he asked, marking the first number down on a scrap piece of parchment.

"Yes."

"Well, take your pick."

His merchant's ring glinted as he pointed to the far window, where a string of leather straps was hanging against the glass. The brass buckles weren't even shined, and the color of the oiled leather ranged from the lightest gold to nearly black. I lifted onto my toes, running my fingertips down a belt that was a warm shade of red. The openings cut for the tools were even on both sides and I'd have to trim its length for it to fit around my hips, but as long as it didn't slip under the weight of the metal, I could make it work.

I unhooked it from the string of others and set it down on the counter as the smith finished the tally. When he turned the parchment toward me, he pointed to the total sum of coppers I owed.

Forty-one. I almost wanted to laugh at the number. Zola had given me fifty coppers for the dredging gear and I'd been sure he was trying to cheat me. A full belt of tools of this quality in the Unnamed Sea would have cost me more than twice that.

I counted the coins from the purse and the smith raked them into a can under the counter without so much as a thank-you. I wouldn't have thanked me either. The ports in the Narrows hated Saltbloods as much as they needed them. It was our coin that flowed through the port of Ceros, and our stones that filled the gem merchants' shops. That copper was what funded the smiths, the shipwrights, the sailmakers, and even the fishermen and crofters. The Unnamed Sea needed the Narrows' cheap grain. The Narrows needed the Unnamed Sea's coin and their trade routes to reach outside of these waters. We were a teetering, precarious construct. A bridge on the verge of collapse. If you removed one piece, they would all come crashing down.

The smith disappeared into the back room and I laid the belt out before me, smoothing the flat of my palm over the length of the rough leather. The smell of the oil used to dye it was pungent in my nose, but that was what would keep it from being ruined from day after day in the water.

I methodically slipped the tools into the openings, arranging them in the order I preferred to reach for them. I'd developed my own system through the years, placing the picks and chisels based on frequency of use rather than their lengths like other dredgers. I could find what I was looking for without so much as glancing down.

When I was finished, I lifted the belt, weighing it in my arms. It was significantly heavier than my old one, but it wouldn't take many dives for my legs to get used to it. And this belt was the only tether I had to a chance at starting over in the Narrows. Whatever came, I could dive. That was what I'd told myself as I stood in my mother's study beneath my father's portrait the night I left. It was the last thought I'd had before I knocked on Simon's door.

I reached up to touch the purse that hung beneath my shirt. That memory wasn't the only thing I'd taken with me. The ringing of the midnight hanging around my neck was a constant reminder of the moment I'd realized it wasn't the sea that had taken my father. It wasn't the reef or the tides or the turn of wind. It was Holland.

My father was a gem sage who gave up the work to dedicate his life to the humble craft of celestial navigation. But when it became clear that I'd inherited the gift, he turned his attention to my training. Every night, we sat on the floor of my bedroom and he meticulously taught me the language of the gems. Their names. Their colors. Their clarity. Most importantly, their song.

I was fourteen when I began working for my mother, traveling to the farthest reaches of the Unnamed Sea on her ships to dive with crews of men and women two and three times my age. More than once, I'd come close to finding my death on those reefs. But my mother was happy as long as I came home with gems. And when I got my first taste of what her approval felt like, that was exactly what I continued to do.

I hoisted the belt over one shoulder and stepped out onto the street, welcoming the weight of it. I'd felt too light without it, but now I had a sense of gravity about me. A distinct feeling of place. I didn't know if I'd ever feel like myself again. That version of Isolde was gone. But the girl who'd only ever

felt at home beneath the surface of the water was still there inside of me somewhere.

I made my way back toward the harbor, as promised, where Burke would be waiting. The small strip of shops in this part of the village were filled and the dockworkers were still unloading the inventories that had come in the night before. Smiths, shipwrights, and sailmakers were people that every port needed, no matter how small. With Dern sitting at the farthest you could get down shore before venturing into the waters of the Unnamed Sea, there was no shortage of traders stopping in on their way to and from Ceros. In another few years, I imagined, the port would look very different than it did now.

The top of the *Luna*'s main mast was visible in the harbor as I walked down the hill. The slick cobblestones were still running with gray water from the morning's rain, but the sea looked calm for the trip to Ceros. Zola would be finishing up his rounds with the merchants before we set sail, and he was in a hurry.

I took another step just as a hand shot out from behind the corner of the next building, taking hold of my jacket and wrenching me from the street. The belt slipped from my shoulder and the back of my head hit the stone wall, making me gasp as two stormy blue eyes appeared before me. Eyes that had glistened in the firelight of the tavern the night before.

It was the young helmsman with the crates of rye. The one who'd left the burn of his touch lingering on my skin.

Now his hands tightened on the opening of my jacket, firmly pinning me in place. "You scream, and it'll be the last sound you ever make." His voice was low and steady. Different than it had been when he gave me that name—*Elias*.

I tried to shove him back, but he didn't budge. The unnerving, calm look on his face didn't waver as his chin dipped down so he could look into my eyes. He was so close that I could feel his breath on my cheek.

"What do you want?" I spoke through clenched teeth.

"I want my gems back."

I searched his face as I shrank even more heavily into the wall. The gems. In the rye bottles. Zola hadn't wasted any time making his move, and there was no trace of a question or a guess in the helmsman's voice. He knew that I knew, which meant I hadn't imagined that look he'd given me in the tavern.

"I don't have your gems," I spat.

"Your helmsman does. And you're going to get them back for me."

"I have no idea what Zola does or doesn't have. I'm just his dredger."

A bitter smile appeared on his lips, making his eyes glint. "Is that all you are?"

I went still, my chest rising and falling between us in the silence. The sounds of the village felt far away now.

His hands suddenly loosened and he let me go. But he didn't step back even an inch. He still looked down into my face and the resounding thought that kept circling in my head was that this didn't feel the same as when Zola towered over me, letting his frame swallow mine. It was something else. And there was no doubt in my mind as he met my eyes that he knew. He knew what I was.

"I saw you in the tavern," he breathed. "You're a gem sage. It only took you seconds to figure out

what was in those bottles and then you told your helmsman.”

I pressed my lips together, my face flashing hot at the sound of him calling Zola *mine*. But I didn’t deny the accusation. Something told me it wouldn’t do me any favors.

“I hope you at least negotiated a cut.”

I hadn’t, because I’d never intended to steal the gems. Zola wasn’t that kind of businessman, anyway.

“I need them back. Today,” he said.

Need. Not want. Despite the smooth expression on his face, I could see in his eyes that there was a shadow of desperation behind the words. I’d been right—this helmsman was in over his head.

My eyes drifted to the street behind him. I could still see the tip of the *Luna*’s main mast against the gray sky. “Or what? You’ll tell Zola what I am?”

He finally took a step back, putting more space between us, and I almost moved forward. As if the air had the same pull as water. But I didn’t move. Slowly, the look on his face changed into something like amusement. He nearly laughed. “You think he doesn’t know?”

My heart was beating harder now, the sound of it loud in my ears. Whatever he was alluding to, I wasn’t following.

“That bastard is taking you to Ceros to sell you to the highest bidder. And not as a dredger. As a gem sage.” His voice didn’t lower when he said it and the words echoed around us in the alley, making me swallow hard.

“You’re lying,” I said, more unsteadily than I’d meant to.

“Am I? Zola can get twenty times the copper for you than he can from a gem haul. Enough to launch a trade route.”

I could feel the blood draining from my face, my fingertips going cold, and I almost wished he would move closer again so I could feel the heat that hovered around him.

The way he looked at me, patiently waiting for me to put it together, made the sick feeling inside of me churn. Part of me, even if it was a small part, believed him.

“Why would you tell me that, *Elias*?” I said, using the false name he’d given me. I wanted to feel as if I had some kind of balance to the scales. Zola was a liar, yes. But so was he.

He moved closer again, setting his hands on the stone behind me to frame me in his arms, and I immediately regretted that I’d silently willed him to do so. The collar of his shirt was unbuttoned beneath the opening of his jacket, revealing an expanse of sun-darkened skin.

“You just cost me a lot of copper. Now you’re going to fix your mistake. If you don’t, I’ll make sure that Zola isn’t the only one who knows your secret. And you’ll have half the helmsmen in the Narrows trying to sell you to the gem merchants in Ceros.”

He met my eyes for another breath before he dropped his arms and the cold instantly came rushing back, making gooseflesh rise on my skin.

“I’m raising anchor at sundown. And I want those gems back by the time I set sail.” He blinked once before he turned on his heel, the tail of his dull blue jacket flicking around the corner as he disappeared.

I finally let out the breath I was holding, my weight collapsing into the wall. Slowly, I slid down the brick until I was crouched in the shadow of the building. Beside me, the dredging belt was half

submerged in a puddle of water, painting the leather a darker red.

The helmsman was lying. He had to be. If Zola knew what I was, then he had no need of me as a dredger. But there were stories bleeding into every corner of the Unnamed Sea about gem sages being snatched up. Disappearing. It was the reason my father had wanted us to leave Bastian. To never look back.

Traders smuggling gem sages to merchants who were willing to pay were things I'd never had to worry about because of my family. Because of Holland. But I wasn't her daughter anymore. I'd cut that thread between us the moment I opened that gem case and took the midnight.

And that was the thing. Here, in the Narrows, I was no one.

ISOLDE

Burke was waiting on the dock when I reached the harbor, his usually slanted mouth set in a straight line. Behind him, the *Luna* was readying to set sail, the deckhands climbing the masts to do their routine checks. As soon as Zola returned, we'd be raising anchor.

I reached up, rubbing the spot on the back of my head that had hit the brick wall. It was aching, but the pain was nothing to what the helmsman from the tavern had said. I could still feel his weight pressing into me, the smell of him thick in my lungs, and his words felt like a tightening rope around my ribs.

I'd taken the place on the *Luna*'s crew without thinking twice. I'd signed a name that didn't belong to me, knowing I'd slip away in Ceros before Zola even knew I was gone. But if Zola knew I was a gem sage, it wasn't a far leap for me to believe that he had other plans for me in Ceros. And it wouldn't be so easy to disappear.

Burke's eyes scanned the crowd spilling down from the street, and when they finally landed on me, his eyebrows raised in annoyance. I let myself be pulled into the stream of people headed to the ships, my grip tightening on the dredging belt that hung over my shoulder.

I'd been caught up in rivalries before, always between my mother and someone else, and I was used to being used. She'd paraded me around, flashing me like a diamond ring to the guild and her fellow merchants in Bastian. Now that I thought about it, it had felt the same way last night in the tavern with Zola.

"What took so long?" Burke growled, taking hold of the ladder when I reached him.

"Smith had other customers."

Whether he believed me, I couldn't tell. He flung a hand toward the ship, waiting for me to climb, and I pulled myself up the ropes, feeling the solid ground of the docks vanish beneath me. Burke was always gruff, but he was agitated in a way that made me uneasy. If they'd taken the gems last night, and it was likely they had, he'd be eager to get the ship out of the harbor.

I'd lived at least half my life on the sea, my feet always finding their way to the water. But as I stepped back onto the *Luna*, I was missing the feeling of safety it had once given me.

In the Unnamed Sea, the stories about the disappearing gem sages had seemed like folklore, a ghost story told over glasses of cava and cups of tea. But something about Saint's words rang too true. There was more to them than a feud between two helmsmen.

If Saint was right and Zola was going to sell me to a merchant in Ceros, I would have little chance to get out of this mess once we got out on the water. The thought put a stone in my throat. I didn't want

to imagine what lay at the end of that fate. A room with a locked door. A lonely death. Years dictated by the amount of coin I could earn some guild member in Ceros. I'd lived at least one of those lives already.

But I also didn't doubt that Saint was telling me what I needed to hear in order to get what he wanted—his gems. The way I saw it, I had two choices. If I trusted Zola, I risked the possibility that he was going to hand me over to a merchant. And not every story like that ended with being a prisoner in some guild member's workshop. There were also rumors about merchants willing to pay just so they could cut a gem sage's throat. The fewer of us there were, the more power and coin the Gem Guild had.

If I trusted Saint, I might save my own neck, but I'd also make an enemy of Zola and give up my only passage to Ceros. All of this—leaving Bastian and Holland and everything else—would have been for nothing.

The problem was, I didn't trust anyone. And once the *Luna* set sail, the decision would be made for me.

The deck was crawling with crew when we came over the railing and Burke immediately got to work, taking his log from his jacket. Once he checked the coordinates and Zola returned, we'd be setting sail.

I eyed the cracked door beside the helmsman's quarters in the passageway, where the coin master worked from morning to night. I didn't have any friends on the *Luna* or favors to call in, but if the answers I needed were here on the ship, that was where they'd be. The coin master would already be at work in his tiny office, updating the ledgers with the trade they'd done in Dern before they went on to Zola to be checked.

The door of the cabin creaked as I gently pushed it open and the man only half looked up, lifting his quill from the parchment. His curling black hair was stuck under his cap, still wet from the morning rain.

"What is it?" There was a flinch in his eyes. I was the last person he'd expected at the door of his little stall.

I jerked my chin toward the deck, sounding as detached as possible. "Harbor master's looking for you."

His brow wrinkled. "Harbor master?"

"Something about docking payment?"

He let out a heavy breath, pinching his eyes closed. "You've got to be kidding."

"Says we can't go until it's paid."

"The man couldn't keep a ledger if his life depended on it," he muttered, getting to his feet.

He reached down, giving the chest on the floor a firm yank to be sure it was locked, and the ledger fell closed before he tucked it into his jacket. No coin master with any sense left a ledger unattended. If it wasn't with him, it was with Zola. But that wasn't what I was after.

He wedged himself around the table in the cramped room, turning sideways to slip out the door. I started down the passageway behind him, following until he was climbing down to the dock. As soon as he was out of sight, I stopped short, scanning the deck. Burke was already unpacking the sextant, but there was still no sign of Zola in the harbor.

I turned into the passageway and slipped back inside the coin master's cabin, letting the door fall closed behind me. The wall was fit with a series of locked cabinets behind iron grates that held the copper the *Luna* kept on hand. From what I'd been able to gather in the last couple of weeks, the chest bolted to the floor was the same. But the coin master didn't only keep the ledgers. He also handled the correspondence and contracts that ran the *Luna's* operations.

The deep shelf that stuck out over the desk kept them within reach. I thumbed through their edges quickly, my eyes flitting over dozens of pages of folded and filed parchment. An array of handwriting penned in different inks covered their faces, their broken wax seals stamped with the insignias of ports and merchants. For someone who couldn't even call himself a trader in the eyes of the Trade Council, Zola had certainly gotten his hands into a lot of business.

He'd steered clear of my mother, it seemed. There wasn't a single parchment that bore her seal, and that was no surprise. She had no need of a low-level helmsman from the Narrows to do her bidding when she had the whole of the Unnamed Sea lining up to do it.

But there was *one* parchment that caught my eye.

My fingers stopped on a broken wax seal that was the color of amethyst. The same deep violet I'd seen Simon use in North End.

I slipped it out from between the others and unfolded it carefully. It was the same one given to Zola when I came to the docks that night. But it had been sealed and only now could I see that it was a contract, stamped with a merchant's seal I didn't recognize. The terms were written out above the signatures.

TRANSPORT AGREEMENT

Courier: *The Luna*

Recipient: *Oliver Durant*

Route: *Bastian to Ceros*

Cargo: *26 bolts Nimsmire silk*

Payment of 8,000 coppers upon procurement, 15,000 upon October 12th delivery

I stopped, reading the numbers again. The sum was high, much too high for Nimsmire silks. And twenty-six bolts was a quantity no single merchant had need of. Especially in the Narrows.

Signed,

Simon Fuerst

Simon Fuerst. I blinked.

Simon. *Blue door, black lantern.*

The question was already spinning in my head like the eddies that churned over the coral reefs before a storm.

I know who you are.

When he'd said it, I'd thought only of my name. My parentage. But what if that wasn't all Simon knew about me?

My finger moved over the words as I read them again, still telling myself that it didn't prove anything. Simon had sent me to Zola, but that didn't mean Saint was right.

My gaze narrowed on the date. October 12th. That was four days from now. A cold prick crept up my fingers and over the tops of my hands as I refolded the parchment and returned it to its place. Zola was determined to be in Ceros in three days' time.

The cargo hold was full of goods he was transporting and there was no reason to believe there weren't twenty-six bolts of Nismire silk somewhere among the crates. Unless ...

I sank down onto the stool, shifting the parchment on the desk until I found it—the record of the ship's master inventory. That was one log that never left this room.

My finger trailed down the list quickly as I read, picking up from before the last stop in Bastian. It looked to be the only port in the Unnamed Sea they'd stopped at.

Silver ingots, crystal glasses, reams of parchment, even a crate of handmade horn buttons. But no silks. There wasn't a single mention of them in the last several pages of the log.

My eyes trailed to the wall that the coin master's cabin shared with the *Luna's* helmsman's quarters.

It wasn't proof that Saint was telling the truth, but it lined up with what he'd said. Maybe Zola had no intention of having me run dives and turn over hauls for the rising gem merchants of the Narrows.

Maybe he was running a delivery service instead.

ISOLDE

The sharp ping of an adze reverberated in the wooden slats beneath my feet, a sign that Yasmin was at work belowdecks. She wasn't a friend by any stretch, but I also knew she had no affection for Zola. Everyone, however, had an affection for copper.

A deckhand shouldered past me in the narrow passageway as I followed the sound of Yasmin's tools around the corner. She was crouched beneath the door of the cargo hold with a set of new hinges at her feet. The lantern over her head swung as a wave hit the side of the ship and the adze slipped from her fingers. I caught myself on the wall beside her, leaning into the rock of the vessel before I lost my balance.

"What do you want, dredger?" She only half acknowledged me with a sideways glance as she picked up the adze.

I waited for another pair of footsteps to disappear up the stairs. "I have a question, and I can pay for the answer," I said, keeping my voice low.

She gave me an indifferent frown, opening her hand.

I fished a copper from my belt and held it between us. "How often does this ship go to Bastian?"

"What kind of question is that?"

"Just tell me."

"I don't know. It's not exactly a set schedule. Once a month maybe. Why?"

"What do you usually pick up there?"

"I'm the bosun. I keep the ship floating to and from a port. I don't keep tabs on inventory once we get there."

I leveled my gaze at her. "We both know that you're not just a bosun. You're running a side trade on this ship, which means you know exactly what's on it."

When her eyes lifted again, the icy expression I expected them to hold wasn't there. She was entertained, if anything. "Well, look who's been paying attention. Thought you were just another cushy Saltblood brat looking for adventure."

"Maybe I am."

"I doubt that." She glanced down the passageway. "If you're wanting to be cut in, you can forget it. I have enough hands begging for coin."

"I don't care about what you're skimming. I care how you're doing it. What does he pick up in Bastian?"

"Metals, mostly. Silver-cast tea sets, gold-plated cutlery, stuff like that. Things the guild members

in Ceros request to make them feel like their tin scales are a little shinier.”

“What about silks?”

“For the Narrows?” She half laughed, plucking the coin from my fingers. “No. No silks.”

I leaned into the doorframe, my eyes moving over the contents of the cargo hold behind her. It wasn’t even half full, but what was there was contained within barrels and crates. I didn’t see the seal of Nimsmire stamped on any of them.

“Do you ever stop in Nimsmire?”

Her eyebrow arched up as she crossed her arms over her chest and I sighed, pulling out another coin.

“No. Never been that far north.” She took it. “Any other questions you’d like to bleed copper for?”

Zola clearly had powerful friends in Ceros if he’d gotten away with unsanctioned trade for this long. If he was running under-the-table trades for guild members, that would explain it. It was the same in Bastian. The merchants who made and upheld the laws were the first to break them, and maybe the new Trade Council of the Narrows was no different. They also had something to prove.

There was more going on here than Zola had let on. I was sure of that. I started back up the passageway, stopping short when Yasmin’s words finally settled in the back of my mind.

I turned to face her again. “What did you mean ... *another*?”

Yasmin’s irritation was at the surface now. “What?”

“You said I was just *another* Saltblood brat.”

“Yeah?”

“What did you mean by that? Have you had others on the *Luna* before?”

“Sure. A few times.”

It wasn’t until that moment that I could see the threads coming together. I took a step in her direction. “Where do they come from?”

She shrugged. “Bastian. We usually pick up at least one stray there.”

“And then?”

“And then they get off in Ceros.”

There was numb feeling hovering beneath the surface of my thoughts. A coldness blooming inside of me. Zola wasn’t running errands for guild members. He was selling to them. He was going to Bastian to courier gem sages.

That was what Simon had meant the night I knocked on his door, when he said that fate was smiling on him. I was an entire crate of coin that would make it back to his coffers.

My eyes followed the beam of light coming from the stairs that led to the deck, where it was pooling on the floor. Zola was building a fortune. There was no telling how many gem sages he’d handed over in Ceros.

I reached inside my shirt, pulling at the chain around my neck until it was over my head. Yasmin’s eyes narrowed on me as I untied the small leather purse from its length and stuffed it into the pocket of my jacket. The gold chain glistened, tangled in my fingers as I made a fist.

She studied my face. “That’s a lot more than a coin’s worth.”

“It’s yours if you get me into the helmsman’s quarters. Worth at least sixty-five coppers. Maybe seventy.”

Yasmin dropped the adze into the loop on her belt, taking the chain from me. She ran the links through her fingertips, inspecting them. “You have a death wish?”

“Maybe.”

A smile broke on her lips as she plucked a hooked pick from the back of her belt. “You get caught and I’ll deny I helped you. And there isn’t a bastard on this ship who won’t back me on that.”

I nodded. “Understood.”

She looked up and down the passageway, sighing. “All right. Come on.”

I followed her back up the steps, keeping a few paces behind her when we came up onto the deck. Burke was still at the bow, taking wind measurements before he finalized the course, and any minute, Zola would be climbing the ladder and the deckhands would be raising anchor. I had minutes. Seconds, maybe.

Darin was on the upper deck loosening the lines of the main sail as we passed beneath him and Yasmin caught his eyes, gesturing to Burke. He looked at her with a question he didn’t ask aloud before he nodded and immediately retied the rope and made his way down the mast to the deck. When he placed himself before the helm, I realized he was keeping watch. They’d probably done this dozens of times.

Yasmin took hold of the long blond braid over her shoulder and let it fall to her waist as she pressed herself into the opening of the door. I gave her my back, keeping an eye on the opening of the passageway, and I tightened the dredging belt around my waist, tugging at the knot. The sound of metal scraping the wood sounded for a moment before it fell quiet again. The hinges creaked softly and then she was walking past me, bumping my shoulder with hers. She didn’t look back as she took the steps belowdecks and disappeared again.

I wet my lips, swallowing hard before I stepped backward toward the door. I didn’t breathe as my hand reached for the handle, and a chill crept up my spine. The door swung open and I slipped inside, letting it close with a soft click.

The crate of rye I’d seen in the tavern was behind the desk, and to anyone else it would look like something Zola had picked up as his personal supply. It was only twelve unmarked bottles, but even from across the room, I could feel the buzz of the red beryl dancing over my skin.

I pulled the knife from my belt and touched each bottle with my fingertips, lifting the ones that reverberated with gemstone and setting them on the floor beside me. There were four in all. I picked up the first one, cutting at the fresh wax in an arc until I could pry it up. Then I wedged the cork free before starting on the next. When I had them all opened, I searched the room for the chamber pot. Every cabin had one, and Zola’s was tucked beneath his bed. To my luck, it had recently been cleaned.

I tipped the first bottle over my cupped hand, pouring slowly. The cold amber liquid ran through my trembling fingers and when the first stone landed in my palm, I exhaled. One after the other, they came tumbling out until the facets of twelve stones cast a spray of red glitter over the ceiling and the walls around me. I picked up the next bottle, doing the same.

The rye sloshed in the chamber pot when another wave rocked the ship, and as I picked up the third bottle, Burke’s gruff voice rang out.

“Raise anchor!”

I jolted, dropping the bottle, and it rolled across the floorboards beneath the bed, spilling as it went. If Burke was raising the anchor, he'd spotted Zola. The ship was about to leave.

I cursed, scrambling after the bottle and when I got back up on my knees, I poured it out faster. Too fast. One of the gems fell through my fingers. I abandoned the last bottle, slipping it back into the crate.

More orders were called out and the footsteps of the crew beat on the upper deck as I pushed the chamber pot back to its place and got to my feet. I pulled the leather purse from my pocket and opened it, my heart racing as I dumped the red beryl inside with the midnight. As soon as it was cinched closed, I bolted toward the window.

The shadows of bodies on the ship moved over the green water below and I climbed up, swinging my legs through the opening. Behind me, the iron door handle lifted, and I clasped my fingers around the purse tightly before I jumped.

I fell through the air, hitting the rough water and plunging beneath its surface. A flurry of white bubbles rushed up around me, tracing over my feet, my legs, my hands, my hair. I let the weight of my belt pull me deep, and the belly of the ship grew smaller overhead as the first bit of air slipped through my lips. I dropped more than twenty-five feet before my feet touched the soft, sandy bottom, making pain swell in my ears until the ache filled my skull.

I waited, watching the surface above. The sound of the red beryl amplified in the water around me, along with the other stone in my purse, and my fingers curled tighter around it as I pressed it to my chest.

It had begun with gems, I thought, my knuckles throbbing the tighter my fingers curled. And it didn't matter how far from my mother I sailed. It would end with them too.

10

SAINT

“She’s not coming.”

Clove stood at the foremast behind me, leaning into it with one shoulder. His eyes were fixed on the harbor’s entrance, where the trickle of people leaving the merchant’s house was thinning by the minute.

I looked down at my watch again before studying the water below. The orange light was skipping over the surface and the shadows of the crews up on the ships moved over the docks. It was nearly sundown and the dredger hadn’t shown, just like Clove said she wouldn’t.

“Then why aren’t they leaving?” I said, thinking aloud.

I turned to glance at the *Luna*, floating a few slips down. According to Gerik, Zola had been scheduled to set sail well before nightfall, but the sails were still rolled up tight and the anchor hadn’t been raised.

Clove uncrossed his arms, coming to stand beside me. His silence had been growing heavier by the hour and though it was like him to worry, this was different. This time, we weren’t just gambling with the *Aster* or a trade license. We were gambling with our lives.

“I cut the crew by more than half. Kept Julian and Mateo,” he said. “We need to get on the water if we don’t want to pay for another night to dock.”

The crew, we could do without, for a while, anyway. We couldn’t afford to feed them and we didn’t need more eyes on us than was necessary. Not when we had Nash locked in the belly of the ship.

“Managed to convince some dockworkers to mix up some of the inventory coming out of the merchant’s house. Wool was the best I could do.”

“All right,” I murmured, eyes still fixed on the *Luna*.

I didn’t like stealing from crofters, but at least they’d been paid already. The Saltbloods would be the ones with the coin deficit, and that was nothing more than justice.

“And these.” He pulled a fistful of silver and gold from his vest, the result of a collection of grabs he’d done coming to and from the tavern. Rings, bracelets, a pocket watch. Even a pair of spectacles. It was a talent of his that had kept us fed when the ledger was less than kind.

I nodded.

“We need to decide how to handle this,” Clove said. “Henrik.”

I tucked my watch into my jacket, the sinking feeling returning to my chest. Henrik was a problem we couldn’t afford to have. When he found out that we’d lost his gems, he wouldn’t be happy. His

father, Felix, on the other hand, would gut us in front of the harbor master and not think twice.

“Any ideas?” I said.

Clove shook his head. “Not any that will be quick enough. We have to have that coin by the time we get back to Dern. That’s only three weeks to scrape together the copper we need to pay him.”

I set my elbows onto the railing, staring out at the horizon. The minute Henrik got wind of this, there would be hell to pay. Our usual rounds wouldn’t touch what we owed him, and it would only put us even deeper with Emilia, the rye crofter who supplied us. We didn’t even have the option of running. Not until Rosamund was finished with the *Aster*.

I had no doubt that Zola was the one who’d taken the rye. He’d been after us for months, poking around and trying to sniff out what we were up to. But he had three times the crew and three times the ship we did. I’d be dead before I stepped a single foot on the *Luna*. And he knew it. Which was why I’d bet on the dredger. But I’d bet wrong.

We’d known the risks of running such a tight trade and investing so much coin into the *Aster*’s build. There was no give when we lost copper or fell short. By the time the Roths were finished with us, it wouldn’t matter if I was holding a trade license or standing on a brand-new ship. I was a dead man.

“We’ll have to trade as much rye as we can. Maybe swipe some more inventory in Sowan or make a deal in Ceros that will hold us over. If we have something to give Henrik when we get back to Dern, it’s better than nothing.”

It would be a hungry and sleepless few weeks, but we might be able to come out the other end with our lives. If we were lucky.

Clove’s mouth flattened. What I really meant by *make a deal* was take on a debt to someone. Something we’d sworn since the beginning that we would never do.

“Or we disappear for a while. Until we can pay.”

“There’s no disappearing in the Narrows. Not for us.”

It was true. There were already too many stories about the two foolhardy boys who sailed a sinking ship into hell-born storms. And the Trade Council had its eye on us now that we’d applied for a license.

“We could go to Cragsmouth,” he said.

My eyes cut to his, my shoulders going rigid. “No.”

That was something else we’d sworn we’d never do. There were too many ghosts waiting for us there. I didn’t think of it as home anymore. Not since our fathers died. And I wasn’t sure the people in Cragsmouth would give us safe harbor, anyway. I had too much blood on my hands.

“May not have a choice.”

I knew what Clove was thinking. He’d never wanted to get mixed up with Henrik. Anyone in their right mind wouldn’t. But I’d known the stakes when I took the first batch of gems from the Roths, and until now, they’d played in our favor. The law was clear—only gem merchants who’d been given a ring from the Gem Guild could buy and sell gems. Traders could take them from one port to the other. But we were neither. And working with a notorious fake-gem maker from Bastian was another matter altogether.

“I’ll deal with it,” I tried to reassure him. I was reassuring myself too.

I watched my reflection ripple on the water below for another moment before I finally started across the deck. We'd make it to Sowan with a skeleton crew and Emilia would be waiting with a new inventory of rye. But the copper to pay for it was gone. That was a puzzle I'd solve when we got there.

I pushed into the helmsman's quarters and shut the door, leaning into it heavily as I stared into the dark. I took three long breaths before I finally crossed the small room. My hand hovered over the handle of the drawer that held the ledger for a beat and when I pulled it open, I flipped it to the last page that was covered in my writing. The numbers were dismal. Impossible. They had been for months. But this was a sum that would sink us.

I picked up the quill, my hand freezing in midair when I spotted a small leather purse at the corner of the desk beside the inkpot. One I'd never seen before. And it hadn't been there that morning.

A prickle ran over my skin as I dropped the quill and picked it up, letting it roll into the center of my palm. It didn't have the feel of copper inside.

I unraveled the ties, tilting the opening toward the last bit of light coming through the window, and the shine of red lit within it. Gemstone.

A long, heavy exhale escaped my lips and I swallowed hard, feeling suddenly unsteady.

"It's not all of them." A soft voice sounded behind me and I shot up from the stool, turning with the gems clasped tightly in my hand.

Zola's dredger was crouched in the corner, her clothes wet and her hair drying in thick waves over her shoulder. She looked like she was somehow painted into the shadows of the room.

"How the hell did you get in here?"

Her eyes went to the window on the other side of the cabin in an unspoken answer. The shutter was closed over a trail of wet footprints drying on the floor.

"It's not all of them," she said again, standing slowly. A belt of dredging tools was draped over the chest beside her. "I was only able to get three of the bottles."

She stepped into the small bit of light cast through the room, her gray eyes flashing more blue. There was a flush to her skin that hadn't been there that morning. A warmth beneath her cheeks.

"That wasn't the deal."

I didn't like how she met my eyes so directly. I wasn't used to that anymore. Everywhere we went, Clove and I were given a wide berth, but either this dredger didn't know anything about us or she just didn't care.

"I don't remember making a deal," she said. "A *deal* would imply I was offered something in return."

"Look around, dredger. I have nothing to give."

Still, her gaze didn't leave my face. The feel of it traveled from my eyes to my chin. "They're good fakes. Some of the best I've seen."

The words sounded like a question. But if she was hoping to find out who the maker was, she was a fool.

"I'd say thank you, but you haven't done me any favors." I closed the purse and tossed it onto the desk. "How exactly are you planning to pay for the ones you lost?"

"I can't."

“Then why are you still standing in my quarters?”

Her mouth twisted.

“Let me guess. Zola wasn’t the upstanding chap you thought he was.”

She stared at me, that deep silence returning.

“Then I’d get a new crew if I were you. And fast. I’m sure one of those Saltblood helmsmen headed back to Bastian will take you.”

She surprised me by taking a step in my direction, and the cabin immediately felt smaller around me. There was something about her that filled up the space. She was like a thick, curling smoke in the air. “I can’t,” she said again.

“Why?”

“It’s complicated.”

The harbor bell rang out in the distance, signaling a ship out of the bay, and the muscle in her jaw ticked before she reached up, opening the shutter just enough to peer out.

“He’s not going to leave. Not with his precious cargo missing,” I said. “He’ll tear this village apart until he finds you.”

Her fingers slipped from the shutter and she folded herself back into the shadow of the wall, watching me. “Maybe there will be nothing to find.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“I gave you back the gems. Now I need to get out of here.”

“You said yourself that it wasn’t a deal. And you didn’t even pay in full.”

“I need to get to Ceros.”

It was only then that I could see beneath the hardness on her face. She was scared. Terrified, even. And I still had that feeling when I looked at her—like the eerie quiet that fell over a ship before lightning struck.

“Saint!” Clove’s voice sounded on the deck, making both of us still.

The dredger’s eyes widened before she pressed herself to the wall. Across the cabin, the door opened and Clove appeared in the glow of lantern light on the deck. It took him all of three seconds to read the look on my face. In the next breath, his eyes found her.

“You’re kidding.” The faintest trace of mirth laced the words.

“Seems the dredger showed up after all.”

“The gems? She has them?”

“*Some* of them.” I shot her an irritated look.

The low beat of steady pounding reverberated in the floorboards of the cabin from the cargo hold below, and the girl looked between us warily.

“Shut him up before someone on the docks hears him,” I muttered.

Clove’s gaze lingered on the dredger for another moment before he took two steps backward, toward the door. I followed him out, closing it behind me.

He took the stairs belowdecks, stopping halfway down. When he looked up at me, it was with a look I knew well. “So?”

My eyes lifted to the closed door of my helmsman quarters in the passageway as I reached for the knife in the back of my belt. I closed my hand over the blade before pulling it through my fist and then

I lifted it into the air, over the railing. A steady stream of blood dripped into the water below.

“Raise anchor. Set course for Sowan.”

Clove let out a long breath. “You sure about that?”

I met his eyes reluctantly. He always saw more than I wanted him to. “No.”

He was so still for a moment that I was almost sure he would argue. But instead, he gave me a nod and climbed down the ladder.

If we did this, things would be different. The rivalry with Zola had been beneath the surface until now. This would change everything.

I glanced up to the raised sails of the *Riven*. She was half cloaked in fog, making her look more like a ghost than a ship. And maybe she was. I’d seen enough strange things at sea to believe it. The *Riven* had lost her soul a long time ago. So had we.

The sun disappeared over the horizon, the light striping the surface of the water in one long pillar of gold before it began to fade. It was crisp and clear, wavering on the surface, but the sight gave me an uneasy feeling. The sea was too quiet, and that could only mean one thing—that she was readying for something. There was a distant whisper I could hear on the wind, an echo from miles away. A storm was coming. It always was.

The adder stones jingled in the open window, where they were strung on a thin stretch of twine. It was an old helmsman's trick to ward away the eyes of the sea demons, and I'd paid a few Waterside strays in Ceros to collect them for me in the early hours before dawn the day Clove and I first set sail. I'd stood up on the rocks, watching their lanterns bob on the black sand below, and I'd given them a copper each before I hung the stones up.

I knew better than to ignore the traditions. I'd learned the hard way what happened when you did. And though my piety and consecration of the old ways sent myths about me trailing through the Narrows, there was one that only Clove knew. The black sea. The open mouth of the wave. Wide eyes looking up at me from beneath the water as they disappeared. There were some sins you paid for your whole life. I knew that now.

The light cast an orange glow in the cabin as I dipped the finest-tipped quill into the pot of blue ink and tapped along its rim. I'd managed to get a pint of oil for the lanterns to last us until we got to Emilia's croft by promising the barkeeper at the tavern in Dern two extra bottles of rye on our next stop. If I caught Emilia in a good mood when we reached Sowan, maybe she would see us off with more.

Before me, the map I'd spent the last year working on was unrolled across the desk. The thick parchment was unmarked, every edge still sharp. It was the only thing on the ship that wasn't tattered or half rotted with damp, and in another month or two, it would be complete.

The Narrows.

What lay before me was the first accurate rendition of the entire mercurial shoreline that crept in from the Unnamed Sea into spidering veins of water that spilled in from the rivers. I was no mapmaker. My father had been the one with that talent, even if he'd never properly used it, but I knew how to mimic him. Every careful brushstroke, etch, and symbol.

No one had ever made a complete map of the Narrows. Ceros had its share of charts, but not the whole of the waters. And why would they? Every helmsman worth their salt had its shape and depth and width carved on their bones. Had its waters running through their veins. But to the outside world,

the Narrows was more of an idea than a place. A reputation. In a way, I figured, we didn't really exist until we were recorded with parchment and ink. Until we were, we'd never be seen as a people standing on our own.

The map archived every angle, every degree, every depth in careful detail. I set the heel of my hand onto the edge, letting the breath ease out of my lungs before the tip of the quill touched down. I dragged it in a stack of straight lines, shadowing an arch of reef that snaked east and opened to a circular well that plunged forty feet deep. The water there was crystal clear, and on sunny days, you could see the gold glittering on the sand below.

I picked up the quill and set it onto the linen beside me, unfolding my fingers to stretch the sore muscles in my hand. My father had been a much better artist than I was, but he'd made me practice every night, painstakingly drawing the fishing routes on scrap parchment that would later feed the fire.

Mind the ink, Elias.

I could still hear his voice, hovering in the darkness around me.

I picked up the bowl of sand and sprinkled it over the map to dry the ink and it scattered, covering the work I'd just done. When it was dry, I carefully rolled up the parchment, returning it to the waxed-leather cylinder case and fitting the lid on tight.

The trip to Emilia's was usually an easy one. Those were the nights on our route when we had coin in our coffers and gems in our rye. It was the leg back to Dern that had our bellies growling and our hull light. But this time we were sailing with shadows following us. Zola. Henrik's gems. Rosamund's missing apprentice.

Mateo stood at the helm, eyes on the black sky as I came from the passageway, which meant that Julian was asleep below. The *Riven* was too much ship to be handled by only four sets of hands, especially if any of us wanted more than two hours of sleep. But if Julian and Mateo were curious about what had made us dump the rest of the crew in Dern, they hadn't shown it. Maybe that was why Clove had kept them over the others.

Clove was waiting on the upper deck when I came up the steps, his boots propped up on a coil of rope and his hands folded behind his head. He'd been waiting.

"Where is she?" I asked.

"Down in the crew's cabin. Sleeping, I think." He sniffed.

I hadn't seen the dredger since I'd sent her belowdecks, but she hadn't left my mind for even a moment. I was a believer in signs, and the sea gave plenty of them. But there had been no warning when I caught sight of her in the tavern and that heavy feeling sank deep in my chest. There was no accounting for the fact that it hadn't left me either.

I rubbed one hand over my face, feeling the grit that covered my skin. "And Nash?"

"We can let him out in the morning. He has nowhere to go."

A rumbling wind growled over the water and my eyes went to the expanse of darkness that surrounded the ship.

"Too late now," Clove said, dropping his feet from the ropes and setting his elbows onto his knees as he looked up at me. His hands were folded before him.

"I know what you're thinking."

"Do you?"

“That it was a mistake to leave Dern with her on board.”

“And I’m right.”

My hand dropped from the collar of my shirt. Clove never minced words or told me only what I wanted to hear. He wasn’t afraid of me either. But I’d harbored a hope that in this, he wouldn’t be against me.

“Could have told me that before we raised anchor.”

“Wouldn’t have done any good.” He smirked. “We do need to talk about it though.”

“About what?”

“Zola,” he said simply. “As soon as he finds out about this, we’re his enemies. Forever.”

“We were already enemies.”

“Not that kind.”

That, I did understand. There was an understanding between Zola and me. We needed each other if we were going to establish trade in the Narrows among the helmsmen born on our shores. But we also couldn’t let each other pull too far ahead. It was an alliance that was doomed to turn deadly.

“Then it’s already done,” I said. “It was done the minute we left Dern.”

Clove gave me a knowing look.

“What?” I sat on the crank beside him.

“Even with the gems she brought back, we’ll still owe.”

I’d already added that up. No matter what, we’d still be short of what Henrik would be expecting, and that was including every single coin we had. It was better than having nothing to give him, but it wouldn’t be enough.

“We have less than three weeks to come up with the rest.” He didn’t sound like he believed we could do it.

“How?”

He stared at me. “We have the rye.”

“We don’t have it yet.”

Emilia wouldn’t be happy when we showed up unable to pay for the last haul of crates she’d given us. She would be even less amused when I asked her for more.

“She’ll do it,” I said.

“I don’t know.” Clove’s head tilted to one side.

“Emilia needs us like we need her. She’ll do it.”

“Even if we sell every bottle she has, it will only be enough for Henrik. There won’t be anything else.”

The coin from this trade would have been the seed money that would launch our trade under our new license. Now we’d have to get it some other way. But there was also the matter of hiring crew for the *Aster* and everything else we’d need to outfit the vessel. When we got back to Dern, we’d have a ship, but nothing else. Not even a way to sail it.

The wind howled, a low groan rattling the ship around us, and my teeth clenched, every muscle in my body tensing.

“Storm?” Clove asked.

I shook my head. “No. Not tonight.” The sound of my voice trailed off.

This wasn't the hum that bubbled beneath the water before the sky started churning. It was more than that. Something I hadn't felt in a long time. And I couldn't pretend that I didn't know it was about the girl sleeping in the crew's cabin.

"We'll get rid of her," I said, swallowing. "In Sowan."

One blond eyebrow arched beneath the sweep of hair on Clove's forehead and a mischievous look I recognized resurfaced in his expression. Sometimes I forgot that version of Clove still lived inside of him. The one I'd known before we left Cragsmouth. Before we both watched as our fathers were swallowed by the sea.

"What?"

"Am I really the only one who is putting this together?"

I stared at him.

"We leave that gem sage in Sowan, and Zola will track her down. It's plain to anyone who looks at her she isn't Narrows-born. Her clothes. The way she talks. She doesn't exactly blend in. And when he finds her, he's taking her to Ceros."

Still, I said nothing. I knew where he was going with this.

"So, if Zola's expecting a crate of coin when he delivers her, we might as well sink the *Aster* before we ever set sail," he said. "We've clawed our way onto even ground with that bastard. For the first time, we're on equal footing. But if Zola gets a fortune to launch his trade route..." He didn't bother finishing.

I knew Clove was right. Zola wouldn't just have the advantage over us in starting our trade, he'd also be able to buy the loyalty of harbor masters and merchants at every port. His first priority would be to make sure that our trade never got off the ground. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if he had designs on eventually making sure we ended up at the bottom of the sea.

"She isn't just a gem sage. She's a dredger, Saint."

"I know she's a dredger."

His eyes cut to the stairs that led down to the main deck. "Last I checked, we don't have one of those."

"You just said that you think it was a mistake to bring her on the ship. Now you want to take her on as crew?"

"I do think it was a mistake. But it might have also been a stroke of luck. If we've dug a grave with Zola anyway, we might as well keep her out of his hands. If we don't, we'll lose any chance we had to beat him."

I stared at the crack running along the boards under my feet, a black crevice paved with tar. The clock was ticking down. On us. On this ship. It was a desperate ache in my chest that had lived there for years. I was good at plotting and strategizing and making do. But I was also tired of waiting for it all to pay off.

Another rumble of thunder sounded in the dark and Clove let out a long breath. "Go get some sleep. I'll wake you in a few hours."

I didn't argue. I was so tired that I could feel my weight threatening to fall through the deck. I pulled myself to my feet and Clove set his head back, crossing his arms over his chest as he watched the fog.

The ship was quiet as I came down the steps. Even when we had an actual crew aboard, we weren't the kind of ship that sang songs or played dice after the sun went down. We weren't the kind that enjoyed each other's company either. On the *Riven*, we existed for one purpose—to get to the next port alive.

Every waking moment sailing that ship had been with the idea that one day, we would be rid of her. We'd cut her bones up and feed them to the vultures, and then we'd say our thanks before boarding the *Aster* and bidding the *Riven* farewell. She'd been good to us, but the ship was an open, gaping mouth. It was only a matter of time before she devoured us. I knew that.

I ducked out into the passageway, closing the door of my quarters behind me, and I stared into the shadows as a cloud passed over the moon. The cabin filled with darkness, and a swift cold bled into its corners around me. I had that hollow feeling inside of me now—one I knew well. The sea didn't forget our sins. She just let us pay for them in different increments of blood.

I pulled the shirt over my head and kicked off my boots, sitting at the edge of the cot and raking my hands over my face. Across the cramped room, the mirror was lit with moonlight, and the shape of me moved over the glass. Sometimes, I thought I looked like him. Or at least, the version of him that I could remember. It had only been six years since my father died, but it felt like longer. I'd become a man without him. I'd become a lot of things.

12

ISOLDE

The grand estate my mother called Azimuth House in the merchants' district had never been a home to me. Waking on a ship was the only time I didn't have that split second of confusion about where I was. The sounds, smells, and gentle rock of the hammock were where I belonged. I'd always thought it was because of my father's love of the sea. That maybe I had more of his blood running in my veins than my mother's. I liked that idea. I hoped it was true.

Beside me, the other four hammocks strung up in the crew's cabin were empty. Aside from the helmsman and the navigator, the *Riven* was sailing with only two deckhands. It wasn't a large ship by any stretch, but they were tempting fate by having so few on a vessel that was in such bad shape.

I sat up, letting my weight tip forward until the toes of my boots hit the floor. It was slick with a thin layer of moisture, the humid air thick in the room around me. My clothes were damp with it. That was a bad sign too—an indication that the seal of the hull was compromised.

"Take one more step and I'll cut his throat!"

I froze at the sound of the voice, my eyes finding the open door, where the narrow passage belowdecks was washed with the sunlight spilling down the hatch.

"I mean it!"

I climbed out of the hammock and pulled my knife free, following the trail of light with slow steps. The crude ladder that rose up from the floor to the hatch was missing its bottom rung, but when I lifted onto my toes I could see the main deck, where the noise was coming from.

The navigator stood near the bow, eyes fixed on an auburn-haired man with his back pressed to the railing. In one hand, the man had a knife. In the other, he had the twisted shirt of a young deckhand with a busted face, pinning him against the foremast.

"I told you to let him *out*, Julian, not let him take hostages." The navigator glared at the cowering deckhand to his right.

The young man he'd called Julian had wide eyes, his chest rising and falling in panicked breath. "I'm—I'm sorry, Clove—I—"

Clove. I didn't remember Zola saying the name at the tavern.

"Where exactly do you plan to go, Nash?" Clove didn't bother letting the deckhand finish, looking utterly bored by the scene playing out before him.

The red-haired man shot a look out to the water, jaw clenching. "You can't keep me as a prisoner. You can't just—"

"This is my ship, and I can do whatever I'd like on it."

The helmsman's voice came from the other side of the mast, forcing me to step up onto the lowest rung so I could see him. When my eyes finally landed on his face, I swallowed hard. He was missing the shirt and jacket he usually wore, the roped muscles of his arms, back, and chest moving under his olive skin as he leaned one hand into the railing. He looked as if the commotion had caught him mid-dress, and he, too, appeared more annoyed than concerned for the deckhand who had a knife at his throat.

"You had a choice, Nash," he continued, "now you can live with it."

The deckhand with Nash's knife to his throat pinched his eyes closed, whimpering.

I climbed up the ladder, coming onto the deck as the helmsman took a step toward them.

"I'll make you a deal," he said. "When we're out to sea, you're free to move about the ship. And you'll do whatever work is requested if you want to be fed. When we make port, you return to the cargo hold. If you follow these rules, you can walk off the ship when we get back to Dern and we'll be even. If you don't..."

Nash's face flushed a furious crimson.

"You kill him, and we'll turn that knife on you. Even if you make it over that railing, you'll drown before you reach land."

Nash seemed to weigh his options and it only took moments for him to realize he didn't have any. He lowered the knife, shoving the deckhand to the ground.

The young man scrambled back to his feet, a look of terror still distorting his face. The helmsman didn't even wait to see if he was all right before he turned back into the passageway, disappearing without another word.

"You all right, kid?" Clove offered him a hand, pulling him up to his feet.

But he didn't answer, reaching up to wipe blood from his lip.

Clove clapped him on the back. "Get the bosun's tools from below. Nash has work to do."

Nash glared in answer, but the deckhand still looked like he was going to vomit, edging away from Nash as he slipped behind the main mast. It was only then that anyone seemed to notice me.

Clove looked me up and down before he breezed past me to the helm, where his log was lying open on the deck. It looked as if he'd dropped it there. He snatched it up and headed for the ladder that led to the cargo hold.

"What did you do to end up on this death wish of a ship?"

The question was coming from Nash, who'd had the knife in his hand only moments ago. He leaned into the railing, arms crossed over his chest as he watched me.

My grip tightened on my own knife as I squared my shoulders to him. "Just needed passage," I answered.

But he wasn't buying it. He smirked, the tilt of his lips changing his face. The fury that had been there a moment ago was only a simmer now. He'd accepted his fate. "Sure. And I just needed a change of scenery."

I couldn't tell now if he was the kind of person who would hold a blade to the deckhand's face for show, or if he'd meant it. He gave me his back, turning out to the water, and the wind pushed his curling hair to one side. His clothes weren't ones that I'd seen helmsmen and their crews wear. He looked more like a tradesman.

“Dredger!”

The helmsman’s voice sounded in the passageway and my eyes trailed to the open door of his quarters across the deck.

I followed the sound, letting my shoulder touch the wall and leaning forward just enough to see through the crack above the door’s hinge before my shadow crossed the threshold. He stood behind the desk, pulling a fresh shirt over his head before he rolled up each of the sleeves.

When he was finished, he retied the bandage that was wrapped around his hand.

“You going to just stand out there?”

His eyes suddenly flicked up, finding mine through the crack in the door, and I lifted my chin as I pushed the door all the way open. His gaze traveled from my boots to the top of my head, as if he was trying to measure me against the girl he’d found in his quarters the night before.

The corners of the small room were now visible in the daylight. It was bare and simple, stocked with only the most necessary items, including my dredging belt that he’d draped over the chair beside the desk. But it was the string of adder stones in the window that held my attention. A superstition that I recognized from the old sea myths.

He picked up the quill on the desk and returned it to its inkpot. It was fit with a worn little heron feather that needed replacing and the sight of it was a reminder that here, I was still safely hidden away from my mother’s eye. From her whistling swan feather quills and the fools who did her bidding.

He stared at me for a moment before he reached into the drawer for the purse of gems and carefully dumped them into a wooden tray, pushing them toward me.

I stared at him.

“Well?” he said, the word heavy and impatient.

“Well what?”

“What do we have here?”

I hesitated before I took a step forward and lowered myself to the stool across from him. My fingers hovered over the stones before I gently sifted the real red beryl from the others, pushing them to one side of the tray.

“Which are the fakes?”

I placed a finger in front of the larger group. In all, there were eleven real gems and twenty-four fakes.

He scratched at the scruff on his jaw, eyeing them. He was unreadable, his face like stone as he picked up the quill. He dipped it in the inkpot before opening the ledger and turning the page. “I didn’t do myself any favors by leaving Dern with you. Is there anything I should know before I arrive in Sowen with you on my ship?”

If he only knew just how important that question was. There was plenty for him to know. Zola wouldn’t be the only one looking for me or what I held in my pocket. But he was already keeping the most precious of my secrets.

I pulled my gaze from the red beryl, finding his face again. The straight line of his thick, dark brows made his blue eyes look like polished sea glass.

“I’m just a dredger.”

“I think we’ve established that you’re not just a dredger. And if you want to keep anyone else from finding out, you’d better be more careful. I marked you as a gem sage almost the second I met you.”

He fell quiet, studying me again. The calm in his face was unsettling, but most unnerving was the fact that I believed him. I’d felt it in the tavern that night, the way he’d looked right into me.

The expression in his eyes shifted so slightly I thought maybe I imagined it, but it ignited a warmth in the air that hadn’t been there moments ago.

Now *I* was studying *him*.

“What?” he asked, as if trying to unearth my thoughts.

I considered just how honest I could be. “How do I know you’re not planning to sell me when we get to Ceros like Zola was going to?”

“I don’t trade people.”

“Then what was that out on the deck?” I asked flatly.

“A shipwright’s apprentice who couldn’t keep his mouth shut,” he answered. “Trust me, it’s a problem I didn’t ask for.”

So I’d been right. Nash wasn’t a sailor. He was a guild hopeful.

The helmsman leaned into the desk with both hands, meeting my eyes directly again, and a flick of heat raced over my skin, the buzz of something alive waking in the air.

“If you’re thinking about cutting loose in Sowan, that’s a death sentence. It’s a small village and you draw too much attention. He’ll find you.”

“What do you care?”

That question seemed to catch him off guard, but he recovered quickly. “If he gets what he wants, I don’t get what I want.”

It was that simple. Those were the clearly defined rules that hadn’t changed once I crossed into the Narrows. It was every man for himself. And I was no different. I’d been thinking the same thing when I left Bastian.

Zola didn’t have the power that someone like my mother did, but he was a proud man. He wouldn’t forget what I’d done, and the Narrows was a small world. Our paths would cross again, and when they did, I needed to hold the upper hand.

“And if he starts telling people what I am?”

“He won’t risk it. Not when he’s this close to getting a trade license. It’s too likely you’ll be traced back to the *Luna* and if that happens, things won’t go well with him and the Council.”

It sounded like he was saying that as long I was on the *Riven*, I was safe. But nothing felt safe anymore.

“How did you end up on that ship?”

“A man named Simon.” I gave the answer more easily than I’d meant to. I wasn’t even sure if it was information I should keep to myself. “I asked for a way out of the city and he gave me one. I didn’t know about the gem sages.”

He stared at the corner of his desk in an absent way, like he was thinking. Sifting through line after line of numbers and possible outcomes. But he spoke none of it aloud.

“What’s your name?” he asked suddenly. “The real one. The one you were born with.”

He didn’t blink, watching the war on my face as I contemplated lying again.

“You trusted me with your life when you got on this ship. But you don’t trust me with your name?”

It wasn’t that. The thing that made me want to bite my tongue was that I *did* trust him. I had absolutely no reason to, but I did. And I didn’t like that feeling.

“Isolde.”

This time, the truth of it was in the tone of my voice. The familiar way the word sounded on my lips. Even I could hear it.

“What’s yours?” I asked.

“I already told you.” He met my eyes again in that open way that made me feel like the ship was threatening to give way around me.

Elias.

The name he’d given me in the tavern. But I hadn’t heard a single person call him that, which meant that somewhere along the way, he’d picked up another. The one I’d heard Zola call him by—Saint. That name held an emptiness to it, like a gem with no song. But it also felt safer. Elias was something hallowed, and that made a string of silent questions dance on my tongue.

I wanted to ask, but instead I held his gaze in an excruciating silence until, finally, his eyes fell back to the ledger.

With that, I was dismissed.

I picked up my dredging belt from the chair, setting it on my shoulder, and opened the door. But before it closed, I peered through the crack, finding Saint again. He leaned over the desk, running one hand through his hair as he wrote. His bandaged hand was bleeding through the wrapping, but he didn’t seem to notice.

I pushed outside and welcomed the sting of the wind as it hit my face. I breathed it in deeply, trying to rid my lungs of the tight feeling I’d had as I stood in Saint’s quarters.

That look on his face was as beautiful as it was cold, and I didn’t like that I’d had to force myself to tear my eyes from his. I didn’t know if it was this ship or the sea or the strange look of the sky that made my blood hum in my veins. I hoped it was.

I hoped it was anything but him.

The wooden crates creaked, threatening to pop at the joints as the pulley lifted them from the *Riven*, and Ward, Sowan's harbor master, guided the load onto the dock. Clove stood beside him, watching over his shoulder as he logged the inventory. Six crates of wool we had no claim to, but the coin from its sale would keep us sailing until we got back to Dern.

The look on Ward's face as he scratched the numbers onto the page wasn't a friendly one. He'd been much harder to keep in line than Gerik, and his patience was wearing thin. Where Gerik was all gruff talk and empty threats, Ward was genuinely unpredictable. It was a quality that worried me.

Doing favors and making friends didn't serve anyone in the Narrows. There was always a bag of copper heavy enough to sway alliances, and Zola's coffers had only grown in the months since the Trade Council was instated. If this wasn't our last unsanctioned stop in Sowan, I wasn't sure we'd be able to risk a return. Not when we had a gem sage on our ship.

Nash had stowed himself in the cargo hold, as agreed, and the two deckhands we'd brought from Dern were perched on the jib, watching the busy, narrow street that overlooked the harbor. We didn't have the coin to pay someone on the docks to keep watch of the *Riven*, so there they would stay.

Isolde came up to the deck with her jacket buttoned up beneath her chin, and I couldn't help but think the name suited her in a strange kind of way. It had felt both new and familiar as she said it.

Her eyes skimmed the ships in the harbor and I watched as her gaze stopped on a carrack four slips down. She drew her bottom lip between her teeth and reached up, tucking the length of her dark red hair into her jacket.

"How long will we be here?" She looked nervous. Skittish, even.

"Just a night," I answered, dropping the map case over my shoulder. "Long enough to offload those gems and pick up more rye from the crofter."

"How do you know the merchant won't spot the fakes?"

"He doesn't need to. He knows what he's buying."

Her expression twisted into confusion. "Then why would he buy them?"

My gaze narrowed on her skeptically. She wasn't Narrows-born, but she was a dredger. And that usually came with a wealth of knowledge in working with traders, their crews, and the merchants they sold to. It was a world that went hand in hand with illicit trade, making it hard to believe she didn't know how any of this worked.

The last crate came over the side and once it touched down, I swung myself over the railing, catching the ladder with my boots.

I climbed down and Isolde hesitated before she followed, jumping from the last rung and landing on both feet beside me. Ward was already glaring at me from the top of his spectacles, but I was eyeing the stack of parchment tucked behind his ledger.

“Messages?” This time, I was almost afraid of the answer.

“No,” Ward said, only half paying attention.

My hands curled into fists in my pockets, my eyes meeting Clove’s. It had been almost three months since we’d submitted the petition for our trade license and the longer we went without it, the longer we sailed without the Trade Council’s protection. We’d never needed it more than we did now.

Ward was far more concerned about the next crate of wool being lowered from the *Riven*. His crooked brow slanted even higher than usual.

“Since when do you transport wool?”

“Since now.” Clove’s words were an impatient warning.

There were plenty of people Ward could snitch to. The only thing we had going for us besides a bribe was the fact that Clove and I stood an entire head taller than him. Ward had the good sense to be afraid of us. That was all.

Ward’s eyes traveled to Isolde, who stood behind me, and I didn’t like the way they narrowed. There was no getting around the fact that she drew the eye. She was beautiful and she very clearly did not belong with us. But the more she piqued curiosity, the more likely it was to get back to Zola.

Clove took a step toward him, drawing his gaze from Isolde. “Are you going to have it taken to the merchant’s house or do I need to find someone myself?”

Ward met Clove’s cold stare, hand tightening around the quill, before he shot a glance up the dock. A shrill whistle cut into the air as his head tipped back, and two men jogged up the slip.

“Merchant’s house,” he ordered, pushing past them without another word.

“I’ll deal with this. You get to Lander’s.” Clove’s head tilted in Isolde’s direction. “Probably shouldn’t take her into the merchant’s house.”

I nodded, studying the crates of wool as the men lifted the first one on its side, sliding it onto the wheeled platform. We’d scraped Dern’s port seal from the wood, but it wouldn’t take much for someone to put together that the crates were stolen. I could only hope that Clove found a merchant who needed a deal.

“Go,” Clove pressed. “I’ve got it.”

I hooked one hand into the strap of the map case stretching across my chest and reluctantly turned on my heel, leaving him behind. If anyone could get out of a scrape, it was Clove. But he was also very good at getting into them.

Isolde followed as I started up the dock and her boots were beside mine in seconds as she put herself between me and the railing, keeping her head down.

From the corner of my eye, I could see her instinctively reach for her pocket, hand curling around whatever was there. But it was the way she walked that caught my attention. It wasn’t just the fact that she was closer to me than she’d been since Dern, when I’d pulled her into the alley. It was the way she kept one shoulder turned away from the docks, her eyes cast down. Like she didn’t want to be seen.

My gaze drifted over the ships to our right. Sowan was a much bigger harbor than Dern and there were ships from every port in the Narrows and several from the Unnamed Sea. I wondered, not for the first time, what exactly Isolde had left behind there.

The winding road that snaked through the village was crowded with doors open to the cool breeze coming in from the water and the stream of people coming and going from the harbor. I followed it up until the cobblestone path narrowed and curved into a broken vein of shops. Lander's was the only one that was shut up tight, the windows dark.

I stopped in front of the door, lifting a fist to tap the round beveled glass with my knuckles.

"This is it?" Isolde looked skeptical.

"Not impressed?" I muttered.

I'd never been to the Unnamed Sea, but if their traders had taught me anything, it was that they prized presentation over everything else. Usually, it was just a shell of pretense that got them what they wanted. People in the Narrows were used to bending beneath them.

"You can wait out here if you're worried about getting your hands dirty."

I didn't know why I'd said it. Lander didn't need, nor did he deserve my defense, but the look on her face stoked a fire in me. I wouldn't let her look down on him either.

"That's not what I meant," she whispered.

I turned to look at her. "Then what *did* you mean?"

Her chin tipped up so she could meet my eyes, and she didn't shrink beneath me. She squared her shoulders, licking her lips before her mouth opened to speak. But before the words left her tongue, the door opened.

Lander stood on the other side, a glazed look in his eye and his shirt only half buttoned. He hadn't even bothered to comb his hair.

"You're late," he said flatly.

Isolde's eyes slid to me, an almost-smirk on her lips, as if the picture of the man before us had been exactly the point she was trying to make.

I ignored the jab. Lander disappeared inside without extending an invitation for us to follow, and Isolde stared into the empty doorway before I stepped over the threshold. She stuck close as I pushed into the shop, one eye on the window that looked out over the street. She still had that look in her eyes. Like she was waiting for a face she knew to appear there.

"Who's this?" Lander followed her with a suspicious, unfocused gaze.

"My new dredger," I answered, lifting the strap of the map case over my head and setting it on the counter. I pulled the purse of stones from inside my jacket.

Isolde's eyes cut to me again, but this time, a tension hung in the air. She didn't like being claimed, I realized.

"Not every day you find crew so nice to look at." Lander pulled the scale onto the counter. Beside it, the tray and the ledger were already waiting.

When he looked up, catching sight of my face, he gave a nervous laugh. "Come on. Just a bit of fun."

Beside me, Isolde wasn't laughing. But she didn't look surprised either.

"All right, what have we got?" He set both hands on the counter, waiting.

I could smell the rye on his breath. The slick look of his skin and damp hair at his temples gave him away for a night of drinking at the tavern. I'd found Lander in this state more and more lately, and there were hardly any signs of business in his shop. The shelves were dusty, the candles unburned. My guess was he was spending all his coin on drink, and if that was the case, he was becoming unreliable. I couldn't have that.

"Red beryl." I let the purse fall open and the stones came tumbling out onto the tray, their facets like glistening drops of blood in the pale light.

The corners of Lander's mouth turned down, his chin jutting out. He was impressed. And he should have been. They were the most valuable gems we'd ever moved. The fact that we were missing half of them was something he would have no way of knowing, and that worked in my favor. The arrangement was to pay the standard rate of a gem by carat, and it was as simple as that.

He'd pay me the sum that I'd take to Henrik before he gave me my cut, and then Lander would sell them to a few merchants in Ceros who thought they were getting the finest Bastian stones from some Saltblood's side trade. They were buying below their value if the gems were legitimate, but they weren't. In the end, the merchants would pay four times their worth.

The low murmur of Lander's voice broke the silence as he counted to himself, and Isolde's eyes finally found mine, though I could no longer read the look that lay there. She could hear the gems. Feel them, in a way. But we stood in a shop filled with everything from silver to onyx and, if that was true, she didn't show it.

"That makes..." Lander murmured, his hand shaking slightly on the quill. The sheen of sweat at his temple had now pearly into a single drop, trailing along his jaw, to his chin. It fell onto the wooden counter between his fingers. "Seven and a quarter."

"Seven and a quarter," I repeated.

The corner of Isolde's mouth twitched.

"That's right." Lander tapped the page of the ledger with his finger, reaching for the trunk he kept under the shelf. I waited for him to fit the key into the lock.

"That's funny," I said.

"What is?"

"When I weighed them this morning, there were nearly nine and a half carats."

Lander's lazy grin returned as he pulled two large purses of coin free. "Your scale must have been off. That happens with the movement of a ship, you know. Must be time to get it checked."

When I said nothing, he gestured to the stones.

"You can see it for yourself. It says the weight right there."

The brass basket that held the gems was still slightly swaying, the dial that sat in the center a smooth white face with a steel needle that read seven and a quarter.

"It's wrong," I said, the careful tenor of my voice unbroken.

I'd learned a long time ago that it never did much good to lose your temper. In the end, that was just noise. Only when it was quiet could you clearly detect the tells of a liar. The faint hitch of their breath. The shift of their eyes.

"We've been doing business a long time now, Lander." I studied the scale. "So I don't know why you'd choose now to cross me."

Again, the too-quick laughter. The drop of one shoulder as he bent closer. “Saint.” He set both hands on the counter between us. “I—”

My hand hooked the handle of my knife before another word could leave his mouth and I lifted its weight into the air before letting my fingers loosen and skim its hilt. By the time I had clasped it in my palm, Lander was already straightening. Already tilting his weight backward.

I caught his wrist, pinning it in place as I drove the knife straight down. I didn’t even feel the tip of the blade press into his skin. Between the bones. It slid through muscle and veins until the steel found the solid wooden countertop beneath his palm and the sound of the metal ringing was followed by Lander’s strangled cry.

Isolde screamed, one hand flying to her mouth as her eyes widened.

“Saint!” Lander’s face twisted, the open gape of his mouth making my name sound misshapen as he gulped for air. “Saint!”

“What are you doing?” Isolde’s voice was hoarse. The hand that was pressed to her mouth was now just hovering in the air between us. She was so pale she looked like she was going to faint.

“Check it.”

“Wh-What?” she stammered.

“The scale,” I said softly. “Check it.”

Isolde stood frozen for several breaths before she moved forward, steps halting and jerking like she was struggling to move her feet. Her hands fumbled over the scale until she had hold of the dial.

I let go of the knife, moving my other hand from the counter before the blood that was pooling there could touch my fingers. Isolde sniffed, twisting the back of the dial open until it dislodged, and she bit down onto her bottom lip, looking up at me before she turned the tray so I could see.

Two small iron pellets had been wedged into the mechanism to create more resistance against the needle. I’d seen it done before in Cragsmouth, when my father had his catches weighed for sale. He hadn’t drawn his knife on anyone for it, but he should have.

“I’m sorry.” Lander gulped, choking. “I’m sorry! I just needed a little—”

“I don’t care what you need,” I said, reaching around him, into the trunk. “I expect to be dealt with fairly. And if I’m not”—I lifted another purse of coin from inside—“you will be made to wish you had. Next time it won’t be a hand.”

I counted out the purses for the exact amount, not taking more than I was owed. I wouldn’t steal from a Narrows-born, even if he was a cheat. Not unless I had to.

Down the counter, Isolde was staring at me, her chest still rising and falling in rushed breath. I tucked the purses into my jacket one at a time, rebuttoning it before I reached for the handle of my knife.

“Saint.” A voice like melted honey filled the cold air of the shop, making all three of us look to the open door behind us.

There, Emilia had a hip propped against the doorframe, her arms crossed over her chest. Her long blond waves fell over one shoulder as her head tipped to one side.

“Expected you this morning.” Her brown eyes glinted as they moved from me to the knife pinning Lander to the counter. It was encircled by a shining pool of blood.

“We were delayed,” I said.

Emilia's attention went to Isolde and it lingered there for a moment before she hooked her thumbs into her belt.

"Come on. Supper's waiting." She took a step backward out of the shop and the sunlight hit her fair face before she started up the street without us.

I reached for the knife, gripping the handle and yanking it free, sending another sharp cry from Lander's lips. He clutched his hand to his chest, falling into the counter, and Isolde almost stumbled backward, catching herself on the back of a chair.

I dragged the blade over the thick wool of my trousers, turning it twice. When I slid it back into my belt, I looked up to see Isolde watching me, a horrified expression on her face.

"Well?" I said, taking the map case from the counter and slinging it back over my shoulder. "You coming?"

ISOLDE

Saint didn't so much as look in my direction as I followed him up the hill in the opposite direction we'd come from the harbor. His dark hair was damp with mist, the collar of his gray-blue coat pulled up to hide the bottom half of his face. But his gaze was on the ground as he walked.

We'd left the merchant's shop with the sound of Lander's moaning at our backs, and the pathetic sound echoed between the stone walls, carried off by the wind. I still had a sick feeling curled in my throat, my hands colder than they should have been.

He hadn't even blinked. Hadn't hesitated for even a second when he drew that knife and drove it down into the man's hand. In broad daylight, with the shop door open, and no one had even come running.

The woman who'd appeared in the doorway of Lander's shop was waiting at the top of the hill, her wavy gold hair drifting in the wind that was rolling in from the water at our back. Her trousers were tied at her middle, a flowing white shirt rippling around her slender frame.

A large wooden market cart was stopped beside her, where the buildings in Sowen began to thin, giving way to an expanse of sprawling hills. They looked like an unrolled painting behind her, yellows and greens in swirling patterns beneath an almost-blue sky. She waited patiently, running a hand over the snout of one of the two dove-gray mules rigged to the cart.

A white-haired man with a bony frame that jutted out from beneath his thin white shirt sat at the front of the cart, leads in hand. He didn't look strong enough to control the beasts or even clear-eyed enough to see the road.

"Saint." The old man's face brightened at the sight of the helmsman, mouth stretching in a smile that revealed a gap between his front teeth.

"Perrie." Saint made his own attempt at a smile, but it was more in his eyes than anything. His face was always set, eyes always watching from beneath his rigid brow like he was bracing for something.

"We were bringing the grain down to the merchant's house and saw the *Riven* in the harbor. Figured we'd save you the walk." Again, the woman's eyes roamed over my face. "I'm Emilia."

I gave her a polite nod.

But Emilia's attention had already skipped to Saint, waiting for an explanation.

"Dredger" was his only reply.

He didn't say *my* this time. I hadn't liked the sound of it in Lander's shop.

"Hope that's true. I don't trust anyone who doesn't have callouses on their hands." Emilia didn't look satisfied with that answer. "If you're taking on crew now, things must be going well."

Saint's face was unreadable, giving nothing away. The words couldn't be further from the truth. He pulled himself up into the cart, finding a seat in the back, and Emilia followed, taking the open place on the bench beside the old man.

"Join us," she said, looking out over the hills in the distance. "It's the only decent meal you'll get for a while yet if you're sailing with this lot."

Saint leaned his back into the railing, waiting, as if to see what I'd do after that display at the merchant's shop. This felt like some kind of test.

I glanced back to the village, where the road bent and disappeared before Lander's could be seen. My hands took hold of the cart's side, tightening, before I lifted myself from the ground and climbed in.

The slap of the leads was followed by the jolt of the wheels before I'd even sat, and the cart pulled off the cobblestones onto the dirt road that curved like an *S* into the hills. Beyond the top of one in the distance, I could see two soft, trailing wisps of smoke. We were headed in their direction.

I hooked one arm into the wooden slat beside me as we rocked from side to side, feeling the chill of Saint's gaze before I finally looked at him.

"What?" His cold eyes bored into mine, which I was beginning to mark as a rare thing.

I swallowed. "You didn't have to hurt him like that."

"Oh, darling." It was Emilia who answered, her back still to us. "Yes, he did."

Darling.

The word reeked of my mother's voice, making my mouth twist to one side.

I'd been no stranger to ruthlessness. I'd seen it many different ways, and it was usually at Holland's order. But things in the Unnamed Sea were done behind closed doors and in shadows. And my mother's hands were never dirty with them.

I'd been young when I began to understand what she was. I was ten years old when my father sat me down in the solarium for a cup of tea and told me what I needed to know about my mother—that she would always choose the trade. Over me. Over him. Over everything. That trust was something that only he and I would have. If I'd listened to him, *really* listened, I thought, he might still be here.

He hadn't said the words with any kind of malice or resentment. There wasn't even a hint of sadness. But he'd wanted me to know. It wasn't until a few years later that I began to understand what he meant.

We came over the last hill before the sun touched the horizon, but the warm light changed the land into sweeps of violet and blue. The chimney smoke drew closer until I followed one of their trails to a small stone house set atop one of the bluffs. Once the clouds cleared and the orange light deepened, I could see what lay beyond it—miles and miles of golden hills rippling beneath the sea wind.

Rye.

I sat up, studying the ridge that overlooked the road. More than one crofter had appeared, watching us from their perches, and a few lifted hands into the air as we passed.

The croft was a well-kept one. Beyond the house, four large barns were erected in a semicircle. One of their doors was pulled open, where I could see a heavy cart of rye stalks disappearing. The cottages that dotted the hillside looked like a constellation of stars. A croft this large likely had a harvest big enough to support at least two or three dozen people to plant and pick and thrush.

The rye was the reason the traders of the Unnamed Sea had first begun to sail in the Narrows. As our cities grew, so did our need for grain. When our own crofters ran out of fertile land, we came looking for more.

Saint's business with the croft seemed to have more to do with the bottles of drink than the sacks of grain they were made from. I had to admit, it was smart. Crofters weren't permitted to sell their crop to anyone without a license, and that had always been the traders from the Unnamed Sea. But there were no clear rules on the sale and transport of the rye drink that filled the taverns in the Narrows. They were outside of the law, but just barely.

Perrie clicked his tongue, pulling back on the leads, and the cart came to a slow stop at the foot of a zigzagging stretch of steps carved into the earth. They led up to the stone house, now drenched in fire-gold sunlight.

Saint stood, waiting for me to jump down before he followed.

"A nice harvest coming in," Emilia said, climbing the steps first and looking out to the barns at our left. "Should be in the barrels in another month. Maybe two."

"And the ones that are already resting?"

"Three or four. They're coming along nicely. I'll take you out to see once you've eaten and the color comes back into your cheeks." She smirked.

She reached out, touching his elbow in a gesture that was familiar. Close. Saint seemed to exist with an invisible space around him, but in an instant, this woman reached through it.

Perrie lifted the latch on the door and it swung wide, releasing the thick smell of baked bread and roasting potatoes into the chilled air around us. My mouth watered, making me instinctively swallow. I hadn't eaten anything that smelled this good since I'd left home.

There was that word again. *Home*.

Saint pushed into the doorway behind him, and Emilia waited at the door, stepping aside for me to enter. But that studying look was still in her eyes, as if she were trying to puzzle something out.

"Thanks," I said, ducking inside.

A long wooden table was set in the center of the space, a kitchen on one end and a row of three tidy cots on the other. Everything from pots to tools to shelves stacked with jars lined the walls and every inch of floor was taken by chairs, needlework baskets and stacked wood before the hearth.

Candles burned in every corner of the rectangular room and lanterns were hung from the rafters overhead, washing the beams that lined the ceiling of the house in light. The last of the sun was still streaming through the windows, but it would be gone in minutes.

A young woman stood over a steaming pot bubbling on a wood stove in the kitchen, stirring with one hand on her hip. When she spotted me, she looked surprised. "Hi there."

"Hello." I bit down hard after the word left my mouth. It sounded too formal, and my accent was becoming more noticeable to my own ears.

She caught Emilia's gaze, amused. "I'm Tansy." She gave Saint a look-over next. "Saint, you look half starved, as always."

He didn't answer, sinking down into one of the chairs at the end of the table. Bowls and plates made of a red clay were set out neatly before short glasses. At the center of the table were two bottles of rye. They looked like the same ones Saint carried on his ship.

The warmth of the fire touched my cold hands, making me curl my fingers into my palms. The house was a home in every sense of the word, but not like any I'd ever known. It was the kind I saw sketched into the pages of fairy tales my father used to read to me. Mice that lived in tiny cottages filled with firelight or fairies that dwelled in star-shaped hovels by the sea. The memory immediately made me swallow hard, a sting lighting behind my eyes.

Tansy made her way around the table, scooping heaping ladles of stew into the bowls, and I took the seat across from Saint. Emilia sat beside him, unbuttoning the collar of her shirt and pulling it open to the air. She was beautiful and rough, the sun baked into her skin and hair like a glaze.

She looked amused when she caught me staring at her. "Bread, Tansy."

The girl scurried back into the small kitchen before returning with a floured loaf. As soon as she set it down, hands were reaching for it.

"And where's Clove?" Perrie asked.

"Made a stop at the merchant's house. He'll be here."

"The merchant's house," Emilia said, as if to herself. "Does that mean you've got that license you haven't shut up about for the last year?"

"Not exactly."

"Hmm." She reached for her knife, dipping it into the plate of butter. "I see. Pretty risky trading in the merchant's house without one, don't you think?"

I watched the look that passed between them. I didn't know what kind of person found fault with unsanctioned trade but didn't blink an eye at pinning a man's hand to a counter with a blade. This woman was a creature cut from the same cloth as Saint and Clove. Riddles with unspoken rules not easily solved.

"It's coming."

"I see." Emilia didn't look convinced. In fact, it almost seemed like she was intentionally provoking him.

Saint didn't seem bothered by it. "Any day now."

"You've been saying that for months. I have a warehouse full of rye I could sell to any of those bastard traders in Sowen. But I'm sitting on it for you."

"Manners, Emilia," Perrie chided.

She arched an eyebrow at me. "An uncle who thinks he's my father," she muttered.

Perrie only smiled wider.

She leveled her gaze at him before it drifted to me again. "And where did they find you?"

Tansy sat down beside me, hiking up her skirts to cross her legs. She looked delighted by the interrogation, a thin smile playing on her lips.

"Dern," I answered, filling my spoon with the broth. I resisted the urge to sip it from the edge, instead putting the whole spoon in my mouth like the people in the tavern did.

Emilia frowned. "Dern, huh? How'd you come by that Saltblood accent then?"

"I'm from Bastian." I answered the question she was really asking, which I should have done in the first place. She didn't strike me as someone who accepted half truths.

"Trading at the merchant's house, taking on Saltbloods..." Emilia's eyes cut back to Saint. "You've been busy."

“Any decent crew has a dredger,” he said, not looking at me.

“Oh, you’re a *decent* crew now.” Emilia stifled a laugh.

Tansy, on the other hand, didn’t even try to hide it. But the sound was lost to a mouth full of stew, and Perrie followed.

It wasn’t what I’d expected when Saint said that he was stopping to meet the rye crofter. This wasn’t just business around this table. It was history. Friendship, even.

The knock of boots sounded on the steps outside and every face turned to the door before it opened to the night air. Clove appeared against the dark sky, blond hair swept to one side. His arm was cradled around the small frame of a curly-headed girl no bigger than five or six years old.

“Found him!” she chirped.

“Started without me, I see.” Clove smiled, tipping the girl forward so she could peer at Emilia from beneath her curls.

They were too similar not to share blood, but too far apart in age to be sisters. Emilia was the girl’s mother, I realized.

“There she is.” Tansy’s tone was a reproach. “I called for you over an hour ago.” She pulled the girl from Clove’s arms, but the girl was sliding down as quickly as Clove handed her over, and then she was crawling into Saint’s lap.

He barely acknowledged her, pulling one arm from the table so that she could curl into him. There was no rigid set to his mouth now. No attempt to put more space between them. He looked as if she’d sat there a hundred times.

He reached into his jacket, producing a small iridescent shell, and her eyes widened before she plucked it from his fingers. The smile buried on his lips was visible for half a second before it disappeared again.

Emilia pulled out a chair for Clove beside her, and he was taking a bite of bread before he’d even settled into the seat. His blond scruff was like gold dust in the candlelight, making him look younger than his time on the sea painted him.

“Was wondering if those traders in the merchant’s house had eaten you for supper.”

The comment wasn’t an innocent one. She was probing. Wanting to know what exactly they’d been trading. Even if there was history between them, it was clear there were still secrets.

The little girl’s bare feet dangled under the table, her toes tapping my leg as Saint shifted. When I looked up, her wide green eyes were trailing over me as she chewed a too-big bite of stew. A dribble of broth dripped down her chin.

“I’m Hazel,” she said, wiping it with the back of her hand.

I followed the smear of dirt on her cheek to where it disappeared into her hairline, smiling. She was a wild creature. A character that would fit into one of my father’s bedtime stories.

“Isolde,” Saint said quietly, giving her my name.

It was timid almost, as if he were trying the name out in his own voice for the first time. The curve of the word was soft and gentle, like those hills the sun had fallen behind. The sound of it made me bite down on my bottom lip.

The talk moved from news in Dern to news in Sowan, and discussion about rye barrels I didn’t know how to decode. But across from me, Hazel’s attention slowly narrowed, growing more acute by

the second. Her eyes were focused, her brow wrinkling as she absently turned the piece of bread in her hand.

I set my elbows onto the table, watching her.

“What is it?” she asked softly.

“What is what?”

Her lips pursed before she set down the bread, and her gaze fell to my pocket.

“The stone,” she whispered.

I stilled, suddenly feeling like the midnight in my pocket weighed a hundred pounds. But the strings of the small purse were tucked in. She couldn’t see it.

She could *feel* it.

My eyes flitted from one face at the table to the next, gooseflesh racing over my skin. But they were lost in conversation. All of them but Saint.

“Leave it, Hazel,” he said lowly.

She picked up her bread, shoulders hunching like a scolded puppy’s, but every few seconds, her head involuntarily turned back in the stone’s direction. As if it were a magnet drawing her gaze.

I said nothing, not wanting to draw any attention to the stone in my pocket. If Saint had stabbed a man for red beryl, I didn’t want to know what he’d do for something as priceless as the midnight. But he didn’t seem to be curious about what Hazel had said, and something told me that was because he didn’t want *me* paying any attention to the fact that she’d just sniffed the stone out with no reasonable explanation.

Emilia’s chair scraped against the floor and she stood, tossing her napkin onto her empty plate. The others didn’t even look up, carrying on with Clove about something to do with the next harvest. But Emilia caught eyes with Saint and he mirrored her without a word, shifting Hazel from his lap so he could get to his feet.

He followed her to the door and pulled it closed behind him, the cuff of his shirt shifting beneath his jacket sleeve just enough for me to see the fabric painted a bright red. I bristled, remembering the way the blood had pooled on the counter in the merchant’s shop.

Looking at him now, I couldn’t tell the difference between the Saint that had stabbed the screaming man and the one who sat across the table, the ghost of a smile on his lips and the gleam of firelight in his eyes.

Maybe there was no difference at all.

There were false memories tied to the sound of the rye. They woke every time we came here.

Cragsmouth was a scant fishing village north of Dern where the cliffs crumbled down into the sea like a black wall. There was no rye growing there, but there were vast grasslands that rolled up into the hills. And they had the same sound as the croft, like rushing water.

Fishing had been the work of my father and his father before him, but I'd known from the time I was young that I wanted to sail one of the trading ships that crossed our paths when we were pulling in the nets.

My father had wanted it for me too.

Emilia reached out, touching the tops of the stalks as we made our way up the path toward the barn. She was a rye crofter by blood, growing in the same fields her grandmother had planted, but where her family had traditionally only sold the grain in bags at Sowan's merchant's house to traders from the Unnamed Sea, Emilia was the first to start distilling some of it in barrels.

The harvest had already begun and the rows were still filled with workers bent beneath bundles on their backs against the last moments of a brilliant sunset. Some of it would be packed into crates for the traders from the Unnamed Sea or sent by ship to Ceros. The rest would make its way into the barrels. In the end, if things went my way, both Emilia and I would hold its coin.

"You don't look so good, Elias," she said, plucking one of the rye stalks as she passed and crushing it in her palm.

"Thanks." I let the bite of sarcasm touch the word.

"I'm worried about you."

"Don't be."

I followed her around the corner of the first wood-plank building, to the door that faced the fields. She hooked one hand into the iron ring, looking up at me.

"What?" she said.

"You need to be careful." I lowered my voice. "With Hazel."

The set of her mouth faltered for just a moment before it recovered. I'd warned her that the Narrows was crawling with rumors about gem sages going missing. I had one of them on my ship. And all it would take was one disloyal crofter running their mouth at the tavern to tip someone off about Hazel.

Emilia rolled the grain between her fingertips, falling quiet for a moment. I knew she was worried, even if she pretended not to be.

“And you need to be careful with that dredger,” she said, changing the subject.

I didn’t take the bait. “I’m serious.”

“So am I.”

“We have new crew on the ship almost every time we come through Sowan.”

“You never bring them here,” she said, lower.

“I told you. She’s just a dredger.”

Emilia let it go. She didn’t often show any kind of curiosity about the inner workings of our crew, but I’d seen her eyes focus on Isolde more than once since she’d shown up at Lander’s.

“How’s the rye coming?”

She grinned. “It’s coming.”

She pulled the door open. Inside, dozens of barrels were stacked on iron racks, all of them missing the mark of the crofter who’d made them. That had been part of our agreement from the beginning. Partly to protect Emilia, but I also didn’t want anyone to know where to find the goods I was selling. Not until everyone knew they had to come to me to get them.

She took one of the tin cups hanging on the wall before making her way to a barrel at the back. The spigot gurgled as she pulled down the handle and the red-amber liquid came rushing out. The smell of it was already in the air before she handed it to me.

“Probably the best batch yet,” she said, nodding for me to drink. “I’ve got four dozen crates waiting to be loaded up for you.”

I lifted the cup, taking a sniff before I poured the rye into my mouth. The burn traveled over my tongue, down my throat, before pooling in my belly. The taste of wood and fire smoke lit in my nose. She was right. It was good.

If I’d told my father that I’d be trading rye when I finally got my own ship, he would have laughed at me. He’d never have believed it. Growing up, rye was the home brew that the fishermen drank to help drain the cold from their bodies after days on the water. Back then, it was only ale the taverns wanted. But the more people traveled from port to port, the more they were asking the barkeepers for rye. Now, even the Saltbloods were drinking it.

“When can I put my name on it?” she asked, lifting an eyebrow.

“Soon.”

I handed her the cup and she stood there, waiting. “You know, you usually pay me before you eat at my table.” Her eyes dropped to the swell of coin purses in my jacket. “You going to tell me what’s wrong or should I just assume the worst?”

I drew in a deep breath, running one hand through my hair. I’d dreaded this exact moment since I lost the gems because I could feel the sand shifting beneath us. If we were going to have goods to trade on the *Aster* and keep our route, we needed Emilia. But Clove was right. She wouldn’t like being put in this position.

“We’re short on this run,” I said, trying to smooth out the edges of the words so that they didn’t carry the scrape I felt as they climbed up my throat.

“What do you mean *short*?”

“It happens sometimes.” I looked over her head, to the barrels.

But Emilia wasn’t buying into my calm. “Tell me.”

It had taken six months to convince her to partner with us, but Clove and I hadn't shared everything with her about our work. She didn't know about Henrik or the fakes. If she did, she would have never agreed to sell us the rye. Emilia knew exactly what we needed her to. That was all.

"Just a bad trade," I said, giving her at least part of the truth.

"You really expect me to believe this has nothing to do with that girl?"

I studied her. "What?"

"After two years of dragging the rattiest crews I've ever seen across the Narrows, you show up here with a girl who looks like she was grown in a glasshouse and for the first time, you have no coin. I'm thinking those two things aren't a coincidence."

I leaned into the barrel beside us. I wasn't going to lie to her. She was too smart for that. But I also wasn't sure just how much trouble the dredger had landed me in and I wasn't going to pretend I did.

"What's really going on, Elias?"

I sighed, the weight of that name making it hard to look at her. She was one of the few people I'd known before it was erased. "We need crates to sell in Ceros and Dern, but I can't pay you for it. Not yet."

"Rye you can't pay for," she clarified. "That's all you need, huh?"

I nodded.

Emilia scoffed.

"You know we'll pay you."

"I don't know anything." Her tone shifted, her green eyes darkening. "I made a deal with you, Saint. When no one else would. You wouldn't be on the water right now if it weren't for me."

"I know that."

"And if you can't keep your end of that deal, then I'm not going to keep mine."

I straightened, waiting for her to finish the threat. It wasn't a veiled one. I'd been the one to put those ideas into her head about selling the rye, but now, she had the means to do it without me. She knew that the moment traders started getting their licenses in the Narrows, they would line up outside her door. For the first time, she had the upper hand between us, and she wanted me to know she would use it.

"The minute we start doing each other favors, we're done for. You know that, don't you?" she said.

I did. I could feel her patience wearing thin. It had been for a long time. And she was right.

"The next time I see you, I'll have the license."

"Like I haven't heard that a hundred times."

"I mean it." I sounded desperate now, younger.

For the first time in a long time, I could feel that hardness cracking around me. Emilia had it too. We'd needed it. But now we were both just trying to keep our heads above water in a rising sea. The Narrows was changing and we both wanted our stake.

Her expression softened and she sighed, reaching up to hook her fingers in my folded arms. "We're friends, Saint. A rare thing in a world like this one. That's the only reason I'm going to pretend that when you take that rye, you've paid for it."

An ache rose in my throat. I was ashamed of how relieved the words made me.

"Figure I owe you for one thing or another."

We'd known each other for nearly three years, and in that time, we *had* become friends. But we'd been other things to each other too. After Hazel's father, Victor, died, I'd spent more than one night in Emilia's bed, and the ghost of it was in the way she touched me now. But we'd never had anything more than loneliness between us.

"And Perrie?" I asked, shooting a glance toward the open door of the barn.

"He doesn't need to know. No one does."

I nodded.

"But this is the only time, Saint."

I didn't miss that she'd stopped calling me Elias. That was what had gotten her into this mess in the first place.

We took the path back down to the house, the stones now invisible in the dark. The stars were stretched across the moonless sky over the lantern light of the cottages on the hill. Emilia pulled the pipe from her vest and filled it with mullein, lighting it in an amber glow and the air filled with the sweet smell of the smoke.

"It's not just for me, you know," she said, her face half lit by the candlelight coming through the window. Her gaze moved down the table, landing on Hazel. She was sitting in my empty seat, finishing my bowl of stew. "It's for her."

I knew what she meant. Copper was protection. Emilia had managed to keep her father's farm going after he was gone. Even after she'd lost Victor. The croft was turning out grain at a rate that it never had before, and the truth was, she was good at this. But if she wanted the kind of power that would make people afraid to cross her, she needed more than Saltblood traders vying for her harvest.

Across the table, Isolde was the only thing in the house that didn't belong. She didn't look like she belonged anywhere, really. There was a carefulness to the way she spoke and moved, like she had learned to walk on glass. But she wasn't afraid. I was still trying to figure out what exactly that meant.

She set her elbows on the table, taking small bites of the stew and wiping the corner of her mouth with the linen napkin in her lap. It was those little things that gave away that she was a Saltblood. It was also clear she knew how to do a job. She acted like a well-bred girl, but in her two days on the *Riven*, she'd shown she could crew like anyone else. As far as I could tell, she was a highborn gem sage turned dredger who'd maybe fallen from grace. But nothing about that made any sense.

"Promise me your trouble won't come to my door." Emilia said suddenly.

I turned my face, finding her eyes in the dark. There was no humor in them now. No sly meaning. She was asking, as a friend.

"I promise."

ISOLDE

Emilia knotted the leads around the driver's bench before she jumped down from the cart, landing a head shorter than Saint on the ground. Her hair was barely bound up by the wrap around her head, making her look even more like Hazel than she had the night before.

I'd noticed almost right away that Saint seemed antsy on land, and so was I. I'd spent the dark hours on solid ground for the first time since I'd left Bastian, and already, we were headed back out to sea.

Tansy had had to scoop Hazel up to keep her from stowing away on the cart as we pulled away from the stone crofter's cottage at daybreak. The little girl was a gem sage, that much I knew. But I'd lain awake in the night, Saint's deep, even breaths only feet away as I watched the starlight paint the air a silvery blue, wondering what would become of her. The sages in Bastian had all gone, along with their apprentices, and there were people in every port with theories about where. With no one to teach her, I doubted she'd ever learn to use the gift, and maybe that was a good thing.

Hazel had been born into a different world than me or my father. She was probably safer on the rye croft than she would be anywhere else.

The rye jostled in the crates as Clove and Perrie unloaded the last of them, and the men from the docks were already hauling them to the *Riven* down the harbor. But as Emilia watched them, there was a wariness in her eyes.

Saint watched her over the back of the cart for a long moment. Whatever had transpired between them last night, it had changed the feel of the house and altered the easy way they were with each other. He'd been different when he returned from the barn. Quieter, if that was possible. But there was something lighter about him too.

I slid the crock of stew Tansy had given us from the back of the cart and propped it on my hip when Saint gave Emilia a nod as goodbye. She watched him go, taking the steps down into the harbor, but she caught me by the arm before I could follow him.

She reached for my hand, turning it palm up to the sky and brushing a thumb over the lines that covered the rough skin. Along the base of each finger, the pad of my thumb, years-old callouses had been formed by my work on the reefs.

Satisfied, Emilia let me go, pulling her arms back into her cloak. "Keep an eye on those two, dredger."

I smirked, expecting her to do the same, but she didn't. This girl who seemed all wit and cutting tongue wasn't joking. She was serious.

“I mean it.” She took a step closer.

The way she looked at me was with the protective eye of a mother or a sister. This wasn’t a selfish merchant’s concern for the trader carrying her goods or a backhanded way of looking out for herself. She cared about them—Saint and Clove.

“They’ll deny it until they’re two breaths from death, but they need a keeper,” she said.

I wanted to tell her I was no keeper. That I was just trying to figure out how to keep myself. But I’d likely never cross paths with the woman again and I couldn’t see what good it would do either of us.

“I’m just taking passage to Ceros.” I told her the truth.

The smirk did surface on her lips, then. “So, not a dredger after all.”

“I am.”

“Well,” She pointed a finger at the *Riven*. “There’s a ship, or at least, what’s left of one. And the beginnings of a crew.”

I watched the fog move over the *Riven*, Clove’s shape rippling across the deck. “I think my days of diving to fill the purses of traders and merchants are over.”

Emilia clicked her tongue. “That one’s a got a different kind of affliction, I’m afraid.” When she looked past me, her eyes found Saint. He stood on the docks, supervising as the crates of rye were rigged to pulleys.

She turned back to the cart and I watched her untie the leads, hands fidgeting with the crock of stew as I tried to decide whether to say the thing that had been stirring in me since the night before. “It —”

Emilia stopped, looking over her shoulder at me.

“It’ll be easier to hide in a year or two,” I breathed.

Emilia cocked her head to one side. “What will?”

“Hazel.”

As soon as I said her daughter’s name, Emilia stilled.

“She’ll get better at hiding it. Better at not reacting to the gems when she feels them.”

She let go of the leads, her boot finding the ground again. Her eyes searched mine, as if trying to unearth any threat that may lay there.

“It’s worse indoors. Louder, and harder to ignore. The merchant’s house in particular is difficult. I wouldn’t take her there.”

The humor she’d had seconds before was gone and for a moment, I wondered if she was considering drawing her knife. But she was silent, waiting for me to continue.

“It would help if someone taught her.”

“You offering?” she asked, her tone full of knowing.

I shook my head. “Like I said, I’m just going to Ceros.”

I remembered what it was like, to be surrounded by something in the air that only I could feel. The constant buzz and hum, the way it was almost never just quiet. But I’d had my father. Hazel had a mother who seemed more than capable of protecting her, but that wasn’t the same as having a teacher. Emilia reached a hand between us and I took it, shaking.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

Perrie came back up the steps of the harbor, latching the back of the cart closed, and my fingers

slipped from Emilia's before she climbed back up to the driver's bench.

"Don't drown out there, dredger," she called over her shoulder.

I smiled, pulling up my hood. I started down the stairs and up the dock until I reached the *Riven*. Then I climbed the ladder, dropping myself onto the deck. Clove was high up on the main mast, untying the lines on the sail, and on the upper deck, Saint latched the opening of the hold, his dark hair falling into his face as he heaved the iron lever into place.

"Where are the deckhands?" I looked up at Clove.

"Looks like life on the *Riven* was a little much for Julian and Mateo."

"They left?" I said, confused.

"Not the first time crew's disappeared at port." He climbed down, jumping from the pegs and landing beside me.

"Who's going to crew the ship?"

"We are," he answered.

I glared at him. The *we* he was talking about clearly included me.

"I don't work for free," I said.

"Well, it's a good thing we've paid you in advance with a hot meal and a warm bed at Emilia's." He winked at me.

So, that was how they were going to play this. A game of trading favors.

I held up the crock between us. When he realized what I wanted, he huffed, producing the key from his pocket and starting toward the hatch. We climbed down into the dank passageway that led to the cargo hold and Clove lifted the lock from the bolt, fitting the key inside. The deckhands had abandoned their posts, but they hadn't bothered to let Nash out before they left.

I supposed he deserved that after threatening to cut Mateo's throat.

When the door swung open, Nash was sitting atop a closed barrel, arms crossed over his chest.

"Took you long enough."

"What the..." Clove growled, eyeing the empty bottle of rye on the floor. The entire cargo hold reeked of it.

"Man's gotta eat something," Nash muttered, sliding down.

When he saw the crock in my hands, he brightened.

I handed it over and he pried open the lid, giving the stew a sniff. "No bread?"

I glared at him.

"Well, there's at least one civilized creature on this ship." He fished a carrot from the broth and popped it into his mouth. "That's something."

"You just got a promotion," Clove said, turning on his heel and ducking out.

Nash stopped mid-chew, eyeing me.

"The deckhands are gone." I answered his unspoken question.

He cradled the crock in one arm, following after Clove. "Wait a minute."

But Clove was already back on deck, headed for the anchor crank. "I'm not asking."

Nash looked to Saint, who was coming down the stairs from the upper deck. "So, what? You're expanding into slave labor now?"

Saint ignored him. "Just get us out of here." He pulled off his jacket, going to the railing. In one

movement, he pulled the knife from his hand and pressed it to his palm. I flinched when I saw the bright shine of blood bead against the steel, but Saint didn't look fazed. Once the blood was flowing, he flicked it into the water below.

I was the only one who seemed to even notice. Behind me, Nash had already climbed up onto the anchor crank, loosening his trousers. In the next breath, he was relieving himself over the side of the ship.

I pinched my eyes closed, grimacing.

Saint had the bleeding fist pressed against his chest, pulling a cloth from his back pocket as a steady stream of blood dripped from between his fingers. Once it was wrapped, he climbed the foremast himself, not waiting to order someone else to do it.

His hair blew to one side as the wind caught him, the hard shape of his arms surfacing under the skin as he rose higher. I tried not to trace the outline of him against the gray sky. It wasn't until I spotted the bloodstain on his sleeve again that I pulled my eyes away.

"Riven!" Ward was coming up the dock with a limp that sagged one shoulder, waving a hand in the air overhead.

"Now what?" Clove muttered, locking the anchor back into place. He went to the railing, leaning into it with both hands as Ward turned onto the slip.

"Looks like that luck of yours finally came in!" Ward lifted a sealed parchment into the air.

Clove's eyes shot up to Saint and I watched as every muscle in Saint's body tightened, all at once, the fog curling before his lips the only evidence that he was still breathing. Slowly, his gaze dropped to Clove, and something boyish lit in his eyes. Something untouched.

The expression was mirrored on Clove's face as he pushed off the crank, untying the ladder again. It rolled down with a slap against the hull and then he was climbing, his flaxen hair disappearing over the portside. When he had the parchment in hand, his thumb brushed over the red wax seal that was pressed to a thin green ribbon. It looked like a summons to the Trade Council.

The wind picked up, reddening the curves of Saint's face, and he climbed back down the foremast. When his boots hit the deck, he didn't move, as if he were afraid that at any moment both the navigator and the parchment would vanish.

An evil grin stretched across Clove's lips as he handed it over, and I didn't know if it was the wind or a slight tremble in Saint's hands that shook the letter as he opened it. His eyes skipped over the words frantically as he raked his hair back from his face.

"So?" Clove paced before the helm, waiting.

But Saint said nothing, lifting his gaze just long enough to find Clove's. They stared at each other, wordless, and then Clove closed the distance between them in two steps, surprising me as he wrapped his arms around Saint, drawing his tall frame to him.

Saint's white-knuckled hands clenched into Clove's shirt and he let out a heavy breath before he let him go. The face he wore was one I'd never seen, the blue of his eyes as deep as the water that surrounded the ship.

"Set course for Ceros," Saint said. "Shove off."

Clove took hold of the pegs on the main mast, not waiting even a beat before he began the climb. A moment later, the sails were unrolling over our heads. The tone of his voice was lighter than I'd ever

heard it. “It’s about damn time.”

SAINT

I didn't sleep on nights I could feel a storm coming.

The ropes creaked around me as I tightened the fastenings at the corner of the sail, leaning back into the lines at the top of the main mast. The heels of my boots were wedged into the joint of the boom, suspending me in midair over the deck far below.

It was pitch black, the air like ink around me, but far in the distance, a tiny flicker of white light had my hackles up. I couldn't see the wall of clouds drifting toward the ship, but I could feel them. Like a silent giant creeping over the water.

The sea was restless. The shapes of the waves weren't the smooth calm we'd seen that morning. I watched as their peaks sharpened and danced, a sinking feeling settling in my chest. No, the sea wouldn't sleep tonight. Neither would I.

Another frayed knot of lightning tangled in the sky, spidering down until it touched the horizon. I guessed we had an hour before it was on top of us. Maybe less.

The ring of grommets on the foremast behind me pulled my gaze from the distant storm and I looked back to see Clove fitting himself into the rigging. Once he was balanced, he pulled on his leather gloves and got to work, wedging an iron rod into one of the knots so he could retie it.

It was a job we wouldn't have entrusted to the deckhands, even if they'd stayed. No one knew the weak joints of this ship like Clove and I did. Put your life in the hands of a vessel enough times, and you developed an intuition about those things.

This was the point when most helmsmen would break from their coordinates and head to the nearest port. But I wasn't most helmsmen. With Zola making his way toward Ceros and the clock ticking on my next meeting with Henrik, we didn't have time to spare.

"Was going to let you sleep a while longer," I said. "It's going to be a long night."

Clove unraveled the rope, letting it fall slack into the air. "You know I don't like to miss the fun."

Really, he just didn't like me out of his sight when a storm was bearing down on us. We both knew just how quickly your fate could change in those moments. How, in a blink, the sea's hands could reach up and take what it wanted.

"You checked the deck when you boarded the ship at port." I didn't ask it like a question but that was what it was.

"I did."

I knew he did, but I needed to hear him say it. I'd checked it myself too. I always did.

A gust of wind hit us, and I glanced again in the direction of the storm. The air was bitterly cold, a

sharp contrast to the warm, balmy breeze that had been pushing us to Ceros. But I wasn't sure why that made me nervous.

My hands moved faster over the ropes and I ran my thumb along the stitched seams of the sails, checking them for gaps or loosened threads. Not that it would do any good, anyway. The wind didn't need a foothold. If it wanted one, it would take it.

"You know, I'm still trying to figure out exactly what you're thinking," Clove said, still working at the knots.

"About what?"

"How we're going to pay Emilia back."

My hands stilled on the sail as I finished checking the last seam and I pulled myself up to stand. "We'll sell the rye and see if we can pick up something else to trade in Ceros. It might take a few routes, but once we've made another trade for Henrik—"

"Last I checked, you stabbed our buyer. So, who's going to pay for these gems?"

I climbed down, finding the cleats with my hands in the dark until I was lowering myself onto the deck. "We'll find a new buyer."

Clove fell quiet as he looked at me.

I paced to the bow, passing beneath him, and when I reached the jib, I checked the stays. "I'm too tired to play games, Clove. Just say what you want to say."

"We have the coin we paid for the petition."

When I didn't answer, Clove jumped down, coming to stand next to me so that he could reach the lines on the other side.

"We could take back the copper."

"We're not giving up the license," I said, the words heavy and final. I couldn't believe he was even suggesting it.

"We wouldn't be giving it up. We can resubmit the petition after we've built the coin back up and settled accounts."

I shook my head. "No. We're not giving it up. Not now."

"Saint—" Clove said lowly.

"No!" I hit jib with the flat of my palm, the word burning my throat.

Clove let his grip slide from the stays, turning to face me.

"I have to do this." I swallowed. "I *have* to."

He looked at me then with an expression I could hardly bear. One that didn't break away or dissolve into his usual brash humor. He held my gaze for a long moment before he said it. "They're gone, Saint. There's no undoing it."

"It's not just for them. You know that."

I had a debt to pay. It was no secret between us that I was to blame for that day on the water when we both watched as our fathers were swept into the sea. It was the reason the people of Cragsmouth had turned their backs on me. The reason we'd left.

But *this*. I couldn't fix what I'd done, but this license was something I *could* do. It's what they'd wanted. What we'd wanted. And after everything, I'd promised myself I'd see Clove and me sail under our own crest, or I'd die trying.

He exhaled, a sound that bordered too close to sympathy. “All right.”

My teeth unclenched, my muscles relaxing a little. I knew it didn’t make sense. That it was reckless. But losing the license was a risk I couldn’t take. Not after everything we’d been through.

“You give any more thought to what I said about the dredger?” Clove said, finally breaking the uncomfortable silence between us.

“Keeping her on?”

He nodded.

“I have.”

“And?”

“If she wants a place, she can have it.”

Clove grinned to himself, but he didn’t say anything. He didn’t have to. The dredger had gotten under my skin and I wasn’t sure how to remedy that. I wasn’t totally sure I wanted to.

The odds of her accepting a place on our crew were slim. She’d be able to find a helmsman in Ceros who would take her on without knowing anything about what she was, much less what happened in Dern. But it was only a matter of time before Zola caught up with her, and I didn’t know if she really understood that.

“It’s not your problem,” Clove said, reading my mind.

I met his eyes for only a moment, releasing the lines of the jib before my gaze traveled over the deck to the hatch, where Isolde was sleeping in the crew’s cabin.

He should have been right. The only problem either of us had was each other. That was how we’d always done things and that way of life had kept us both alive. But something about it didn’t feel true anymore.

ISOLDE

“Isolde.”

My name drifted in the darkness, soft and close, but the sound was muddled by something else. The slosh of water. The slip of wind in the passageway. I turned my face into the damp fabric of the hammock, pulling a deep breath into my chest.

“Isolde.”

I opened my eyes and Saint’s silhouette hovered over me in the dark crew’s cabin. For a moment, his voice filled the air, the murky threads of thought spinning in my mind.

“Storm,” he said. “We need you on the deck.”

I blinked, finding my feet beneath me as I sat up, and tried to shake the lingering sleep from my mind. I was still between worlds, wondering if I’d heard him right. Wondering if he was even really there, close enough to reach out and touch.

“Are we headed to port, then?” I asked.

“No,” he answered, waiting for me to stand.

I did, arms lifting around me to keep my balance as the floor shifted under my boots and I realized the ship was tilting against a swell. Across the small room, the door hit the wall before it righted again.

But if we weren’t headed to port, then we were going to ride it out.

I blinked again, waiting for some kind of explanation, but Saint didn’t offer one. He kicked the trunk in the corner, checking to see that it was secured before he caught the door with his hand and held it open for me. “Come on.”

It was only when I stepped into the passageway that I smelled the rain. The sweet, earth-churned scent lit in my nose, climbing down into my lungs. With it, the flash of light coming from the deck, the movement of the ship, it all came into focus, waking me up.

I followed Saint’s shape in the dark and the ship rocked again as the wind barreled into the portside. I caught myself with both hands pressed to the walls before I reached the ladder. Behind us, the doors to the cargo hold and the supply room were shut and locked, and before I’d even made it out of the hull, I could hear Nash cursing.

I turned my face from the wind and rain as I pulled myself up, ducking beneath the overhang where Saint was waiting. His clothes were already wet through, his skin pale in the darkness.

“We still have time!” Nash shouted from the bow, giving the coil of rope in his hands a firm yank. “We can make it to shore!”

“No, we can’t” was Saint’s only answer.

A trail of fresh blood dripped from his wrist, almost wiped clean by the spray of seawater in the air. At some point since I’d gone to bed, the wound in his hand had torn back open. Looking at the sea now, I wasn’t sure how I’d even managed to stay asleep belowdecks. But the darkest of the sky wasn’t behind us, or even overhead. This was just the beginning of the storm, and it was an angry one.

My eyes fixed on the feeble sails at the top of the masts. Every time the lightning flashed, it illuminated the tattered labyrinth of seams. My stomach dropped at the sight. But beside Saint, Clove was showing no trace of concern. He looked at ease, like the helmsman.

“Nash is right,” I said. “We should head for shore.”

Another flash of lightning lit one side of Saint’s expressionless face. He’d already given his answer. He wouldn’t give it again.

I looked between him and Clove, searching for any hint of fear in their eyes. But this was what the helmsman of the *Riven* and his navigator were known for. There was no telling how many storms they’d sailed through to earn their reputations. And they had no intention of turning toward land.

“All right.” I met Saint’s gaze. “What do you need me to do?”

For a moment, I thought I could see the smallest tug of a smile on his lips. Maybe even a look of approval in his eyes.

“Into the wind, Clove,” he said.

Clove nodded, unlocking the helm and turning the wheel until the air was sweeping from bow to stern. It whipped around me, the rain hitting the glass of the helmsman’s quarters’ windows like tiny stones.

“Storm sails.” Saint was talking to me now.

I moved for the main mast without question and climbed just high enough to reach the small, stowed sails tacked below the open ones. They’d give us more control in the unpredictable winds and keep us from veering too far off course. But once they were open, they’d be almost impossible to get closed again.

Saint came up the other side of the mast, reefing the sheets as I untied the storm sail and hooked one arm into the rigging, letting myself swing out into the air as it filled. There was a short jolt in the frame of the ship as the triangular sail took shape, and I was relieved to see it was in better repair than the ones we’d been sailing with.

All around us, the darkness felt like it was moving, and I tried not to think about how small the *Riven* was beneath the crests of the black waves. The only ships I’d been on in a storm were beasts compared to this one, with the finest construction and rigging copper could buy. But the *Riven* felt like a box of matches floating on the surface of the water. The thought made my stomach roll with nausea.

Saint dropped himself onto the deck beside me and I followed him to the foremast. He waited for me to take hold of the pegs and I lifted myself until one boot left the deck.

“Could get used to this,” he said, pulling at the knots over his head.

My fingers loosened on the iron rods until my boot touched back down. Saint was watching me from the top of his gaze now with a look that felt like it was measuring me. Taking stock of my reaction.

Used to this. I didn’t know what that meant. Used to having a dredger? Another set of hands? Or

used to *me*?

I opened my mouth to ask, but before I'd gotten a single word out, Saint's hands froze on the knots. Slowly, his eyes lifted over my head and the prick in the air turned sharp, the wind suddenly quieting.

A feeling like fire beneath my jacket crept across the surface of my skin and my hands slipped from the pegs, my fingertips numb.

The *Riven* creaked and my weight pulled forward, toward the bow. The feeling was disorienting without being able to see the horizon. It was almost as if the ship were dragging in the opposite direction it had been moving only seconds ago.

Saint stepped away from the foremast and his hair blew across his forehead as he turned his ear to the water. Like he was listening.

"Brace," he said, the hollow word moving over the ship in the silence.

My brow pulled. "What?"

Clove jammed the lock into place at the helm, immediately reaching for the railing of the steps that led to the upper deck. But I was still searching the mist, trying to see whatever Saint did.

Gray light painted the world silver, casting eerie shadows over the ship. When I spotted movement in the distance, I took a step toward the railing, my eyes focusing. The clouds were rolling toward us like a flood of smoke.

But the sound that cut through the air wasn't wind. The ship rumbled with the vibration of it. And every second, it grew louder.

It wasn't clouds. It was *water*.

"Brace!"

The word tore from Saint's throat again and his arms came around me, driving us backward toward the main mast. He pinned me against it, crushing his weight into me, and the sound of the sea towering over us turned into a sickening growl. It was seconds from crashing down.

His face was so close that his cheek brushed mine as he wrapped his fists into the lines behind me. I was wedged tightly between his body and the mast.

He looked me in the eye. "Breathe." The word was soft.

He curled himself around me, and I frantically gulped in a chest full of air before the squall broke over the ship. And then we were gone. The world turned black, the crush of the water scraping over the *Riven* and trying to peel us from the deck. I held on to Saint as it pried at my hands. Pulled my feet from beneath me. The world tipped and turned as the cascade washed over the ship and I buried my face in his chest, my eyes pinched closed.

It wasn't until I heard his gasp for breath against my ear that I realized we weren't underwater anymore. The churning was gone, the clouds visible again.

I willed myself to unclamp my fingers from where they were tangled in Saint's shirt. He was still holding on to me.

"All right?" His words were half broken between breaths.

I nodded, unable to speak. Because we shouldn't have still been standing. The ship shouldn't have even been afloat.

At the bow, Nash's eyes were wide and terrified as he looked up to the sky. He'd pinned himself beneath the foot of the jib. Miraculously, he hadn't been swept away.

Saint's arms slid from where they held me, and then he was pushing toward the helm. "Clove!"

"Here!" Clove launched himself from the stairs to the upper deck, headed in our direction. His blond hair was stuck to his face, his shirt pasted to him like wet parchment.

Saint shot another glance to the sea. All around us, the water was churning again. This was no ordinary storm. Judging by the direction of the wind, the squall shouldn't have even come from the other direction. And it wasn't over. Not yet.

"There are two," I said without thinking. "Two storms."

It was the only explanation. If we'd had the advantage of daylight, we'd have seen it, but in the dark we were blind.

As if the same thought had just occurred to him, Saint pulled the knife from his belt, reaching for the line of the storm sail I'd just tied. He didn't even try to free it. It was no use. Instead, he took the rope in one hand and started sawing.

As soon as Clove saw what Saint was doing, he crouched down, turning the ends of the lever below the wheel to check the lock. The helm was still holding.

"Wait ... what are we...?" Nash pulled himself along the railing, panicked now.

"We're going to lie a-hull," Saint answered.

Nash's mouth dropped open. "*What?*"

Lying a-hull was a last resort in a storm like this. A whispered prayer. In another ship, maybe we'd be able to manage with the storm sails, but there was no way to know which direction the next squall would come from. The *Riven* was barely holding together as it was. It wouldn't be able to take the resistance of the water's push and pull.

"Get that anchor freed!" Saint shouted, still sawing through the last threads of rope.

Ahead, Nash hadn't moved, his white-knuckled hands curled around the railing. Rain dripped from his chin in a steady stream.

Water burned in my throat, my eyes, as I turned in a circle, trying to keep my bearings. It still felt like the sky was beneath my feet. The *Riven* swayed again, the masts tipping before it righted, and I crouched down when I began to slide, letting gravity take me toward the anchor crank.

I slammed into it hard, knocking the wind from my lungs, and I wheezed as I reached for the lever. My wet, cold hands slipped from the metal and I jammed it forward, trying to get it to budge. But there was no slack. No tension either.

I hauled myself up and peered over the side. "Shit." I exhaled. The loop of line that reached the hinges was missing.

The slide of the wet ropes sounded overhead and I glanced up to see Clove and Saint heaving the weight of the sails up between gusts to tie them down. But if we didn't have the anchor, there was nothing keeping the next wave from rolling us.

I climbed over, fitting an arm around the railing so that I could lower myself down.

"What are you doing?" Saint's voice was faraway, pulled out to sea by the wind.

Below, the surface of the black water looked like the jagged cut of the onyx or obsidian that covered my mother's jeweled fingers. Like the moment I touched it, it would cut me open.

I didn't think. When I was within reach, I swung my leg, kicking at the latch with the heel of my boot.

Lightning flashed again and there were a few seconds of blood-chilling quiet before the sound exploded in my ears. The high-pitched ring that followed washed out the storm around me. All I could see was the anchor. My boot desperately reaching for it.

I swung my leg again and again, each time draining the dwindling strength in my arms. It took six tries, but it freed with a screech, and the anchor flew out into the air, nearly hitting me. I clung desperately to the railing, trying to lift myself back up, but every muscle was jumping under my skin. I couldn't feel my hands anymore.

I grunted, my teeth bared as I fought against my own weight, and then I was suddenly being pulled. Saint's face appeared over the side of the ship, his ice-blue eyes finding me. But they were missing the calm that usually lived there.

I took hold of his forearm and he grabbed hold of mine, and then Clove was reaching over, yanking me up by the belt. Together, they lifted me back over the railing until my boots were hitting the deck beside theirs. As soon as I felt the ship beneath me, the sick feeling inside of me was climbing up my throat.

I swallowed it down, letting myself slip from Saint's grasp before I sank low to the crank. This time, the handle gave under my weight with the sound of scraping metal. The rope rippled as it raced through the feed, and the anchor lowered, splashing into the water below. A few seconds later, the *Riven* steadied just slightly.

Clove glanced over his shoulder, eyes studying the clouds. "We can't stay out here."

"Go." Saint lowered to his haunches, locking the crank, and Clove pulled me along to the passageway.

We ducked inside the helmsman's quarters, taking a river of water with us. Nash had already wedged himself into a corner, his arms crossed over his chest. He was trembling all over.

The sea dripped from my clothes, my hands, my hair, and I curled my fingers into my palms tightly, trying to make the warmth come back into them. Like it was the only thing that would convince me I was still breathing.

As soon as Saint was inside, the door was closed and he walked straight toward the desk. He pushed the parchment out of the way, sliding one of the maps free. I watched as he rolled it up with steady fingers, taking great care not to get it wet. When he was finished, he snatched the leather cylinder case from the hook on the wall and slipped it inside, securing the lid.

An unsettling silence fell over the cabin as he dropped it over one shoulder, letting the strap stretch across his chest. Whatever it was, he wasn't going to let it go down with the ship.

Almost in unison, Saint and Clove stepped on the heels of their boots, pulling their feet free.

Of course, I thought, the feeling of sickness coiling in my belly again. In case we had to swim.

"Take them off," Saint said, looking at my own boots.

I obeyed, letting them fall to the floor, and Nash reluctantly followed, the blood draining from his face. If he was a shipwright's apprentice, he wasn't used to being out on the water. Certainly not in a storm.

If the *Riven* went down, there was no saving us. As soon as I thought it, it was almost like a weight lifted off of me. A relief in knowing that I had no idea what was going to happen. My life had been lived according to a very specific plan. From the moment my mother knew what I was, every day had

a purpose—find gems. Make coin. But the moment I crossed into the Narrows, the plan for my life had been wiped from my mother's ledgers. And I could feel that open nothingness that stretched before me now more than ever, as the ship groaned against the breaking waves.

At any moment, I could take my last breath. That single truth felt like an infinite space inside of me. Where anything could happen.

I looked up from my boots, catching Saint's eyes on me. They ran over my face slowly, as if he were trying to read my thoughts. Or maybe he was remembering, like I was, what he'd said moments before that wave came down on the ship.

Could get used to this.

I was glad now that I hadn't had the chance to ask for his meaning. Because if it had anything to do with the feeling that flooded my veins when his arms wrapped around me, when his cheek touched mine and his hands gripped me tight, I was almost sure I didn't want to know.

ISOLDE

I'd never been happier to see the sunrise.

We'd spent the better part of the night in Saint's quarters as the storms tore through the sea, but the race of my heart didn't stop when the howling did. Those storms were still inside of me.

I'd slept in fits and starts, unnerved by the creaks and groans of the *Riven* as if, at any moment, the hull would breach and drown us all. I wasn't the only one who thought so. Every time the ship moaned, Nash shifted in his hammock, his eyes finding mine in the dark. It was nothing short of a miracle that we were still afloat, but we were. And I had no explanation for it.

I stood at the bow, watching the pale green water of the Narrows race beneath the ship. There was no mistaking the difference in the color. The Unnamed Sea was a dark, inky blue that was like the richest hue of sapphire. As soon as we'd crossed into the Narrows on the *Luna*, I'd noticed the slow bleed of it to a shade of turquoise. The air was different too, missing the weight of the salt that laced the water I was used to.

Storms like those we'd seen last night were rare in the Unnamed Sea, and my mother's helmsmen would sooner abandon an unfinished dive than draw her wrath by risking my life by riding one out. I was more precious to her than a single haul of gems, but not because she loved me. I was irreplaceable to Holland because of what I could give her.

I reached into my pocket, finding the only thing I'd taken with me when I left the Unnamed Sea. The purse was heavy in my palm and I pressed the tip of my finger to the sharp point of the midnight I could feel through the soft leather.

The closest I'd ever come to seeing the eye of a real storm was a few years ago, when I was on Fable's Skerry. The little rocky island off the shore of Bastian was home to nothing except the largest lighthouse in the Unnamed Sea. And over time, it became the only refuge I had from my mother. On days when she had business in the city, I'd sneak away and barter with the fishermen to be ferried across the bay, then I'd spend hours lying on the sunny rocks and diving in the skerry's sea caves. There were no people. No dive maps or routes to plan or ledgers to balance. Just me and the seabirds.

I'd been diving the skerry alone for years with no idea that there was anything there to find. Beneath the surface, the sea bottom was only rock and sand and swarms of silver fish. But all that time, the midnight was there. Just waiting.

I glanced over my shoulder to the deck. Clove stood at the helm, letting the wheel tilt just slightly, his eyes on the white clouds that striped the sky.

I cinched the little bag open and let the stone fall into my hand. The glossy black surface was cut into perfect facets and when I raised it to the light, I could see the glow of violet inside. I still remembered the exact moment, more than fifty feet beneath the surface of the water, when I heard it. The soft, lulling chime that was a stranger to me. A gem song I didn't know.

I'd suspected almost immediately that it was important. But I didn't know just how much of my world it would change. And when my mother told me that I was to be the one to name it, I chose *midnight*, the only word I could think of to describe its haunting sound.

The heavy thud of something on the deck made me flinch, and I closed my fingers into a fist over the stone. Behind me, Nash had dropped the bag of bosun's tools at his feet. He was missing his shirt, his skin already slick with sweat despite the cool morning, and his wet hair was curling on top of his head.

"Like trying to plug a hole. It'll just keep widening," he murmured, crouching down over the bag to fish out a long iron bolt.

He turned it over in his hand, shaking his head as he inspected it. The piece of metal looked like it had been salvaged from a ship built fifty years ago that had spent half that time underwater.

I slipped the midnight back into the purse and returned it to my pocket, coming to stand over him. "How much longer do you think this ship has?"

"Weeks? Days? Hours? Minutes, for all I know." He picked up the adze, fitting the bolt to the end of the rod jammed into the anchor crank. A high-pitched ping rang out as he tapped it, gently nudging it forward. "But they won't be sailing this thing for long."

"What do you mean?"

He smirked. "Not a chance. The reason I'm stuck on this death trap is because I talked."

I glanced to the open door of the helmsman's quarters. Saint told me that Nash was a shipwright's apprentice who hadn't kept his mouth shut. But about what?

They couldn't be planning to sail the *Riven* under their new trader's crest. No one in their right mind would risk hauling an expensive inventory in a vessel like this one. But maybe Saint *wasn't* in his right mind. They didn't have the coin to buy a new ship. If they did, they wouldn't have been in such dire straits after I'd gotten their gems stolen.

Unless they'd already spent it.

"They have a ship, don't they?" I guessed, keeping my voice low.

Nash's hand nearly slipped from the adze before he cleared his throat, tapping again in a steady rhythm. "Like I said, I've learned my lesson."

The click of the helm's lock made me turn in time to see Clove climbing down the ladder into the passageway. I watched his blond hair disappear behind the ledge.

They were a curious pair. Nothing like the helmsmen and navigators I'd sailed with before. These two spoke a language that only they knew, reading each other's minds without so much as sharing a glance. They seemed more like brothers than anything, but there was no trace of that in looking at them.

"What was that thing Saint did with the knife back in Sowan? Why did he cut his hand like that?"

Nash wiped a drip of sweat from his chin, looking up at me. "You've never heard those stories?"

I shook my head.

“You’re definitely not from the Narrows, then.” He dropped the adze, rising to his feet and reaching for the waterskin hanging from the mast behind me. “It’s a pact with the sea demons. Something the old sailors used to do.”

“What do you mean, a *pact*?”

He shrugged. “Like an agreement. That’s why the bastard’s ship hasn’t sunk. There’s a reason people are afraid of him. They’re scared they’ll cross those demons and draw their eye.”

“People really believe that?”

“Most do.” He took another drink, replacing the lid. “Others think he’s just mad.”

I half laughed. “Which do you believe?”

His eyes traveled to the sails stretched over our heads. I expected him to laugh too, but he didn’t. “If you’d asked me yesterday, I’d have said it was all bullshit.”

I hesitated. “And now?”

“Can you think of another reason we’re still breathing after last night?”

I could only guess that the rumors about Saint and the *Riven* had been born of a hundred other stories just like them. A mad helmsman and a cursed ship, tempting death with the favor of the sea demons. After what I’d seen last night, I couldn’t be completely sure that it wasn’t true.

Nash passed me the waterskin, lowering down onto his haunches and getting back to work. I’d heard people joke about the backward ways of the Narrows. The archaic manner of living and lack of advancement. We had our own legends and myths in the Unnamed Sea. But no one put any stock in them. Not anymore.

I paced across the deck and into the passageway, peering into the helmsman’s quarters. But where I thought I would see Saint sitting at his desk, it was empty.

I hooked one hand on the doorframe, slipping inside, and that scent that followed him hovered between the walls. It was the smell of the sea. Not of the sun-warmed shallows or the surf foaming on the sand. It was the scent of deep water, something I could never describe with words but that I would know anywhere.

The chime of the adder stones clinked in the open window, the only embellishment to the threadbare cabin. The *Riven* was anything but impressive, but even in the helmsman’s quarters, Saint wasn’t pretending it was. That was one of the first things I’d marked as a difference between him and Zola.

I caught one of the stones in the palm of my hand, rubbing my thumb over its face. My mother would laugh at the simple superstition. She’d mocked the crew members of her ships that followed such rules, but that didn’t keep them from practicing the rituals out at sea.

I took a step toward the desk, where a frayed edge of torn white linen was hanging from the smallest drawer. I opened it, peering inside. There were at least a dozen strips folded on top of one another. The same ones Saint always had wrapped around his hand.

The ledger sitting on top of the parchment had been left open and the handwriting that covered the page wasn’t careful or practiced. It was hurried. Sloppy, even. But the numbers were legible in the right-hand column. I followed them with my finger.

Ship repairs. Salted pork. Crates of rye.

Nothing about the wool I’d seen them unload in Sowen or the gems I’d stolen back from Zola. If

this ship had an off-the-books trade inventory, it was a lean one. They had to be making most of their coin in smuggled fakes. But the sums were almost nonexistent, coming down to nearly zero every few weeks before they shot up again and began ticking down.

That explained the desperation I'd seen in Saint's eyes when he grabbed me in the alley in Dern. At any given moment, this operation was only a breath away from coming apart.

The largest and most recent amount listed as a payment was to a Rosamund in Dern, but there was no notation of what goods it was for. This two-man crew didn't look like much to contend with, but they sure had a lot of secrets. Maybe that was why Zola was so fixated on them.

Beside the desk, the cylinder case Saint had strapped over his chest the night before had been returned to its hook. I reached up, taking it from the wall and prying the lid open. Inside, creamy white parchment was curled up tightly.

I watched the door for any sign of him before I slid it free, unrolling it over the desk.

It was a map. A beautiful one.

I shifted the parchment into the light coming from the window, letting it move over the colors and bring them alive. The scripted writing at the top was done in an expert hand, a flawless calligraphy.

The Narrows

Every inch of the shoreline was drawn in a precise, detailed rendering. It wasn't complete yet, but I'd never seen a map of the Narrows before. Not like this. Even the ones that Zola had given me were just crude charts with rough estimations and no attempt at accurate distance.

The hue of blue paint used for the sea darkened with what I assumed was depth, and the tangle of reefs set in its center was labeled Tempest Snare. I remembered it from the charts Zola had shown me. The graveyard of ships that the sea claimed for its own.

I eyed the inkpots in the tray to the left of the desk. The brushes and quills. The purse of fine sand used to dry the parchment. They were mapmakers' tools.

Saint was making a map of the Narrows. This was *his* work.

"I thought you Saltbloods were all manners and decorum." His voice cut the silence, making my eyes snap up to the door.

I let the edge of the map go and it curled, rolling in on itself as I saw Saint standing in the passageway, watching me. As if that threshold were some kind of boundary between us.

"It's rude to go through someone's things without permission," he said.

If that was all the reproach he would give me, I'd be lucky. But something in him had softened since we'd left Sowen. Like the edges of him had been worn down.

I gestured to the inkpots. "It's good work. Very good."

He reluctantly stepped inside, ducking beneath the beam overhead before coming around the desk. He took up the map, rolling it carefully.

"Where did you learn how to do that?"

"My father."

The tenderness in his voice when he answered made me still, and though there wasn't even the slightest hesitation on his lips, he didn't look at me when he said it.

"He was a mapmaker?"

“A fisherman.”

He didn't offer anything more, and I didn't press. I'd never heard of a simple fisherman who had a skill like that.

He returned the map to its case, reaching over me to hang it back on the wall, and I found myself inhaling deeper the closer he was to me. I could feel the warmth of sunlight coming off of his skin and the memory of him last night in the storm, holding onto me as the squall crashed down onto the *Riven*, resurfaced.

I let my gaze fall to his chest. His hands. The meager strip of cloth that was usually tied there was gone, but the blood that had seeped through his fingers was still dried over the knuckles.

“Why do you do it?” I asked. “The storms.”

He didn't answer my question this time. Instead, he turned his attention to the desk, closing the ledger.

“I thought we were going to die last night,” I pressed.

“Well, we didn't.”

“We could have.”

“Anyone could die at any time.”

I wasn't sure if he meant that as a reason. It was just as likely that he had nothing to live for. I glanced again to the map case on the wall. The notice from the Trade Council that still sat on the desk. The ledger. For someone with a death wish, he sure had a lot of plans.

He fell quiet again. I was beginning to understand that silence was his preferred method of communication. He dealt in the unspoken moments. The quiet in-betweens. But there was something about the helmsman that reminded me of gemstone. Like even when he wasn't speaking, I could still hear, or feel, something in the center of my chest.

“It's smart, you know,” I said, eyes flitting to the ledger again. “Saving up the coin in small trades and paying a little at a time. Makes everyone believe you're just scraping by.”

Saint nearly laughed, surprising me. “We *are* scraping by.”

I stared at him, deciding whether I wanted him to know just how many pieces I'd fit together. “But this isn't the ship that will bear that new trader's crest, is it?”

At that, he paused, and his eyes met mine for just a moment. But again, he said nothing.

“So, you have the license. Or you will once we get to Ceros. And you have the ship. Now you just need the inventory.”

“Well done, dredger. You've discovered the secret endeavor of every trader who ever lived: coin.”

I shook my head. “A helmsman who's in it for the copper doesn't spend years making a map like that,” I said. “That's something else.”

Saint looked uncomfortable now.

“You see a future for the Narrows, don't you?”

His chin lifted. In defiance? Self-preservation? I wasn't sure, but I'd definitely hit a nerve.

“You think it's foolish.”

“I don't,” I said, my voice a whisper, and the way he looked at me made me shift on my feet.

It wasn't foolish. It was terrifying.

He was like this room, this ship—honest. Not pretending. I didn't know what to do with that. Because what I was coming to realize was that I believed every word that came from his mouth. Worse, I suspected I could believe in *him*. This vision of his.

I could feel that endless well within me, the capacity I had to fall in love with this trader and his dreams. But I'd spent too many years giving myself up for the glimmering ambitions of others. I couldn't do that anymore.

"Don't worry," I said, my voice hoarse in an attempt at another laugh, "I think you may have convinced the world of your indifference."

"Maybe. I think people believe what they want to believe," he said.

"Maybe," I echoed.

"What should I believe about you?"

He was asking without asking. He wanted to know. But I couldn't make myself say it.

"When I met you in Dern, you didn't even tell me your real name."

"I didn't know you."

"You still don't," he said, more seriously. "And I still don't know who you really are. Or what you're doing in the Narrows."

There was that hard line again.

"But it doesn't matter to me why you came here. Everyone has secrets."

I pressed my tongue to the roof of my mouth. It was true, but not all secrets carried the same weight. The same risks.

"I need a dredger if I'm going to run a crew." He let the words hang in the air between us. "And from what I saw last night, you can handle yourself on a ship."

I blinked. "Are you giving me a formal offer?"

"We can't pay you. Not for a while yet."

We. The distinction of power between him and Clove was no more than a blur.

"But we can feed you. Make sure you don't get your throat cut. I think those are pretty good terms."

He was right. They were good. I could go looking for a place on another ship, but standing before me was the devil I knew. And if they'd planned to trade me as a gem sage, they'd already have me locked in the cargo hold like Nash.

"Why me?" I asked. "You can find a dredger at any port."

"You're a gem sage, and that's an advantage no other helmsman in the Narrows will have."

My throat constricted, making it difficult to swallow. That was the anchor of it. He wanted to use me. And he wasn't trying to hide it.

"You also don't have a past here. All pasts are good for is making allegiances and enemies. You have neither in these waters."

"Except Zola."

"He's a *common* enemy. Zola won't be able to touch you once we have a license and he's bound by the Trade Council. Signing a contract with a crew is the best protection you can get if you're going to stay in the Narrows."

I'd already signed one as Eryss, I thought. For the next year, that version of me was contracted to the *Luna*. But Eryss didn't exist. Not really. And the contract could only be enforced by the Trade

Council if the trader had a crest.

I'd never intended to stay on this ship or any other. When I'd said I wanted to disappear, I'd meant it. I just had one thing I had to do first.

Again, I let my eyes fall to Saint's unwrapped hand, following the streaks of blood dried dark on his skin.

The more I could feel that thing in the air between us, the more convinced I was that not staying on the *Riven* was for the best. So, why couldn't I say no to him? Why couldn't I just say I didn't want it?

I opened the little drawer of the desk and took a strip of linen from inside. When I held my hand out for his, he didn't move, eyes following the line of my arm down to my wrist. It took a full five seconds for him to make up his mind and, slowly, he set his hand into mine.

His warm skin filled my palm as I opened his fingers, and I bit down onto my lip when I saw it.

The soft spiderweb of lines that should have covered the center of his hand was gone, hidden by a stack of scars that looked like long, thin needles.

I wrapped the fresh cloth over the new cut, gently pressing it. He didn't so much as wince, and I wondered if he could even feel it anymore.

His eyelashes just barely moved as he watched my fingers tie the knot. When I was finished, his hand slowly turned over in mine. Before I realized what he was doing, his rough fingertips were moving over my knuckles, like he was tracing the feel of my bones beneath the skin.

He was touching me. On purpose. With a curious kind of intent. As if he hadn't been sure what would happen if he did.

My heart skipped, beat over beat, tumbling in my chest until I'd stopped breathing. The sinking feeling tugging between my ribs forced me to inhale and I pulled my hand from his before I let myself do something that couldn't be taken back.

"I have to think about it," I said hoarsely.

Saint slid his hand into his pocket, as if to cage it there. A moment later, he nodded.

"There's something I have to do in Ceros. I'll give you my answer after."

It was a coward's move. I knew that. But better to disappear without a word than to look into those eyes and say no to him.

I held his gaze for as long as I could bear to, but there was an intensity there that made me forget to breathe again.

"I have work to do," he finally said, his voice dragging in his throat.

I stepped around the desk, not looking back until I was through the door, my eyes finding him just before it closed. But he hadn't moved, his stare pinned to the desk.

I could see that he knew. I'd seen it the moment the lie left my mouth. There wouldn't be an answer, because when I stepped off the *Riven* tomorrow, I was never coming back.

I never should have touched her. That was a mistake.

Only a day after I watched Isolde wrap the bandage around my palm, the *Riven* was drifting into Ceros's harbor. But the passing hours on the small ship had felt more like weeks, that silence she'd left in my cabin worse than the roar of the storm that had almost killed us.

But it hadn't been enough to drown out the single thought that had been replaying in my head over and over.

I never should have touched her.

I wasn't even sure how it had happened. One moment her slim, calloused fingers were waking a fire on my skin, and the next, I was holding her hand in mine. The night and morning since had been spent watching the crack of light beneath my door, half hoping she would come back and also praying she wouldn't.

I pinched the bridge of my nose, willing myself to put it out of my mind. The question I'd asked. The answer she'd given. In the end, it would have been better to wake and find her gone than to imagine that she'd stay. But nothing was worse than admitting I wanted her to.

The sprawling hills and bridges of the city came into view, stretching along the shore in a congested maze. The harbor reflected its chaos. Almost every slip was filled with ships of every kind, most of them from the Unnamed Sea. They'd make their stops to do business with the city's merchants and the new Trade Council before they headed back to Bastian or Nimsmire or Sagsay Holm.

The first time I'd seen this city, I was perched at the top of the mast on my father's fishing boat. But this was the last time I'd stand on these docks without any power in my hands. In truth, he'd been the one to put it there. Long before he died.

I remembered the light in his eyes as the boat floated past those ships, their trading crests flying proudly over the bows. When I'd asked him if one day he'd have a ship like that, he said, *Ah, that's not a future for me, son. It's for you.*

And it wasn't just the dream of it or the grandness of the idea. It was what the idea meant. That one day, when Narrows-born traders were sailing with crests, there wouldn't just be a new horizon. There would be a new world.

Clove jumped down from the ladder of the *Riven* to land beside me on the dock. The last time we'd stood here was three weeks ago, and everything had been different.

"You take care of the docking fee?" He pulled on his cap.

“Yeah,” I answered. “Harbor master said the price is going up for anyone with a license.”

Clove scoffed. I wouldn’t expect any less from the harbor master, finding a way to use the Trade Council’s business to squeeze more coin into his purse. He wouldn’t be the only one.

“Word must be getting around,” Clove said.

I nodded.

There’d been talk about the Trade Council issuing licenses from the moment they were instated, but they’d gone about granting them to every trader from the Unnamed Sea with established business first. They claimed it was part of their plan to legitimize the Narrows, while also not letting the business of the merchants in Ceros suffer. But in the process, they’d kept the Narrows-born crews from doing legal trade, and anyone with eyes could see the guilds just wanted to keep their copper intact.

Now, almost a year after they first took their seats, the Trade Council was finally getting to the job they’d been commissioned for.

Nash came down the ladder next, nearly strangling himself in the ropes before he slipped from the last rung. When he finally had his feet under him, he wobbled, catching himself on the dock post.

Clove laughed, along with a couple of dockworkers in the next slip who were watching Nash struggle to stand up straight.

It was a dead giveaway that he didn’t sail. Losing your sense of gravity was a common reaction to solid ground for someone who wasn’t used to being on a ship for an extended period of time. The bastard hadn’t been at sea for even a week.

“You pull anything, and you’ll lose your passage back to Dern,” I reminded him.

“Got it,” he answered, clearing his throat.

With the deckhands gone, we weren’t going to leave him behind on the ship. If he had any sense, he’d behave and get a free ride home. We both knew he didn’t have anything to trade with another helmsman.

“That’s not all you’ll lose,” Clove warned.

“I said, I got it.” Nash glared at him, trying to comb his unruly hair back with his hand. I’d never seen him so disheveled. Even after a full day’s work in Rosamund’s pier he’d always looked like he was about to go to tea with a guild member. There were more and more people in the Narrows just like him, trying to put on the airs they thought would eventually carry them into high society. What they didn’t understand was that there was no high society in the Narrows. There never would be.

The sunlight flickered overhead and I looked up to see Isolde peering over the side of the *Riven*. Her face was hidden in the shadow, but her hands curled around the railing before she lifted herself onto the ladder. It wasn’t until she was climbing down that I saw the belt of dredging tools draped over her shoulder.

I met her eyes when she dropped to the dock. She’d have no need of that belt in the city. No reason to take it off the ship if she planned to return. That was all the answer she needed to give me.

There was a look on her face that almost resembled guilt. Almost. But she had nothing to be sorry for. I knew firsthand what it meant to carve your own path. I wasn’t going to stand in the way of anyone else doing the same.

“You’re just going to leave the ship?” she asked, glancing up to the *Riven*. There was almost

something protective in her voice and that made me bristle.

“No one wants it,” I said, the words more revealing than I meant them to be.

Her eyes searched my face, making it clear that she’d caught my meaning. What I was really saying was that *she* didn’t want it. Honestly, I couldn’t blame her.

I started up the dock, pressing into the crowd that was headed for the city. Clove wove in and out of the bodies behind me, glancing back to keep an eye on Isolde and Nash. Again, Isolde had her jacket pulled up, one shoulder turned away from the ships as she passed. Her face was cast toward the ground.

I wasn’t imagining it. She was trying not to be seen. The question was why, this far from home, she had reason to fear being recognized.

The very little I’d learned about Isolde didn’t add up. Why was she so comfortable on the ship if she’d been grown in a glasshouse, as Emilia put it? The dredging didn’t seem to be an act. She wasn’t playing a part, but how had she taken up such a brutal job if was highborn? Even if she had fallen from grace, there were other cities in the Unnamed Sea to disappear into. Ones bigger than Ceros. So, why had she come to the Narrows at all?

They were questions I’d never have the answers to, I reminded myself. And really, it was better that way. Emilia had every right to be worried, even if I’d brushed her off. I’d managed in the last two years to do the thing no one thought I could. I’d built something from nothing and I’d kept myself free of ties and obligations, with the exception of Clove. But this dredger was like a fever beneath my skin and whatever she was running from, I couldn’t afford it finding me.

When we reached the stairs that led up out of the harbor, we followed the river of people to the right and climbed until the bridges were in view. The trail of simple, unpolished buildings followed the curve of the cobblestones beneath the walking bridges suspended over their roofs. From here, it was impossible to see the expanse of the city like you did from the water. The closer you got to it, the more it swallowed you up, until all you could make out was the street ahead. That was the way the city felt too. Like one wrong turn would be the end of you.

No one had thought Ceros would become much of anything when they first built the docks here. It was just an easy place to land with deep enough water to accommodate ships. But once the Saltbloods started coming, the city started growing, and it wasn’t exactly something you could pick up and move when you ran out of room. The more crowded the streets became, the more bridges were built. Now, they were suspended over the entire city like a spider’s web.

I reached the top of the stairs and looked back, finding Isolde in the sea of faces below. She’d stopped, eyes wandering over the view behind me. There was a shadow of hesitation there. Something reluctant.

When she caught me watching her, she started again, finding her way up the last few steps. Clove was right behind her, brow cinching when she didn’t follow him onto the street.

“I have something to take care of. I’ll meet you at the tavern,” she said, not looking at me.

She didn’t even bother asking for the tavern’s name to keep up the pretense. There were a dozen in this city.

“Griff’s,” Clove said. “Near the south side.”

She nodded. “Thanks.”

But her feet didn't move.

Wherever she was going, she wasn't coming back, and she must have had her reasons for keeping that to herself.

I waited, watching her war over something to say in her mind. I didn't want a thank-you or a goodbye. I wouldn't give either of those things to her. But I also wasn't going to stand there and wait for her to make a fool of us both. So, I'd save her the trouble.

I looked at her one more time, tracing the shape of her face, her jaw, the curve of her throat. I etched it into my mind to keep for no other reason than I felt like I had to. And then I turned and walked away.

Clove followed closely at my side, keeping his eyes on the street ahead. "Think we'll see her again?" he asked.

"No," I answered, "I don't."

21

ISOLDE

I don't know why I lied.

I watched Saint disappear into the crowd, the color of his coat snuffed out. Just like that, he was gone. A pinprick on the narrow timeline of my life.

There'd been a moment as I stood on the ship, watching him and Clove from the railing, that I'd imagined myself standing beside them. Maybe because they were alone in the world, like I was. Or maybe because I just didn't *want* to be alone. But eventually, there would come a time when they'd have a choice between me and the copper. And at heart, they were just traders. I knew where that road led. Saint had all but admitted it.

I stood there another moment, watching the sea of people pour down the street, before I forced myself to walk in the opposite direction. With every step, I could feel it. That endless well. Its depths. But the only thing I could do now was to keep walking.

The road widened as soon as I was a few steps from the archway, and shadows danced on the ground, casting the shops in shade. I looked up, almost dizzy as I took in the sheer height of the bridges striping the sky. They rocked and bounced, the knock of boots on the wooden planks like little drums over the city. Below, people filed up the ladders and followed them in every direction, like a fishing net cast over the rooftops.

"Excuse me." I reached out, gently catching a woman by the arm as she shouldered past me.

The open clamshells in the basket she carried clinked like pieces of glass as she stopped. "Yes, dear?" But as soon as her eyes took me in, they narrowed.

"I'm looking for the Trade Council Chamber."

Her mouth twisted. "The what?"

"The chamber," I said again, "the place the Trade Council meets?"

"Ah, those fools," she hissed. "Don't suppose you could leave them to work for their own people, now could you? You Saltbloods never saw a thing you didn't think you could take."

She opened a hand in front of me, her jaw set.

I stared at it.

"Well?"

She was waiting on coin, I realized. I reached into my belt and pressed a copper into her hand without giving her an argument. She wasn't wrong about the traders from the Unnamed Sea or the Trade Council, and it was no secret that these people had no love for us. We'd sailed into these waters with more copper than they had ever had need of. Then we *made* them need it by increasing

the demand for their grain without raising the price we were willing to pay. These shores had fed the whole of the Unnamed Sea and now that they were standing on their own two feet, our traders looked for any opportunity to knock them back down. My mother included. But if I did what I'd come to do, her fingers might finally lose their reach in the Narrows.

The woman inspected the coin before she propped her basket on her hip and pointed an elbow toward the ladder at the end of the street. "Follow that bridge toward the building with the four towers."

She shoved into my arm as she continued on, muttering a curse under her breath.

I made my way toward the ladder, waiting my turn before I climbed up out of the still, warm air and into the sea breeze. The wood planks beneath my feet swayed just slightly with the movement as I walked, and I kept one hand to the rope walls, scanning the rooftops in the distance. The building with the four towers was easy to spot, just east, and the higher the bridge rose, the more of the path I could see that would take me there.

Ceros was nothing to Bastian. It didn't look that much different from Sowen, except for its enormous size. No shining marble buildings or painted glass windows. No red cobblestones or smithed iron signs. Bastian was a glistening jewel, a beautiful place. But its heart had gone rotten a long time ago.

I took the nearest ladder down when I was only a few streets from the chamber and the heat that seemed to collect in the streets found me again, making me open up the neck of my jacket and let my hair fall down my back.

A few turns following the northwest spire of the building, and I was there, standing in the open market that snaked through the veins of the alleys behind it. The chamber looked more like a well-dressed pier except for the towers that stood at each corner. The sand-colored brick was set into a simple pattern, stretching across the walls and breaking at a few large windows that looked out over the street like wide, open eyes.

I stood there staring at it for a long while before I finally started walking.

I'd made the decision that night in my mother's house as I stood there in my expensive gown, a glass of cava bubbling in my hand. We'd stood behind the heavy velvet curtain that opened to the hall and the gleam of candlelight reflected off the gem case holding the midnight, lighting my mother's eye.

It will change everything, she'd said.

I'd known then that I was finished.

I'd given her the one thing she needed to curl her fingers around the world. And now I would place it in the hands of her enemy.

I climbed the stone steps to the wide wooden door of the chamber and pulled the brass handle until it opened. It was quiet inside, a stark contrast to the noise of the street, and I stepped into the dim light, where a long hall stretched before me. Brilliant blue paper covered the walls behind large, gold-framed portraits on either side. Beneath each one, a name was engraved on a brass placard that noted their guild. I felt small beneath the faces that were painted there, the same feeling I had in my mother's house. I didn't like it.

It was too familiar a scene. The men and women who filled the portraits were the likes of the guilds, even if they weren't quite as bright and shiny as the high society in Bastian. Tailored suits and

lace-trimmed frocks floated past me, and my hands tightened on the dredging belt. They weren't Saltbloods, but they sure looked like them.

Below the gilded frames, a space on the marble was being cleared where the trader's crests would be hung. Before I could imagine Saint's crest among them, I kept walking. But I stopped short when my eyes caught sight of a placard that bore a name I recognized—Oliver Durant. The name I'd seen on the courier agreement with Zola and Simon.

My chin tipped up as I studied the rich colors of the portrait. The man's wide face was set with a large nose beneath a severe brow. The dark curling beard matched the head of hair beneath his fine hat, and one hand was set on the grip of a gold-handled cane.

So, this was the man who'd planned to buy me. A gem merchant, like Saint predicted. An upstanding member of the guild. Maybe these bastards weren't so different from the ones I'd grown up with, after all.

I took a small step forward, looking him in the eye. I didn't want to guess at what his plans for me had been. Lock me up in the back of a shop somewhere in this teeming city? Tie a stone around my feet and drop me in the harbor to be rid of one more gem sage who could spot the fakes he was trading? I was glad that I'd never have to find out. I had Saint to thank for that.

I closed my eyes, trying to scrub the helmsman's name from my mind. I didn't want to think about the *Riven* or what his face had looked like when I stood at the bottom of those steps. I didn't want to remember that scent, like the deepest sea.

I put one foot in front of the other until the hall came to a stop at a circular vestibule with four bronze-plated doors set into the curved wall. When I found the one I was looking for, I raised a fist and knocked.

POST OF EDGAR MORANTON, GEM GUILD MASTER

It was simple. My mother hated the Narrows. She always had. But that hatred had grown into something else entirely when talk of a Trade Council in Ceros began to fester. She'd been wedged out of her own license to trade at their ports and giving the Narrows its own authority didn't bode well for her prospects.

And if there was anyone who would ensure she was never given power in these waters, it would be the Gem Guild master. He wouldn't want her stones fetching more coin than his.

The door opened and a young man's face appeared. He was near my own age, if I had to guess. Maybe an apprentice, or a clerk of some kind. He could even be an heir.

"May I help you?" His narrow face was set with small, dark eyes.

My gaze found the bright beam of sunlight casting through the room behind him. "I'm looking for the Gem Guild master."

"Regarding?"

"A sale."

The young man's brow pulled, his hand already moving toward the door again. "A sale?"

"The sale of a gemstone."

"I'm not sure you—"

"It's all right, son. Let her in," a quiet voice came from inside.

The young man hesitated before he let the door swing open, revealing a large office lit with a circle of windows set into the high ceiling. One of the towers I'd spotted from the bridges, I presumed.

"What is it I can help you with?" The man behind the desk was already standing, abandoning his quill.

His combed hair was tucked behind one ear, his face clean-shaven over the high collar of his suit. He was an entire head taller than me, his broad shoulders nearly the width of the bookcase behind him. In the Unnamed Sea, the seats of the Trade Council were filled with some of the oldest guild members. Men and women who'd climbed the ranks to the honor of being called *master*. But this man was younger than my own father would be if he were still alive.

The thought made me swallow hard.

"Well, you're far from home, aren't you?" he said, looking me over.

I still wasn't sure exactly what it was that gave me away so quickly. The fabric of my clothes? The laces in my boots? Eventually, I'd have to figure out how to scrub myself of those clues.

"Just stopping in Ceros for the night with my crew," I said, giving him the explanation he'd probably already come up with himself.

He gestured to the tool belt. "A dredger, I see."

I nodded.

"And this is regarding a sale, you said?" He was politely masking his impatience now.

"I have something I'd like to offer you. A rare and valuable stone."

He frowned. "I'm sure there are plenty of merchants down at the merchant's house who would be interested."

This man's days of trading in a booth were long gone. They probably had been for some time. A single sale was a waste of his time when he likely had a whole warehouse of gems down at the water. No, this was a man who dealt in the kinds of trades that tipped power balances. That was why I was here, after all.

"This isn't any ordinary gemstone," I said, a pit sinking in my stomach.

That got his attention.

"All right, why don't you take a seat?" He took a gem lamp from the shelf behind him and set it beside the small tray on the desk. "Who did you say you crew for?"

"The *Reverence*," I said, giving him the first name that flitted through my mind. It was a small vessel out of Nimsmire that I wasn't even sure held a license to trade in Ceros, but by the time he checked it out, I'd be gone.

I reached into my pocket, finding the little purse and pulling it free. The midnight sang inside, the feel of it pulsating between my fingers. I'd had that song with me so long now that it would strange to be without it.

"Well, let's see it, then," he said, tugging on the glittering gold chain around his neck until the monocle fell from his vest pocket. He fit it to his eye.

I pulled open the purse strings and the light coming through the window glinted on the smooth face of the stone inside. The sound of the midnight grew louder in my ears, humming in my blood.

My mother was right. It *would* change everything. Just not in the way she thought.

“I’m afraid I’m in a bit of a hurry, dear.”

The stone rolled into my hand and the man’s eyes narrowed, curiosity pursing his lips. If he was experienced enough to be the Gem Guild master, it would take him all of three seconds to realize this wasn’t onyx or obsidian. There was a strange nature to the black color. A sheer, liquid-like quality.

I let the midnight move under the light until flashes of violet ignited beneath the gem’s surface. But when I looked up to meet the guild master’s eyes, my vision was pulled to the shelf fixed to the wall behind him.

I don’t know what it was that snagged my attention. Maybe the shift of a bending shadow or the sparkle of the crystal glasses. But when my eyes fixed on something I recognized, a sick, horrifying feeling bloomed deep in my gut.

An open wooden box displaying a quill was set into the glass case. And fit into the gold nib was a single black-tipped feather. The feather of a whistling swan.

A sharp prick ran over my skin as the guild master’s voice sounded again. But I couldn’t hear him anymore. My mother’s presence was suddenly filling the room, swirling in the air around us. I could smell the sweet scent that she dabbed at her wrists. Hear the tinkling of the jewels around her neck.

I’d thought I’d gone as far from her as I could. That I’d traveled the sea to find the place she didn’t exist. But this man sitting in the chamber of the Narrows Trade Council was just another hand of Holland.

I’d known long before I learned the truth about my father that the people who’d been gifted that quill were special to my mother. They weren’t just associates or business partners. They were loyal. Devoted to her. And the rumors about what they’d done in her name were the most wicked of her sins.

There was no shortage of her stewards in the Unnamed Sea, so why wouldn’t she have them in the Narrows too? It made sense. All part of her plan. Only, I’d been too foolish to see it.

“I’m ... I’m sorry.” I stood, hand clamping so hard over the stone that the pain of it shot up my wrist to my elbow. “I have to go.”

The Gem Guild master got to his feet, catching the monocle in his palm. “I’m sorry?”

I took a step backward toward the door, and then another. “I—”

But the words disintegrated before they could take shape and then I was in the hallway. Walking. I stuffed the midnight back into the purse, pulling my hood up and sliding the tool belt from my shoulder so I could roll it up tightly and stuff it into my jacket. When I heard footsteps behind me, I picked up my pace.

“Wait!” a voice echoed.

The portraits of the gem merchants flitted past me on either side and I paced toward the light at the end of the hallway, their eyes bearing down on me.

“I said wait!”

I glanced back at the door of the Gem Guild master’s office. He was already flanked by two traders in green jackets, their gold buttons shining as they started toward me.

I pushed into the door to the street with both hands, letting it swing out, and as soon as my feet hit the cobblestones, I was running. The door flew open again behind me and the two traders were running now, the Gem Guild master on their heels.

The market ahead was already filling with a crowd and I looked for an opening, slipping into the

stream of people. Voices and boots folded around me, letting me disappear, and when I heard the sound of a creaky wheel, I followed it until I spotted a cart. It came to a stop on the side of the street and I snaked my way toward it, not daring to look back. I came around the railing to lift myself in the bed, then slid myself backward until I was wedged between two barrels that smelled like salted fish. I pressed my body between them, making myself as small as possible.

“Where the hell did she go?” A gruff voice sounded on the other side of the barrel and I filled my lungs with air, holding it.

The corner of a green jacket flashed past the cart, and then another.

“Get down to the harbor. Find her.” The Gem Guild master’s smooth tone was easy to pick out. So close I could reach out and touch him. “*Now.*”

The cart jerked forward, moving again, and I let out the breath I was holding. A single hot tear slipped down my cheek and I curled tighter into myself as my hand found the stone in my pocket. The pain in my throat grew until I couldn’t swallow. Until my teeth were clenched so tight that my jaw ached.

My father’s face found me, his kind eyes moving left to right over his parchment as he sat quietly at his candlelit desk. His fingers tapping at the corner. His gray-streaked hair like threads of silver.

But the vision was replaced by the looming ghost of Holland. Like everything else. It wasn’t just that my mother’s shadow stretched all the way to the Narrows or that she’d followed me in an endless stream of memories. Her blood ran in my veins. And no matter how far I ran, I realized, I’d never, ever be rid of her.

Griff's Tavern sat on the steepest slope of the city, its windows overlooking the harbor. But as my eyes scanned the crests on the sails of the ships that were docked there, I could only think about the day when none of them would be from the Unnamed Sea.

There were many who thought the idea of the Narrows standing on its own was nothing more than a fantasy. But that was before the streets of Ceros stretched long, following the jagged shore, and the number of piers on the water multiplied. Before we had a Trade Council of our own and merchants to contend with the ones in Bastian. I could feel it changing. Like the patterns that shifted with every wave that broke on the sand.

Maybe I'd never see it in my lifetime, but maybe I would. Either way, today was where it would truly begin.

"Ready?"

Clove's voice made me blink, coming back to myself, and I turned to see him standing in the doorway. He'd shaved his face, making him look a little like his age for once. We were still young, I remembered. But I hadn't felt that way in a long time.

I nodded, grabbing my jacket from the chair beside the bed and stepping over Nash. He was tucked against the wall at the foot of the two beds, still snoring.

Isolde hadn't showed, and I hadn't expected her to. When we came up from the tavern late last night, a part of me had fleetingly remembered how she'd been curled up in the shadows of my quarters the day I found her on the *Riven*. But as my eyes followed the candlelight sweeping the room, illuminating its shadows, she wasn't there.

My mind would stop drifting to her, I told myself. I would forget the way I'd felt when I'd looked into her eyes in the alley in Dern or when I touched her without thinking on the *Riven*. These things would fade. Drift into the past. No matter how untrue, it was easy to believe when a whole future stretched before me.

The tavern was empty when we came down the creaking steps, but Griff was already at work behind the bar, scrubbing the glasses he'd soon be filling with ale and rye. Morning light pooled on the wood floor, finding the shadows of the empty room, but the embers in the fireplace were still glowing. The sharp scent of woodsmoke was powerful enough to mask the stale, sweet stench of spilled rye.

"Tea?" Griff croaked, hands covered in a froth of white suds. His round middle was cinched by the tie of his apron, his bald head missing the hat he usually wore.

He still looked at Clove and me like the kids our fathers had dragged in behind them, and that was likely why he kept giving us a room even when we couldn't pay for it. But I kept the best of the rye set aside for him every time we picked up from Emilia, the way my father would have wanted.

"No, thanks." I buttoned my jacket up to my chin, answering for both of us.

My stomach was already in knots and a pot of black tea would have me vomiting before I even made it to the Trade Council. I hadn't even been able to eat the bread Griff's wife, Daya, sent up at daybreak.

"Suit yourself." He went back to work, but there was a smile on his lips as he stacked the next glass. It looked a lot like pride. "Better get going, then."

It had been at least an hour since the harbor bell had rung, and the Trade Council would be in session. The last time I'd been there I was emptying my pockets of every coin we had to pay the fee for the license petition. Coin we'd never have been able to save without Griff.

He was the one who'd helped us find the *Riven*, which at times I'd questioned was a favor at all. Some unfortunate soul had won it gambling in the tavern, with no idea that it wouldn't pass muster as a real ship. They'd been only too happy to sell it to us for next to nothing, probably guilt-ridden that they were sending us to our deaths. But here we were, about to claim our own trade license.

I'd never thanked Griff for what he'd done for us. Not directly. But that look in his eye as we pushed out onto the street made me think that maybe I didn't have to.

Clove fell into step beside me, making me feel more grounded. The city was awake, the shopfronts open and carts headed to market. The smell of spice and bread and drying herbs was in the air, bleeding into the sea winds under the maze of bridges suspended overhead.

The sunlight flitted over us as we passed beneath them, painting shapes on the dirt beneath our feet. I didn't know what our fathers would think if they could see us now. Walking the streets of Ceros alone. Headed to the Trade Council to accept a license that granted us the freedom to sail port to port and build our own trade.

My father had dreamed it for me. So had Clove's. But I wondered if they ever really believed it. I hadn't. Not for a long time.

Clove caught my eyes, as if he was thinking the same thing, a nervous grin changing his face. We'd waited for this moment for the last three years. And now it was here.

The home of the new Trade Council was one of the oldest buildings in Ceros, marked by four towers that had once been set with telescopes to watch every inch of the horizon for ships and storms. Its stone walls were bleached by the sun and though it had looked like a giant when I stood before it as a boy, it felt significantly smaller now.

It had been dressed up with newly cast windows and polished hinges and handles on the arched, stained doors. At their center, the port seal of Ceros was burned into the resurfaced wood. That was new too.

We stood there, shoulder to shoulder, with the bustle of one of the city's markets at our backs. We'd walk in as urchins. We'd walk out as traders. I tried to wrap my mind around that.

"You did it," Clove said, his smile growing wider.

There was no protest in him now like there had been the other night, when he tried to convince me to forfeit the license for the petition fee. I was grateful for that.

“I told you I would.”

I had. I’d promised him. It wouldn’t absolve me of my sins, but it was something.

The door opened and the air chilled by the shadowed marble inside cooled my skin. I hesitated before I stepped over the threshold, one calloused hand dragging along the fine papered wall. A shimmer of gold rippled in its veins as the door shut slowly, snuffing out the sunlight.

Silver candlesticks were fixed overhead in an even line every few paces and the wicks were lit, giving the hall an eerie glow. It was as if, all of a sudden, we weren’t in the Narrows anymore. I didn’t like that feeling.

I followed the walkway to its end, stopping before the long dais that served as a partition between us and the hall behind it. Its face was covered in a mosaic tile that depicted rolling waves. The woman who stood on the other side looked up from her spectacles with disinterest. Her red velvet jacket was rimmed in a brilliant purple, her fingers covered in gold rings.

She cleared her throat as her gaze raked over us. “May I help you, sirs?”

Sirs. I half expected Clove to start laughing, but he managed to keep quiet.

I pulled the message from my jacket, handing it over, and the woman set down her quill. Her scrutinizing gaze didn’t leave us until she had the parchment opened before her.

“Mm.” Her eyes snapped up. “It seems congratulations are in order.” She gave us a genuine smile and pulled off her spectacles, folding them carefully in her hands. “Wait here.”

She stepped down from the dais and her polished shoes clapped on the floor as she made her way into the narrow hall. Beneath the soaring windows on the opposite wall, two men and two women sat at a carved wooden table the length of the room.

The sound of voices echoed and Clove looked to me again before his eyes lifted to the crystal chandelier hanging over us. “Guess they decided to play the part,” he muttered.

“Looks like it,” I said.

There was humor in it, but not the kind I found entertaining. The Narrows resented the Unnamed Sea not only because of what they’d done in our waters, but also because of their way of life. It had taken years to build the guilds into something that could one day be the seeds of the Trade Council, and now that we were here, they were just trying to turn Ceros into Bastian.

“This way.” The woman reappeared, waving us forward, and we followed her through the opening and into the long rectangular room. At one end, a grand fireplace was stacked with a roaring fire, the seals of the guilds pressed into the hearth by the expert hand of a smith.

The four guild masters sat behind the table, glittering in their fine coats and frocks. The backs of their chairs reached up far past their heads, making them look like miniature thrones. They were, in a way.

Gold inkpots were fixed on the table before them, where an array of parchment was stacked in varying heights. One of the women wore a stone around her neck so large that it looked like it could be a lantern’s flame.

There wasn’t one among them who hadn’t grown up on those streets outside or ones like them. Yet, here they were, pretending to be Saltbloods. I bit the inside of my cheek when a bitter smirk pulled at my lips.

The man sitting at the end of the table had my summons open in his hands. His white mustache

moved as he smiled up at me. “Ah. Elias, is it?”

“That’s right,” I answered, finding my feet beneath me again. That name didn’t feel familiar like it once had.

“I’m Faros, master of the Shipwrights Guild. This is Corinne, Smiths Guild. And here we have Edgar, Gem Guild, and Irva, Sailmakers Guild.”

Each of them nodded as he spoke their names and his voice echoed around us, cut only by the sound of the fire. Its warm glow bled through the room, casting it in a dreamlike light.

“It’s an honor to meet you, son.” The woman Faros had called Irva smiled, and despite her calling me *son*, her tone wasn’t maternal. Her eyes moved from my face, down my chest in a way I recognized. “You’re one of the first Narrows-born helmsmen we’ve had the honor to grant a trade license. And you won’t be the last.”

“Hear! Hear!” Edgar tapped the table beside his parchment with the knuckles of one hand.

The clip of footsteps echoed again and the woman from the dais returned with a triangular package wrapped in brown paper cradled in her arms. She set it beside Irva before disappearing, but not without one more glance back at us.

Faros clasped his hands before him. “It says here you have a ship. The *Aster*.”

“We do. She’s being finished as we speak and will be sea ready by the time we get back to Dern.”

“That’s good. Don’t want our traders sailing in rags, now do we?”

His mouth tilted in a playful grin, as if I were in on the joke. Like we were the same. He had no idea how wrong he was about that.

“And have you a crew?”

“This is my navigator,” I answered, giving him only half an answer. Clove was crew, but that was all I had of one.

“Well, I’m sure once you’re settled on the *Aster*, you’ll have your pick of the rest.”

Irva made a sound that resembled an agreement. She took up the paper-wrapped package and got to her feet, coming around the table. When she stopped before me, she held it out between us. “You’ll need to fly that crest if you want the harbor masters to know who’s coming.” She winked.

I took the package in my hands, realizing by the weight that it was a sail. A clean, white, unstitched sail that bore the symbol we’d be known by for the rest of our lives.

Faros came around the table next, and the others stood, chairs scraping over the marble floor. Irva stepped aside, hands clasped behind her back, and Faros lifted a rolled parchment tied in a red satin ribbon into the air. I swallowed hard, trying to keep my hand steady as I took it from him.

“Well, go ahead,” he said.

I pulled at the ribbon and it unraveled, letting the parchment unroll in my fingers. The tight feeling in my throat was now a painful lump.

The lavish scrolling letters curved across the top of the parchment in glossy black ink. Beneath it, the crest I’d had the smith make for us was etched onto the page. A curling wave arched over a single triangular sail.

By the power of the Trade Council of the Narrows

This certifies that the bearer of this crest is hereby licensed to trade goods at

ports Ceros, Dern, and Sowan.

Helmsman: Elias Redgrave

SAINT

Griff had the rye ready to open when we returned. One of the finest bottles he kept in the back under Daya's watchful eye.

The tavern was filled to the brim, the sound of a fiddle playing somewhere beyond the crowd that stretched from the door to the counter. It was a busy night. The harbor was full, the taverns were full, and we weren't the only ones celebrating. The rumor making its way door-to-door in Ceros was that the Trade Council had granted four trade licenses by the time the sun went down. There were four ships, four crests, four helmsmen to contend with the Unnamed Sea. And by the time the sun rose tomorrow, we'd be going port to port stealing the contracts of the Saltbloods and writing new ones. With our own people.

Daya set down a fresh loaf of bread in the center of the table, careful not to spill the pitcher of ale in her other hand. I could finally stomach it now that I had the license in my possession and we were already on our second pot of tea. Clove reached for the plate, tearing the loaf in two and leaving the other half for me. He slathered a mound of butter over its top before taking a bite that could choke him.

"Can't wait to see the look on Gerik's face." He took another bite before he'd even swallowed.

The harbor master in Dern would probably have the license checked for forgery before he'd let himself believe it was real. Not that I could blame him. We'd lied through our teeth for years to build what we had, and trust wasn't something people in the Narrows gave easily. Luckily, we didn't need it. Trading contracts were the only thing that mattered, and harbor masters had little sway over them.

A few tables over, Nash was watching us. He lifted his cup of tea into the air, giving me an impressed tilt of the head. Even he had to admit we'd been right. Two boys adrift from the shores of Cragsmouth had done the impossible. And I didn't care how many Saltbloods had filled their pockets with our coin along the way. I was going to get every single one back.

"You think Zola's got one of those licenses?" Clove asked.

"More than likely," I guessed. "If he doesn't already, he will soon."

He had too many friends, too many favors exchanged, to keep him from the table. I hoped a new license was distraction enough to keep him from trying to track down the gem sage he'd lost. But whoever he'd struck the deal with wouldn't forget so easily.

I set my elbows on the table, turning my hand over. The bandage Isolde had tied around my palm was gone now, but there was something still lingering where she'd touched me. Like the heat of a candle's flame held too close.

“He’s going to have quite a shock next time we’re in Dern and we set sail on the *Aster*.”

I closed my hand into a fist, making the healing cut on my palm sting. “Yes, he is.”

Clove was all business now, focused. “The rye won’t keep us going forever. It’ll be steady, but not enough to build with. There’ll be other crofters who want to sign contracts. Potatoes, barley, cheese—anything that’ll stand the length of the route without spoiling. Emilia can help us with that.”

“And gems?” I asked, studying him. Our agreement with Henrik wouldn’t be easy to get out of.

“I think running gems is the easiest way to get a knife in our back, even if they’re legitimate stones.”

He was right. No matter how you looked at it, the coin of both the Unnamed Sea and the Narrows ran on gemstones. But there was no denying that it was much more profitable than crates of apples or cabbage.

“Crofters it is,” I said.

He looked relieved, and I couldn’t pretend I didn’t know why. Clove was the sensible one. The steady set of feet who could be patient and wait for his prize. I was the hungry one who was never satisfied, and that had gotten us into trouble. It had also cost us almost everything.

“Saint?” Clove interrupted my thoughts, making me look up from my plate.

His gaze was fixed across the room, eyebrows arched up and mouth still full. I turned in my chair, searching the tavern until I saw it. Between the men standing at the next booth, a flash of a dark red braid appeared and then disappeared, sneaking from beneath the hood of a jacket.

When she turned, her face came into view.

Isolde.

The sleeve of her jacket was streaked with mud and the way she stood there was with a weight. Not the tall, sure posture she usually had. She looked as if she were being pressed into the floor. She tucked the loose strand of hair behind her ear as her eyes scanned the tavern. They were a duller blue, like the light had gone out of them a little. When they found us, I could see a moment of relief in them. Or something else.

“Well, look at that,” Clove murmured.

But when I looked at him, he wasn’t watching Isolde anymore. He was watching me.

She pushed through the crowd, making her way toward us, and I returned my eyes to my plate, breathing through the tight feeling that had returned to my chest. I’d been sure we’d never see her again. I’d also hoped with every breath that I was wrong.

“This day is just getting better and better.” Clove slid over in the booth, making room for her beside him.

She stopped at the corner of the table, one hand hooked into the dredging belt on her shoulder like she was waiting for permission. From me.

“Do what you need to do?” I asked, not looking up at her.

“Not really,” she said.

Clove lifted a hand in the air until he had Daya’s attention and then he pointed to his teacup. She gave him a nod before ducking into the kitchens.

“Well?” He gestured to the seat beside him, and I could feel her look to me again. When I didn’t protest, she took it.

“Filled that dredger position yet?” She said it with the slightest edge of humor, trying to make light of the tension that stretched across the table.

If she was looking for some kind of reassurance that she was wanted here, she wasn’t going to find it. I’d made her the offer and I wasn’t going to take it back. She’d shown up, so I finally had her answer.

“We have now,” Clove said.

Still, Isolde’s eyes were on me. But I didn’t meet them. There was a threshold being crossed here and I wasn’t sure I knew where it would take me. I wasn’t sure I even wanted to know.

Daya reappeared with a fresh teacup and saucer, letting her eyes slide from me to Clove as she set it down before Isolde. Unlike Emilia, Daya knew how to hold her tongue. But that one look held everything she wasn’t saying—that seeing the two of us sharing a table with a face she’d never seen before was more than a little strange.

Clove slid the teapot toward Isolde as Daya shuffled away.

“Is that it?” Isolde said, eyeing the rolled parchment on the table beside him.

“That’s it,” he echoed.

Isolde poured the tea, but she didn’t touch it. “Congratulations.” The word was small. There had been a shift in her, and not just in the way she’d looked when she walked through the door. The undertow of anger she always carried was missing now, replaced by something else I couldn’t put my finger on.

Clove tapped her with his elbow. “Don’t know how I feel about having a Saltblood on the crew though.”

She almost smiled then. Almost. I was beginning to be able to predict that look before it hit her face. I was beginning to get used to the feeling I had when I saw it.

“Figured I’d trade one rotten bastard for two,” she quipped, finally picking up her tea.

She held the cup like one of *them*, but that edge in her voice was Narrows through and through. I wondered, for the first time, if she’d simply been born on the wrong shore.

“May I?” She set a finger on the wrapped triangular parcel that sat beside my plate. The sail that Irva had given me with the license.

I nodded.

Clove draped one arm over the back of the booth so he could see over her shoulder. She tore one corner of the paper before peeling it down and the crisp white canvas almost glowed in the dim light. I watched as she carefully unwrapped it, letting the fabric fall open in her lap until she could see the entire crest. A wave curling over a triangular sail.

The tip of her finger traced it, her brow pulling. “It looks like—” Her words stopped, then started again. “It looks like it’s sinking.”

“It is,” I said.

Clove didn’t look at me, but I could see his posture change. I hadn’t shown it to him after I had the smith render it, but it was the crest I’d submitted to the Council with our petition. And it held a meaning that only he and I knew.

“Isn’t it bad luck?” Isolde asked.

I shook my head once. “We’re not unlucky bastards.”

“Not anymore,” Clove murmured, making Isolde turn her head to look at him. But he smoothed it over, a gruff smile tilting his head to one side. “The sun’s down.” His eyes darted to the window. “Time to switch to rye.”

“Since when do you need the sun to go down to drink rye?” I asked.

Clove got to his feet. “True.”

Isolde stared at the crest for another moment before she refolded the sail and wrapped it, tucking it into the seat beside her.

“Griff!” Clove made his way to the bar.

“Your tea’s gone cold,” Isolde said, crossing her arms on the table.

I stared down into the cup. The grounds had pooled in the bottom, making it look black as tar. But I didn’t know what her observation meant. A way to ask me if there was something wrong, maybe. It was the same question I wanted to ask her. But I wouldn’t.

“So, you changed your mind.” I chanced a glance in her direction, but my gaze only made it as high as her shoulder.

Her spine straightened, her chin dipping down as she looked over the table. “If I’m going to join a crew, better one that isn’t trying to sell me to a gem merchant.”

“Zola knows what you are. That problem isn’t going to go away.”

“Then the better question might be why you decided to take me on. And don’t give me the answer you gave me on the *Riven*. Giving safe harbor to a runaway gem sage isn’t exactly the smartest way to launch a trade route.”

The reason was one I hadn’t been completely able to work out myself. Clove was right that keeping her out of Zola’s hands would only help us, and it was also true that we needed a dredger on the crew. But I wasn’t foolish enough to lie to myself about the fact that I didn’t *want* her to go.

Before I could answer, the door to the street was flung open, followed by a sudden hush that rippled over the room, and we both turned.

A flicker of brilliant green moved through the crowd. The shining buttons that adorned the jackets were draped over the shoulders of two men who couldn’t look more out of place. Saltblood traders.

They didn’t usually venture this far into Ceros. Not even for rye. There were taverns closer to the harbor for that. These bastards were asking for a fight just by walking through that door.

The uncomfortable silence waned as they made their way to the bar, where Griff was handing over three rye glasses to Clove. The men searched the faces around them, scanning the crowd like they were looking for something, and Clove’s blue eyes sharpened in the firelight as he watched them from the corner of his gaze. I didn’t like the smirk at the corner of his mouth.

Across the table, Isolde sank lower in the booth, pulling her hair to one side and tucking it into her jacket. The pupils in her gray eyes widened, making her irises almost disappear as her gaze followed the men. She was biting down on her bottom lip hard enough to draw blood.

“Whatever this is,” I said, keeping my voice low as I tipped a chin toward the traders, “I need to know about it.”

I waited for her to nod before I stood, giving my back to the tavern so that she was out of their line of sight, and I reached into my pocket for the key to our room.

“Upstairs. Third door on the left.”

She slid out of the booth silently, taking the key, but her fingers closed over mine for just a moment before she slipped through the tables by the fire. A few seconds later, she was disappearing up the steps to the room.

At the bar, the two men were too busy talking to Griff to notice, but from behind them, Clove's eyes met mine. He picked up the bottle of rye Griff had set down, that coy grin making the angle of his jaw sharpen.

I exhaled, shaking my head once. *Don't*. I mouthed the word.

But I could see the moment I said it that it was already too late.

Clove took a step forward, dipping to one side to catch the shoulder of the first man, knocking into him.

"Shit," I muttered, already walking.

Clove rocked back, as if he'd lost his balance, lifting the hand that held the open bottle of rye between them. "Pardon me." He brushed the embroidered fabric of the man's sleeve with the back of his hand, rye sloshing everywhere.

"What the—" The man's hands flew up between them, taking Clove by the shirt.

"Apologies!" Clove's voice rang out, getting the attention of everyone in the room. "Apologies, sir. Please, let me help you." He dropped the green glasses and they shattered at his feet as he reached between them, pouring half the bottle of rye into the man's collar in the process.

"A shame." He could barely keep from laughing. "It's such a fine jacket."

Any attempt at pretense was gone now and the man's face lit red, his nostrils flaring.

I shoved a chair aside, picking up my pace.

Three steps. Two.

The man's fist reared back, his other hand pinning Clove in place, and the fist came down hard across Clove's cheek. A spray of blood splattered the smooth wall beside him as the room erupted in shouting. But when Clove's face lifted to the light again, his eyes were clear, a smile breaking over his lips.

I reached them as the man raised his fist again, taking him by the jacket and wrenching him backward. "He's drunk," I lied. "Leave it."

But the trader wasn't buying it. Anyone looking at Clove knew exactly what had happened. And there wasn't a soul in the tavern who wasn't amused.

The man drew a gold-hilted knife from his belt, raising it between us, and by the time I saw it, Clove was already barreling forward again. The other man plowed toward us and my back hit the wall hard as I launched out of reach of the blade.

The tavern's patrons were all on their feet now, climbing onto chairs and into booths to watch the fight, and the man looked back long enough for me to take hold of his throat, driving him toward the counter. Behind me, Clove was swinging at the man's crewmate, catching him in the gut with a fist.

By the time I saw the lantern light glinting on the trader's blade from the corner of my eye, it was too late. I let my weight fall back into him as I turned, hoping the knife would catch my side instead of finding its way between my ribs to my lung. But just when I expected to feel the landing of the blow, the man's knees buckled, his face going slack before he fell to the ground.

Behind him, Nash stood with the broken bottle of rye he'd just hit the man with clutched in his

hand. His eyes were wide, as if he were just as surprised at what he'd done as I was. But the look of shock turned into one of glee as he looked up at me, panting.

"Thanks." I exhaled.

The bottle slipped from Nash's fingers. "You're welcome," he answered between gulps of air.

I took the trader by the collar and I hadn't made it more than a foot from the bar before the other man was being hauled to the door by several sets of hands. I followed them, towing the bastard behind me. I could taste blood in my mouth and smell it in the air. A streak of it was smeared across the floor, beneath my boots.

I dragged him with both hands over it until we were outside, and then I dropped him on the wet cobblestones. When I looked up, Clove was beside me.

"Get on before these fools decide to have fun with you." Griff's voice was at my back. "These boys got a crest today. Don't think the Trade Council will take it lightly if they show up dead the next morning."

Through the doors, the whole of the tavern was still watching.

The traders looked to one another in a silent exchange before the man at my feet stood. He looked me square in the eye before he spit on the ground. Now I was the one smiling, my heart still racing in my chest in a way that made the blood rush through my veins. I couldn't pretend I didn't like it as much as Clove did. The difference now was that we had the protection of the Trade Council between us and Saltbloods.

They disappeared around the corner and I gazed up at the window of our room that looked out over the street. A hand clutched the curtain, but Isolde was draped in the dark.

"Come on." Griff stepped aside, waiting for us to go in before he followed and closed the doors.

The crowd in the tavern parted, making way for us, and Griff appeared at the counter uncorking that bottle of rye he'd had waiting. Daya brushed off the shoulders of Nash's jacket as he sat before signaling to the two men on the stools beside him to move. They obeyed, picking up their glasses and pressing against the wall.

"Today has just been full of surprises," Clove said, giving Nash an appraising look.

The apprentice blinked a few times, looking a little shaken. "Can't exactly get home if you two end up gutted in an alley somewhere."

Clove's eyebrows raised. "Didn't know you had it in you. Hard to believe you've ever gotten blood on that pretty jacket of yours."

"First time for everything."

Griff surveyed the three of us as I wiped the blood from my lip, both hands perched on the bar in front of him. He shook his head in silence as he reached for the stack of green glasses, plucking three from the top.

The tavern went back to its business, conversations picking up where they left off, pitchers of ale being poured. Griff filled the glasses with rye before securing the cork and moving to the next person standing at the counter. No one even bothered to wipe the blood from the floor.

Nash returned to his table in front of the fire after one drink and I set the gold-hilted knife in front of me, picking up my own glass. "You're a stupid bastard," I said, shooting Clove a look before I took it in one swallow.

He shrugged. His arm was bleeding through his shirt where the tip of a knife blade had grazed his skin. He reached into his pocket, pulling a fist of gold chain and two brass buttons free. All items he'd had the wherewithal to pickpocket in the fight. He dropped them beside the knife.

"They started it."

"Pretty sure you did."

Clove tipped his head back, pouring the rye into his mouth and then victoriously slamming the glass down. "No." He exhaled. "It started the first time those bastards dropped anchor in our waters." He lifted his glass to mine, clinking the rims. "And we, my friend, are going to finish it."

ISOLDE

It took only minutes for the commotion down in the tavern to return to a calm hum after the traders were hauled out. It was a sight that would have made the hair stand up on the back of my mother's neck, a bunch of Narrows-born urchins throwing traders from the Unnamed Sea out into the muddy street like the contents of a slop bucket.

It was what she'd feared. What the guilds and the entire Trade Council in Bastian had feared. That one day, the Narrows would stand on its own. And when that day came, there would be a war for the waters that had once been ripe for the taking.

Saint was right in his suspicion that things were changing. But which direction the wind would blow remained to be seen. I'd never felt truly beaten by my mother until that moment in the Gem Guild master's post when my eyes landed on that quill. I'd never felt the full weight of her power before. The only thing I could compare it to was that night of the storm on the *Riven*. How small I'd felt. How insignificant.

I knew firsthand what kind of power the coin of the Unnamed Sea produced. I suspected that the Narrows had only seen a glimpse of it. But when helmsmen started losing contracts to Narrows-born traders and had to break that news to the merchants in Bastian, there would be hell to pay. And behind every door there were traces of Holland. There always would be.

The room Saint had let from the barkeeper wasn't unlike his cabin on the *Riven*. It was plain, with no embellishments to be seen. Two small cots were draped with mismatched quilts and what looked to be another makeshift bed on the floor was wedged against one wall.

Hanging over one of the cot posts was the map case from the *Riven*, its cap still tightly in place. The only thing in Saint's quarters that he hadn't been willing to let go down with the ship. The only thing he took when he left it at port. That single map held a vision for the Narrows that was real. Heart-achingly real. He could see it—bustling ports and thriving merchant's houses. Trading ships with cargo holds filled to the brim and guilds that had something to negotiate with.

I'd thought when I left Bastian with the midnight that I had leverage against my mother that no one else had. But I'd been wrong. Her influence didn't just reside in her gem trade or the single piece of midnight I'd put into her hands. It was in her dream of conquering the shores beyond her own. Her teeth-bared hunger for control. All my life I'd seen the ill-fortuned adversaries that rose against her, the schemes and plotting in hopes of taking her down. But she'd never met her match. Not like she would when the dream Saint had encased in the ink of that map came to life.

And it would. I'd see to that myself.

This myth-born trader from nowhere was an enemy she didn't even know existed. And he probably could not care less about Holland, the great gem merchant of the Unnamed Sea. He wasn't trying to take anything from anyone or play tricks. He was just trying to make something he could keep.

I let my eyes raise to the small mirror that hung on the wall over the wash bowl. It reflected my shape back at me, the details of my face appearing as I stepped into the moonlight coming from the window. I slid the knife from my belt slowly, winding my braid around my knuckles until it was pulled tight in my fist.

There was no beating Holland with a single trade. No making her pay for what she'd done. Not when she owned every chest of coin from Ceros to Bastian. But I realized in that moment that fate had landed me on the ship of the one person who just might be able to make my mother's worst nightmares come true.

I pressed the edge of the knife to my braid and met my own eyes as I began to saw back and forth. There was an emptiness there in my expression that I wasn't used to seeing. A void of some kind. But instead of scaring me, I thought for the first time that maybe I could fill that space with whatever I wanted to.

The blade made it through my braid and I stood there, hands heavy at my sides. My hair fell at an angle, its ends hitting my jaw on one side of my face and almost touching my shoulder on the other. Holland would say that I looked like an urchin. The thought made me smile.

The door opened behind me and I went rigid when I saw Saint's reflection in the mirror. The light from the hall was a warm honey hue compared to the moonlight. His gaze fell from mine in the mirror to my hands that still clutched the severed braid and the knife before he stepped inside.

The room felt even smaller with him in it. His jacket was in his hand, his hair swept to one side as if he'd run a hand through it as he came up the stairs from the tavern. But his eyes were still that icy blue that glinted in the darkness.

He shut the door, tossing the jacket onto one of the cots as I slid my knife back into my belt. The braid I set onto the small table that held the wash bowl.

Saint crossed the room with patient steps, stopping on the other side of the mirror and leaning one shoulder against the wall. I could feel his gaze moving from my hair to my belt, where the knife was back in its sheath. I could feel it everywhere.

"Who's looking for you?"

I considered lying. Spinning a different truth than the one that existed. But if Saint was willing to take on Zola for me, I couldn't see him flinching at the thought of a runaway merchant's daughter.

"My mother," I said.

He waited for me to continue, that pensive look on his face unwavering.

"She's a gem merchant. A powerful one."

"Who?"

Again, I weighed the cost of a lie. "Holland."

He didn't like that answer. The set of his mouth flattened, but his eyes didn't leave me. "Why are you running from her?"

I bit down on my bottom lip, remembering the way my blood had run cold in the candlelight that filled my mother's study. The way my father's portrait looked down at me. "Because she killed my

father.”

That was mostly true. It was the thing that had made me open that case and take the midnight. The thing that had made me go to Simon. But the stone in my pocket, I wasn't ready to talk about that.

Saint's arms crossed over his chest, his brow wrinkling. As if he were trying to work something out.

“She'll have people looking for me,” I said. “And she won't let it go.”

“Does Zola know?”

I shook my head.

Eventually, she'd find out which ship I'd left on. I had no doubt about that. And that meant Zola was walking a narrow road that led to one place—Holland's retribution.

For a moment, the possibility that Saint and Clove could end up her enemy, too, crossed my mind. The thought made gooseflesh rise on my arms.

“What about you?” I let my eyes drop to his scarred hand, hoping he'd trade one question for another. “What are you running from?”

He untucked the hand from beneath his elbow and turned it over, as if inspecting it. It was a long moment before he finally spoke.

“I was twelve years old. So was Clove.” His eyes lifted, finding me in the dark.

I didn't know until he started talking that I hadn't actually expected him to answer. I went still, half afraid he'd fall quiet if I made the slightest move.

“We were going out on the boat to fish with our fathers and their crew and I was the first to the dock that morning. It was only that year they'd let us start coming along with them, and only because they wanted us to learn how to crew. Not on fishing boats. Our fathers wanted us sailing under real trader's crests one day.” He paused, trying to find the words. “There were rules. Ones my grandfather and his grandfather before him followed. There was an order to things. A balance between us and the sea. But I'd never believed in them. Not really.”

The adder stones that hung in the window of the *Riven* flashed in my mind, followed by the bloodied knife as Saint pulled it through his fist. The drops of blood dripping into the water.

“My father had sent me early to start on the nets because we were fishing a remote reef Clove and I had never been to before. I got to the boat and I saw it right away. A lark. Lying dead on deck. It was right in front of the helm, a sign that we weren't to go out on the water.” His voice deepened. “If anyone else on the ship had seen it that morning, we would have never raised anchor. But they didn't.”

I suddenly knew what he was going to say before he said it, and a sick feeling twisted in my gut.

“I thought the superstition was just that—a superstition. That it meant nothing. I wanted to go out, so before anyone saw it, I picked it up and threw it into the water. I didn't think twice. And a few hours later, this storm ... it came out of nowhere. Like it had just risen up from the water instead of falling from the sky. And I knew. I knew exactly what was about to happen.” Another pause. “Clove's father locked us in the cargo hold and it went on for hours. We could hear them screaming. Running across the deck. Eventually, the ship rolled. I don't know many times. But when it was finally over, we came up onto the deck and they were gone. All of them.”

A tear rolled down my cheek, but I didn't blink. His eyes were still locked on mine, and I didn't

want to take that anchor from him. I couldn't tell what he was feeling. He could have told the story a million times, but I had a feeling maybe it had never been spoken aloud. Not like that.

"It took me a few days, but I told Clove the truth. The families of the crew too. The village never forgave me. They turned me out, cut me off. Everyone except for Clove."

It explained a lot. Why Saint and Clove weren't like other crews. Why it was so important to Saint to get that license.

"And now you follow the rules," I said. "That's why you sail in the storms."

He nodded. "I've given my life to the sea. She will never betray me."

He believed it. Completely. I could see that.

"We had a plan: Come to Ceros. Find a ship. Get a trade license." He fell silent, making the emptiness of the room grow heavy.

I knew what he was getting at—*me*. I wasn't a part of that plan.

"If you don't want to take me on, I understand. I can find another crew."

"I do," he answered, more quickly than I'd expected. "*We* do."

I wasn't sure if he amended the statement out of respect for Clove or out of his own survival instinct. There was no denying there was a pull in the air between us, and he wasn't particularly good at hiding it.

I took a step closer to him, studying his face, and his eyes ran over me, wide and open.

"I'm used to being used, Saint." My voice was frailer than I meant it to be. "But I haven't figured out what exactly you want from me."

"Neither have I," he said lowly.

The words caught me so off guard that I almost felt unsteady on my feet, wishing I hadn't closed the space he'd put between us. I felt suddenly like I might cry. From the words or from exhaustion, I wasn't sure. I didn't care. It just felt so good to be told the truth. It felt like the sun after an eternity of night.

He was still looking right at me. Like he was waiting to see what I'd do. "What is this feeling I have?" He spoke again before I could make up my mind. "This thing that makes me not want you to leave?"

I shook my head. "I don't know."

It was an honest answer. I had no idea why he felt like a breath I'd forgotten to take. Like a weight on my chest I couldn't move.

"Just ... don't," he said.

"Don't what?"

"Leave."

I didn't know what to make of this version of Saint. The one who was asking me not to go instead of dancing around it like he wasn't sure what he wanted. The one who didn't seem to care if he was showing me every crack in his armor.

His hand lifted from his arm, moving toward me in the dark, and I willed myself to stay still. My heart raced as I waited for his touch to find my face, his thumb tracing over my bottom lip before he tipped my chin up toward him. His fingertips pressed into the soft skin below my jaw where my pulse was racing, and the silence in the room was broken by the sound of my breath.

But Saint looked calm, at ease in the shadows, and not the least bit unnerved by the fact that he was touching me. Again. That at any moment, he was going to kiss me. Like he'd just made up his mind and that was it. That was all there was.

It was so dark that I almost couldn't tell how close he was until his lips touched mine, and the flood of waiting for it filled every inch of me with a buzzing heat. He opened his mouth, his breath featherlight on my skin, and his hand slid to the back of my neck, leaving a searing burn on my cheek.

He kissed me carefully, like he was being sure to remember the way it felt. And when I deepened the kiss, he followed, pressing his body against mine.

Something shifted into place inside of me. Some off-kilter piece of my soul that had fractured that day in Bastian. I didn't know what we were doing. Where it could possibly lead. But this—he and I—we fit, somehow.

Footsteps on the stairs made him pull away from me, and his fingers slipped from my hair, leaving me breathing so hard that my head was light with it. When the door opened, Saint was already across the room, and Nash appeared with Daya on his heels. She had one hand to his back, like she was guiding him through the doorway.

“Can't hold his rye, that's for sure,” she quipped, not even looking up as she set down a stack of folded linens on one of the cots. “Figured you'd need a fresh bed.” She finally shot me a glance, wiping her hands on her apron. “Need anything else?” The question was meant for Saint.

“No,” he answered.

Nash shuffled to the pile of quilts on the floor, collapsing before he'd even taken off his boots. He rolled over, facing the wall as Daya left, and Clove appeared, pulling the shirt over his head as the door closed. The arm of the light cloth was soaked with blood, but Clove didn't look the least bit concerned about the stripe of open flesh beneath his shoulder.

The three of us moved around one another in the dark and the sound of boots hitting the floor and belts being hung was the only backdrop to the image still whirling in my mind. The way Saint had looked at me. The way he'd kissed me. Like he was sure about it.

Clove climbed into his cot and when I picked up the linens Daya had left to make up another bed, Saint took them from my hands without a word. He said nothing as he unrolled them on the ground and lay down.

I stood there, looking around the dark room for a moment before I climbed onto the cot, tucking myself into the quilts. I closed my eyes before I drew the air into my lungs, knowing what scent I'd find there. Deep ocean. *Saint*.

My fingers found my lips, the soft warmth of his mouth still there.

I didn't know what exactly I'd gotten myself into by walking through the door of that tavern. But something about it felt like I'd been waiting for it my entire life. Like every path I could have taken from my mother's study that night led to one place—right here.

ISOLDE

“Hold still,” Saint snapped, pinching the bloody needle between his fingers.

The wound on Clove’s arm was deep enough to warrant stitches, but he couldn’t have looked less concerned.

The tavern was empty again, except for the barkeeper and Daya, whom I’d worked out to be Griff’s wife. She’d been kind enough to fetch me some clothes that didn’t give away where I was from, and she’d also been the one to insist that Clove’s cut needed tending to. But Clove wouldn’t let her touch him. Saint was the only one he’d let come near the wound.

She reappeared with a porcelain bowl of warm water and Saint pressed the tip of the needle through the end of the cut, biting the thread before he tied it off. The skin was already red and inflamed, but it didn’t look like the blade had reached the bone.

I wondered just how many times he and Clove had stitched each other up. The history between them went back farther and deeper than I could have guessed, and it carried a heaviness that bore more than childhood memories. They were connected in places the eye couldn’t see.

I hadn’t slept more than an hour or two through the night, lying awake in the dark and replaying that moment in my head over and over again. Saint’s hand dragging through my hair. The brush of his lips across mine. Those words he’d spoken—*what is this?*

I still didn’t have an answer.

“If your fathers could see you,” Griff grunted, dragging the damp rag down the counter as Saint washed Clove’s blood from his hands.

Daya tried her best to frown at him, but there was a smile buried beneath it. “They’d be damn proud,” she said.

Griff nodded in agreement, as if that was exactly what he was thinking.

“They won’t let it go, you know,” I said, handing Clove the clean cloth. “Those traders have something to prove now that the Trade Council here is granting licenses.”

What I didn’t tell them was that I recognized those traders. That they were the same ones who’d chased after me in the market. And more than likely, they’d been there last night looking for me.

Clove pressed the cloth to his arm, wincing. His face was busted, a cut lip and a bruise forming along his cheek. But it could have been worse. He could have ended up with that knife in his belly.

Daya set one hand on her hip. “Breakfast before you go?”

“Just tea,” Saint answered.

“All right.” She sighed disapprovingly before trailing back into the kitchen.

Saint took the seat beside mine, not quite as careful to keep the space between us as he'd been before. He didn't have the rigid apprehension I'd expected from him this morning, the hesitancy of someone who regretted their actions. Maybe because I'd said I was staying. Or maybe because he'd put words to the thing that had been unspoken, like letting a wild animal loose from its cage. There was no point in pretending we could put it back.

Clove and Saint had spent the early hours hashing out what came next: sailing to Dern, settling debts, signing contracts. In three weeks' time, we'd be back in Ceros with the *Aster*; and that was when the real trade would begin. But there was still the matter of Henrik's missing coin.

The door to the street scraped over the uneven floor and Griff called out from the kitchen. "Only open to inn guests! Tavern doesn't open for a few hours."

"Then I'll take a room."

I froze when I heard the familiar voice creeping up my spine all the way from across the room.

Zola.

The door fell closed, cutting out the sound of the street, and I turned on the stool to see him. His tall, lean frame was swallowed by his long black coat and its hem swayed over the floor as he walked toward us. Not with the heavy steps of an angry man, like I might have expected. In fact, he looked like he was at ease.

Saint stood, dropping the rag on the counter and taking a purposeful step to place himself in front of me. He said nothing, but the silence that fell in the tavern spoke for itself. This wasn't the polite call of a friendly rival.

Behind me, my fingertips were already finding the knife in my belt and Clove abandoned the wound, letting the sleeve of his shirt fall back down as he rose from the stool.

I watched over Saint's shoulder as Zola lazily wove through the tables. There was nothing menacing in the look of him, no hint of outrage at seeing me. As if he'd found exactly what he'd come looking for. And there was no sign of Burke, the navigator who never left his side. I wondered if it was possible that Zola had come alone. It didn't seem likely.

"You look surprised to see me." Zola stopped a few paces away, but he wasn't talking to me. He was looking at Saint. "Came in before first light and saw the *Riven* anchored. Thought I'd come find you so we could celebrate."

Clove took a slow, threatening step in his direction, but Zola ignored him. He pulled a rolled parchment tied with a red satin ribbon from his jacket. The same one that Saint had been given from the Trade Council.

"I admit I was a little miffed when I heard you'd received your summons a day before me."

The knife was at my side now, clutched in my fist.

"Also heard that the *Riven* had shown up at port with a new dredger." He shot me a look.

Saint said nothing, but I could imagine his mind was racing with the prospect of someone talking. Not Emilia, surely. So, who?

"Nothing loosens a tongue like a knife through the hand." Zola grinned.

Lander, I realized. The merchant who'd tried to cheat Saint was taking revenge the only way he knew how. The only way he could.

Zola's attention went to Griff, who still stood nervously behind the bar. "Come on, Griff. Not even

going to offer me a cup of tea?"

Saint jerked his chin toward the kitchen door, where Daya was watching us through the small window, signaling that it was time for Griff to leave. He disappeared through it a moment later without protest and didn't return.

"Seems I've misplaced some of my inventory," Zola continued. "Just before you left Dern, which one might call quite a coincidence."

"Lot of that goin' around." Clove leveled his gaze at him.

Zola smirked. He wasn't even going to pretend to deny stealing the gems off the *Riven*. "I suppose that can happen when things are off the books."

"What do you want, Zola?" Saint finally spoke, that deep, smooth calm lacing his voice.

Zola pulled out the chair at the table beside him and sat with his feet flat on the ground, his knees wide. He tapped the license against his knee. "I'd like you to return my dredger," he said.

"Go ahead and ask her. If she wants to go back to the *Luna*, there's nothing stopping her." Still, Saint didn't move from his spot in front of me.

"I'm afraid it's not that simple." He pulled another parchment from his jacket. This one was folded into a small rectangle and when I saw the blot of ink at one corner, I swallowed hard.

A lopsided grin surfaced on Zola's lips. He opened it, holding it in the air. "We have a contract."

Saint's body stilled in front of me, his shoulders drawing down his back as Clove took the three steps to Zola and snatched the document from his fingers. His eyes skipped over the words written on the parchment before they raised to me. That one look made the last bit of warmth drain from my body.

"It's true," Zola said.

Clove didn't contradict him.

"It's not valid." I stepped forward, taking the contract from Clove and tossing it onto the table.

"It became valid the moment I was given that license. Now every contract I have is governed by the Trade Council and its laws."

I waited for Saint to correct him, but he said nothing. The muscle in his jaw clenched as he watched Zola from the top of his gaze.

"She's either crew or she's inventory. Which is it?" Clove asked.

"Both. For the sake of my coffers, she's inventory. For the sake of the Trade Council's eyes, she's crew."

The contract had just been a way for him to cover his bases, but it was also the thing that would chain me to his ship. If anyone suspected what he was up to, he had a crew's contract to prove I was just a dredger. But when he delivered me to Oliver Durant, he'd need the courier's agreement from Simon in order to get paid. There was no telling how many gem sages Simon had sold that way.

"The name on that contract is Eryss, and she doesn't even exist," I said.

"And would you like to explain that to the Council, or should I?"

Slowly, his point began sinking in, making sense where it hadn't before.

"More than one member of my crew will tell them they know you as Eryss. You can prove them wrong, if you'd like, but the next question they will ask is who you really are."

Somehow, Zola had finally worked it out for himself.

“I put two and two together when the traders in the harbor started asking around for Holland’s runaway daughter. I never would have let you on my ship if I’d known I was crossing the single most dangerous merchant in the Unnamed Sea.”

I stared at him.

“You’ve gotten me into quite a mess, Isolde. The least you could do is ensure I get the coin I’m supposed to trade you for.”

I could see the smooth exterior of Saint’s face cracking slowly. He hadn’t expected this. Of course he hadn’t.

“She’s a thief, you know,” Zola continued.

Saint gritted his teeth. “She can’t steal what doesn’t belong to you. Those gems were mine.”

“I’m not talking about the red beryls, Saint.” His eyes darted to me. “Don’t tell me you haven’t told him.”

Gooseflesh woke on my skin again, making me shiver. He knew about the midnight too. Somehow, he knew.

“She’s a problem you don’t need to have. Trust me.” Zola sighed. “Hand her back over to me and we’ll pretend this never—”

“No,” Saint said, not even a beat of hesitation before he cut Zola off.

The sound of him saying it took the breath from my lungs, and it was only then I could admit that I’d been afraid he would agree. That he’d cut his losses as soon as he realized I hadn’t been completely honest with him.

“Do you have any idea what she’s cost me?” Zola’s voice grated.

“I don’t care.” Saint snatched his jacket from the back of the chair, pulling it on. “There’s nothing you can do. You’re bound by the same laws that I am now. You lift a hand against me, and the Trade Council will feed that license to the flames.”

The way Zola’s eyes narrowed told me he knew Saint was right. He couldn’t just take me. Not without the Trade Council getting involved.

“You’re making a mistake,” Zola warned. “I’ll have this reported in a matter of hours. And then the Council will be hauling you in for poaching a contracted dredger from my crew.”

“We’ll see.”

Zola sat there motionless for the length of a breath before he stood, his hand curling tightly around the parchment. “You’re making trouble for both of us now.”

“Maybe.”

Zola got to his feet, the bloom of red creeping up from the collar of his jacket. He was angry. Furious.

“That’s not all I heard in Sowan.” He took his time with the words. “I know about that pretty crofter and her daughter. The one who’s selling you the rye. And I know about that ship you’ve got sitting in a pier in Dern.”

The collected demeanor Saint had managed to maintain was gone in an instant. Rage was now rolling off of him in thick waves. It filled the room, palpable in the air. This was getting out of hand. Fast.

“Look—” I said, stepping out from behind Saint.

“Don’t ... say ... a word.” Saint’s deep voice made me swallow. He didn’t look at me. I wasn’t sure he ever would again. “You’re not going anywhere near that croft.” He turned his attention back to Zola.

“I’m not?”

“No,” Clove answered. “Because if you do, we won’t just cut your throat and dump you somewhere you won’t wash up on shore. We’ll sail that ship of yours out into the deepest waters with you and your crew on it.” He took another step forward. “And we’ll set fire to it before we watch from the *Aster* as each of you chooses which way to die.”

A sick feeling bled through me looking between Clove and Saint. They meant it. Every word.

Zola’s eyes found me again. “I think you got a little more than you bargained for, didn’t you, darling?” He stood, coat swaying around him again.

When I didn’t answer, he gave Saint another smile and turned on his heel, pacing back through the tavern. In the next moment, he was gone.

Saint and Clove stood silent, the sound of water dripping somewhere in the tavern the only sound.

“Get that idiot up,” Saint grunted, jerking a chin toward the stairs that led to the room where Nash was still sleeping. “And tell Griff nothing. Better to keep him out of it. We’ll meet you there.”

“Where?” I asked, looking between them.

“You’re not really in a position to be asking questions.” The cold tenor of Saint’s tone made me go rigid. He buttoned up his jacket, staring at the floor between us. “Go.”

I obeyed, walking straight for the door and thinking that any minute, Zola would appear on the other side with his knife drawn. But Saint was right. He couldn’t touch us. Not yet.

As soon as I stepped onto the street, the door shut behind us and I sucked in a breath. “Saint...”

“*Don’t.*” The word was so heavy, so final, that it felt like a stone in my chest.

He started up the walk without another word and I followed, staring at the seam of his jacket that ran down the center of his back. His broad shoulders pulled beneath the fabric, rising with each deep breath, as we snaked through the crowds in the opposite direction of the harbor.

We didn’t take the bridges. Too easy to be spotted, I guessed. Instead, we zigzagged through the streets until I was so dizzy that nausea roiled in my belly. The alleyways grew narrower with each step until we were dumped into a pocket of buildings crammed so tightly together that the sunlight barely hit the ground beneath our feet.

Faces peered out from dark windows, the stench of rot and refuse thick in the air.

“What is this place?” I whispered, catching a pair of eyes in a darkened window.

He kept walking, not bothering to be sure I kept pace with him.

“Elias,” I said, using the name he’d given me in Dern. The one he was born with.

His steps faltered just slightly, slowing. “Somewhere no one comes looking,” he answered. “The Pinch.”

SAINT

Daylight was the only reason we were still breathing.

The rain began to fall as the Pinch swallowed us up into its belly and we pushed farther into the tangle of winding veins that made up its suffocating corridors. There were more people living in this pocket of a neighborhood than the whole of North Fyg, each building stacked with flats that held several families whose mothers or fathers worked at the docks or out at sea. It was children, mostly. And they were the most loyal creatures in any village or city.

If Zola had come to the tavern earlier, before the sun rose, I wasn't sure that the threat of the Trade Council's retribution would have kept him from drawing blood. But in the daylight, there were eyes to see your sins. He knew that. And only hours after getting his trade license, he wasn't going to risk it.

The feel of Isolde at my back was like a looming shadow as we walked. I didn't speak because I wasn't sure I had anything to say. Not yet. She'd had the chance to tell me the truth. I'd given her my trust, even if she'd done little to earn it. And as we made the last turn into the dead end of a circular opening of cobblestone, I knew I'd made a huge mistake. The question was, what was I going to do about it?

A blue-painted door was set into the white sandstone, barely hanging on its hinges. There was no need to lock it, other than the fact that a locked door in the Pinch was the only sign that a place had been claimed.

I could feel the eyes of the Pinch watching as I pulled the key from my pocket.

"Saint." Isolde's voice was careful.

"Not here," I said, glancing up to the windows over our heads.

I trusted the kids in the Pinch to keep an eye on this door. But I didn't need them listening.

She fell quiet as I fit the key into the lock and let the door swing open before us. The bare flat was dark, the storm clouds rolling in over the city and snuffing out the sunlight. The sound of the rain dripping came down the stairs from the broken windows on the second floor.

I waited for her to step inside before I followed, locking the door behind us.

The flat was part of a trade we'd made when we first left Cragsmouth, and one day it would serve as the post for our trading outfit, away from the prying eyes of the merchants and the Saltbloods. No one came to the Pinch unless they had to, and the copper we pressed into palms on these streets ensured that anyone who did come looking wouldn't find this place.

I opened my jacket, letting the air cool my damp skin. It wasn't just the humid rain making me sweat. It was Isolde. That softness that had been there between us that morning was gone now, making

me feel like there was a rope tightening around my chest. I'd been the worst kind of fool. And now I was going to pay for it.

I sat on the ledge of the window, crossing one foot over the other before I finally let my eyes land on her. The night before, I hadn't been able to stop myself from touching her, but now I was afraid to even think it.

She stood across the dusty room with her hands tucked into the pockets of her jacket, her newly cut hair falling in a diagonal line around her face. In the shadows it almost looked like the deepest shade of brown, but when the light touched it, it glowed like garnet.

"You need to start talking," I said coldly. "Now."

"I should have told you," she said, the words stumbling into one another. "I know I should have told you."

"Yes, you should have." My words grated, but they didn't sound nearly as angry as I felt. I was even more furious with myself than I was with her. "I wouldn't have let you on the *Riven* if I'd known you had a contract."

"Is that true?" she asked.

I let out a long breath, pinching the bridge of my nose. There was a headache gathering between my eyes. "I don't know," I admitted. "I hope so."

If this was as simple as a crew contract, there would be no question. No hesitation. The laws that governed the Trade Council were clear, and anyone who wanted to keep their license would obey them. But this girl was anything but simple. She was a gem sage. The daughter of a powerful merchant. And she'd given Zola the one thing that ensured he could control her.

"Zola wasn't bluffing. He'll report the broken contract to the Trade Council because he knows you won't tell them who you really are. And no matter where we make port next, there will be a summons waiting."

"So what are we going to do? Just hide here?"

"You have a better idea?" I snapped. "They can't deliver a summons to us if they don't know where we are. Leaving port will only mean we're stranded out there on the water."

She pushed the wet hair back from her face, pressing her palms to her reddened cheeks.

"As soon as I show my face, that summons will find me. And when I go to the Trade Council, they'll demand consequences for poaching you from Zola. Everything I've done, everything I've worked for"—my voice rose—"will be for nothing."

"Then I'll go to them myself. Tell them what Zola was going to do. I'll tell them he's running gem sages and—"

"If you do that, you'll just put blood in the water. You think he's the only trader smuggling gem sages? You might as well go to the merchant's house and put yourself on an auction block."

"Either the Council upholds the law, or they don't. Which is it?"

I let out a heavy breath. "There's a difference between what happens in the Trade Council Chamber and what happens behind closed doors. Guild masters live by their own rules."

She threw her hands up. "What does that even mean? You just make them up as you go?"

You. That was what this was about. The Narrows. Us. The people who lived in this backwater.

I stood up off the window. "Don't do that. Don't act like where you come from is any better."

“I’m not.”

“The Unnamed Sea has its own poison. They’re the ones who made us into this.”

“Into what?”

I shook my head. “You don’t understand.”

“Then help me to!”

“You can’t!” I nearly laughed. “You’ll never understand how things work here because you’re not *one* of us! You’re one of them. All you know how to do is *take*.”

The words were like a blunt blade pressed to the skin. I wasn’t sure I even believed them. It was more that I didn’t want them to be true. I wanted her to prove me wrong. To tell me whatever she’d left out of the story last night in the tavern. But as we stood there staring at each other in the empty flat, no explanation left her lips. And I wasn’t going to ask her for it. Not again.

Isolde’s hands fell to her sides heavily. She went quiet, the fire going out of her eyes. “I know you didn’t ask for this when you agreed to help me leave Dern or when you offered me a place on this crew. I lied to protect myself and now you’re paying the price for that.”

I didn’t argue with her. “I’m not the only one who could pay,” I said, thinking of Emilia and Hazel. Of the promise I’d made that my trouble wouldn’t find her door. “If anything happens to them…” The darkness of the thought strangled my voice, swallowing my ability to say it out loud.

“What do you want me to do? I’ll do it.”

My jaw clenched painfully. “I want you to go back in time and not walk into the tavern that night.” That, I did mean. With every drop of blood in my veins.

The thrum of the rain was louder now, a distant flash of lightning illuminating her face as the set of her mouth slanted just slightly. Her gray eyes were like glass.

I’d been a ship with a steady course since I left Cragsmouth. I’d known exactly what lay ahead because I’d been willing to do anything to make it happen. But Isolde and whatever she was running from in Bastian was the first thing that had ever made me feel like it was slipping from my fingers. It didn’t matter if I had a trade license or a route or a map of the Narrows. What was the point of any of it if there was something that could take it all away from me?

I stood there, waiting for her to say something and also hoping she wouldn’t. I didn’t want the sound of her voice to conjure that thing in me that had been there in the dark the night before. I didn’t want any more reasons to talk myself out of leaving her there in the Pinch and setting sail for Dern, where the *Aster* waited.

I walked past her, to the stairs, and climbed them to the empty second floor, where the windows faced the only small bit of sea visible from this part of the city. I could barely see it now, cloaked in sheets of rain.

That horizon had once felt endless to me. Like a never-ending expanse of possibilities. But our world was shrinking: The Narrows. Our ship. Our crew. Our trade. It was never supposed to be anyone but me and Clove. There was no future outside of the one our fathers had dreamed for us.

Now, Isolde was like a pebble dropped in the shallows, changing the shape of everything on the surface. And the moment I’d kissed her had been a nail in that coffin.

ISOLDE

Nash wasn't happy about trading his cage on the *Riven* for one in the Pinch. He and Clove had arrived by afternoon and Saint's orders were to stay put. If Zola hadn't shown up that morning, we'd be on our way to Dern and Nash would be headed back to the shipwright, his sins absolved. But if Zola had gone to the Trade Council, Saint's enemies were multiplying by the minute.

Hiding out in the Pinch wasn't a solution. It just delayed the inevitable. A summons was coming, but it could only be answered once it was received. And no one was going to come looking in a place like this for a newly licensed helmsman.

The rain kept falling, filling the streets with little rivers that forked and came together in the cracks. Darkness fell before the sun had, the sky hidden away by the storm that descended on the city. A wedge of cheese and loaf of bread Daya had sent with Clove were torn into pieces on the small table, but not even Nash had touched it. No one had a stomach for food when we were waiting for an axe to fall.

Clove sat at the top of the staircase, his knife raking down the length of a piece of wood. The shavings were piled at his feet, his head tilted to one side as he focused. Saint hadn't come down since he'd told me that he wished he had never met me.

I climbed the stairs and sat down a few steps below Clove, pulling my knees up to my chest and hugging them to me. The map case was lying on the floor behind him, along with my dredging belt he'd brought from the tavern.

"Sure made a mess of things, dredger," Clove said, eyes still on his knife. But the words weren't cutting or accusatory. They even had a slight edge of amusement to them.

"I know," I said.

There wasn't much Clove seemed to take seriously, and I wondered if it was his nature or if he'd seen enough of the world to understand just how little control he had over any of it. It was a painful lesson I was beginning to learn.

I leaned forward until I could see through the open doorway behind him, where Saint stood at the window, arms crossed over his chest as he watched the rain. I wasn't sure if he'd even moved from that spot since he came up here.

"What's he doing?" I asked, keeping my voice low.

"He's thinking."

Clove's eyes met mine only for a moment, but they held his meaning. Saint wasn't just thinking. He was deciding. Deciding what to do with me.

“There’s not much to figure out. The Trade Council will require me to return to the *Luna* or they’ll take that license they gave you.”

“Yes, they will.”

I was glad Clove wasn’t pretending like there was an answer to this problem. That wouldn’t do anyone any good.

“So, what’s there to think about?”

“He doesn’t like other people making decisions for him. If I had to guess, he’s trying to work out how he can still set his own course instead of having it set for him.”

“Isn’t that what the Trade Council does?”

“I’m not talking about them.”

My eyes snapped up to meet his. “Me?”

“You,” he said. He dragged the knife down the wood once more before he abandoned it, setting his elbows on his knees. “There aren’t enough adder stones in the Narrows to ward off the kind of trouble you’ll bring us.”

“Not if I go back to the *Luna*.”

He shook his head. “It’s not the kind of trouble that can come and go, I’m afraid.” He smirked. “You’re crew.”

“I’m not crew.”

“You are. And not the kind that disappears at port or finishes out a contract before jumping ship. Somehow, I’m the only one who’s figured out that the moment we raised anchor in Dern a decision was being made. One we can’t go back on.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

Clove hesitated, studying me before he spoke again. “It’s not just the two of us anymore.” He was missing that bitter charm now. He was worried.

“My choices are my own. He’s not responsible for what happens to me. Neither are you.”

“Maybe. But Saint’s good at paying penance, taking the blame. That’s his way.”

I wished I didn’t understand what he meant by that.

Clove picked up the knife again, going back to the wood, and I realized that he wasn’t shaping it into anything. He was just keeping his hands busy. Passing the time as he waited for Saint to come away from that window.

I’d figured out pretty quickly that there was more to Saint than the stories about a boy from nowhere who seemed determined to die in a storm. He wasn’t the fearless helmsman the Narrows thought he was. In fact, I was sure now that it was fear that drove him into those black clouds.

My eyes fell to the map case on the floor, its worn, smooth leather softened by Saint’s hands. He wasn’t just afraid of losing everything he’d worked for. He *was* the Narrows. And if it died, he would too.

I got back to my feet, stepping past Clove and picking up the case. Saint didn’t turn to look at me as I came through the door. The little room was nothing but dusty floorboards and a pane of cracked glass that looked out over the rooftops. I could see the reflection of his face in it, but his eyes didn’t leave that view.

I reached into my pocket for the purse, pulling the cinched strings open. When the gem rolled into

my fingers, it felt heavier than it ever had.

“I might not be one of you, but I’m not one of them either,” I breathed. “I never was. That’s why I came here. Why I can’t go back.”

I set the midnight down on the windowsill beside him and the dim light caught the glassy edges of the stone. He looked at it, not moving.

“I’ve been diving for my mother since I was ten years old. For a long time, I didn’t care what the gems I was bringing up in those crates meant, as long as she was pleased with me. But the older I got, the more I could see that look in her eyes and the more I couldn’t deny that it wasn’t the gem sage dredger daughter she wanted. She only loved the coin I could put in her pocket.” I swallowed hard. “I found the stone by accident. We weren’t even on a dive. And as soon as Holland laid eyes on it, I knew I’d made a mistake. For the first time, I was truly afraid of her and without even deciding to, I lied to her about where it came from.”

“What is it?” Saint asked, picking it up carefully.

“Midnight,” I answered.

“I’ve never heard of it.”

“Because it doesn’t exist. Not yet. It was the haul that was going to make my mother the only god to rule the Unnamed Sea and the Narrows. But I couldn’t let that happen. So, I stole it, like Zola said. And I ran.”

Understanding lit in Saint’s eyes as he turned the gem over in his hands. “So, she’s not looking for you. She’s looking for this?”

“Both, I imagine. She’s not giving up her gem sage so easily. Not when I’ve made her rich.”

He finally looked at me.

“She killed my father when he tried to protect me from her.” Saying it out loud made the pain of it drive deeper inside me. “And I decided the only way to punish her was to take back everything I’d helped her build. I came to Ceros to give this to the Gem Guild master,” I said, gesturing to the midnight. “I thought that there would be no better justice than to see her fall beneath the Narrows. But she’s always one step ahead of everyone else. And when I went to the chamber, she was already there.”

“What do you mean?”

“Her control. Her influence. The Gem Guild master is already in her pocket. And he’s probably not the only one.”

He didn’t look surprised at that.

I drew in a steady breath. “You said you saw a future for the Narrows.”

“I do.”

“If you’re ever going to see it come true, then you can’t be like them.”

“I know that.”

I let the map case slide from my shoulder and opened it. “You won’t beat the Unnamed Sea with gems. They’ll always have more—reefs, stones, merchants. But you can use their own power against them.”

The parchment slid from the case into my hands, and I unrolled its edge until I could see the sprawling cluster of reef chain he’d painted there. I pointed to it.

“This is how you do it.”

I had his attention now. He took one side of the map to hold it open. “Tempest Snare?”

I nodded. “If what Zola said is true, there are dozens of ships wrecked in those reefs, many of them from the Unnamed Sea.”

“There are. I’ve seen them.”

“Then there’s no telling what lies in their hulls.”

Saint’s face turned toward me and the memory of him standing that close in the dark the night before came back to life in my mind.

“No one will sail those waters because they’re afraid. But if you can map the Narrows, you can map the Snare. And then all you have to do is take what you find.”

I could see his mind turning with it, flitting from one thought and possibility to the next.

“Build a trading operation that doesn’t rely on the merchants in Ceros. Flood the Narrows with coin and the traders from the Unnamed Sea will begin to lose their grip on the guilds. Once that happens...”

“Everything else follows,” he finished.

I nodded.

His jaw clenched. “I would need a dredger if we’re going to dive Tempest Snare.”

“Map it, and when I’m done with my contract on the *Luna*, I’ll dredge it for you. Every single reef.”

He thought about that. “You might not have a choice. If you go back to Zola, he’s just going to sell you to Oliver Durant.”

“I’ll make sure that doesn’t happen.”

“How?”

I let the map roll closed in my hands. “I can make that bastard more coin dredging than Durant was going to pay him. If I show him that, I can change his mind.”

Saint didn’t look convinced. I wasn’t either, to be honest.

“You’ll come back?” he asked.

“If you still want me.”

He moved so close that when he looked down into my face, the tip of his nose was inches from mine. “I’ve wanted you since the minute I saw you. That’s the problem, Isolde.”

My heartbeat skipped behind my ribs, shortening my breath.

“What do *you* want?” he whispered.

The question made me feel like the rain outside was filling my lungs. This thing between us was like the creaking lines that held the bowing masts of the *Riven*. At any moment, they were going to snap.

I didn’t know where we fit together or how. I just knew that we did. Like some tide had carried me from Bastian to that tavern in Dern. Like fate had set me squarely in his path and him in mine. This trader who sailed into storms and spoke to the sea, who’d bound himself to demons, was the first soul who’d ever asked me what I wanted. And the answer was, somehow, so easy to give. I wanted *him*. But it was more than that.

“I want to build something that’s not theirs.”

“All right,” he said. “Then we will.”

ISOLDE

“Take us through it.”

Saint sat on the edge of the table, facing me and Clove, but they both had their eyes on me.

There was no question that the summons was coming. If the guild masters in Ceros were anything like the ones in the Unnamed Sea, they wouldn't stand for crew poaching. What Saint and Clove did once they *got* the summons was the only question.

“Zola's charge against you will be heard by the Council,” I began, “then the summons will be circulated to the harbor masters. Whichever one finds your ship first will collect a payment from the Council in exchange for a report detailing its delivery. From there, you have two days to show at the chamber and face the charge.”

Clove's expression was grave, making me feel even more unsettled. He was usually the one making light of a bad situation, but with this, the stakes were too high. It could sink them. “And what will that look like? The charge.”

“The Trade Council will hold a formal gathering and invite any guild members who want to attend.”

“Why would they want to do that?”

“Lots of reasons. Tracking allegiances and vendettas. Using what they can to get what they want. Recruiting a slighted trader for their own schemes. Covering their tracks. They like to keep tabs on what kind of trouble the traders are getting into and what they can use against other merchants. They can also hold sway over the guild masters who sit on the Trade Council and what they decide.”

“I thought the purpose of the Trade Council was to bring order to all of this,” Clove muttered. “Sounds like it's just more trouble.”

“There's always trouble where there's power to be gained or traded,” I said, thinking of my mother.

It was exactly the kind of work she did to climb the rungs of the guilds in the Unnamed Sea. I had no doubt that eventually she'd be sitting on the Trade Council as the Gem Guild master.

“Once the charge has been presented, they'll ask for the evidence against you.”

“The contract,” Saint thought aloud.

I nodded. “I'll be questioned and asked to explain why I broke the agreement.”

“I still don't understand why you can't just tell the truth.” Nash's voice drifted down the stairs. I hadn't thought he was listening, but I was beginning to wonder if he always was. “The bastard was going to sell you. Seems justified to me.”

“No,” Saint said lowly. “The Trade Council’s protection doesn’t extend beyond the helmsmen who hold their trade licenses to their crews. If we tell them what she is, every crooked trader in Ceros will be lined up behind Zola to sell her to someone else the minute the Council turns its back.”

“Better to stay Eryss for now,” Clove added.

“We aren’t the only ones with leverage, anyway,” I said. “Zola knows about your fake gem trade in the rye bottles and who you got those bottles from in the first place. You accuse him of smuggling a gem sage and he’ll just make sure they know your hands are dirty too.”

“Then what do we do?” Clove asked.

“The Council will demand that I return to the *Luna*.”

“And if you don’t?”

“They’ll take your trade license,” I said, not mincing words. That was the bottom line and there was no getting around it. “I’m all but certain they will want to make an example of you. Especially with the Unnamed Sea watching their every move.”

Saint and Clove looked at each other. Losing the license wasn’t an option.

“As long as I return to the *Luna*, there’s nothing to worry about. You’ll be dismissed with a fine and you can go back to Dern, get the *Aster*, and set sail.”

I kept my voice even. I’d accepted my fate the minute Zola sat down in that chair at Griff’s Tavern. I’d signed the contract, even if it wasn’t my name. There was no getting around it. And in that moment, I hadn’t cared. I’d only wanted to cut my mother’s legs from beneath her. But as I stood there in the flat, watching the shadows move over the floor, there was no denying that I hadn’t even scratched the surface of her reach. She wasn’t a tree I could cut down myself. She was a never-ending web of roots beneath the ground.

“The merchant.” Nash’s voice broke the silence again, followed by his footsteps on the stairs.

“What merchant?” Saint looked up at him.

“The one who was going to buy you from Zola. What was his name?”

The man’s face from the portrait resurfaced in my mind. “Oliver,” I answered. “Oliver Durant.”

Nash leaned into the wall, crossing one foot over the other. “Then you *do* have something.”

“I don’t have the courier agreement. It’s still on the *Luna*.”

“He doesn’t know that.”

Saint’s attention drifted back to me, his mind turning with the thought. It wasn’t enough. The Trade Council would require evidence.

“Even if we had it, it’s not proof. The order was for Nimsmire silks,” I said.

Nash shrugged. “Anyone who digs into the ship’s inventory will find out that bastard wasn’t carrying silks. And Simon’s name is known in the Narrows for his gem sage business.”

A piece of information that would have been helpful before I went to him for help, I thought.

“Might be enough to at least get someone curious. You don’t have to report him and risk her being found out. It’s enough for him to know you *could* if you wanted to.”

“Smashing heads with rye bottles. Scheming against the Trade Council.” Clove surveyed Nash with a look that bordered on impressed. “Not so useless after all, are you?”

“Just trying to earn my keep,” Nash quipped, giving him a wink.

He was right about the merchant. Having that information was valuable, whether Saint used it now

or saved it for a rainy day.

“It still won’t change the fact that I’m going back to the *Luna*,” I said, making sure it hadn’t given Saint any ideas.

“I know,” he said.

Clove looked between us. “Guess it’s about time I make a trip to the harbor master, then. The summons should already be waiting.”

Saint nodded.

There was no point in delaying the inevitable. The longer the Council was looking for Saint, the more suspicious they would be. Especially when his ship was still anchored in Ceros.

“Come on.” Clove got to his feet with a groan, jerking his chin toward Nash.

“Me?”

“This city is crawling with Zola’s crew. Someone’s gotta cover my back.”

Nash sighed, snatching his jacket from the hook.

They disappeared out the door a moment later, leaving Saint and me standing in the empty flat alone. His fingers tapped his elbow, his eyes on the cold hearth across the room.

“You don’t like being on land, do you?” I asked.

“No.”

“Why not?”

He considered his answer, taking his time. “The sea’s a lot more honest than people are.”

I couldn’t argue with that. But I couldn’t say the same was true about Saint. He wasn’t like other people. The weight of his presence was like a leak on a ship, slowly filling its hollow spaces.

“I meant what I said. I’ll come back and help you dredge the Snare.”

It wasn’t just because I wanted to see my mother fall anymore. It was about the helmsman standing in front of me. It was about that dark gleam in his eyes. The way he said exactly what he meant. If there was a future for the Narrows, he was it. And that was a future for me too.

“I know you will,” he said.

I took a step toward him, and this time, I didn’t wait for him to kiss me. I lifted up onto my toes and took his face in my hands before I pressed my mouth to his and breathed him in. His arms came around me, fingers finding the skin beneath the hem of my shirt, their warmth flooding into me as they drifted up my back. He kissed me deeper, leaning into me until we were moving backward, across the floor.

He laid me down on the bare cot and I pulled him closer, tugging the shirt over his head so that I could press my hands flat against his ribs, his chest. I said a kind of goodbye that didn’t need words or promises or plans.

I couldn’t change that night in my mother’s study or the path I’d walked to Simon’s. I couldn’t go back and erase my signature from that contract with Zola. But I could cast my lot alongside Saint’s and know that there was something true in it. Because there was. The hum in the air that hovered around us. The calm that settled in my blood when he touched me. The feeling that we were only the beginning of a story that would be told long after we were gone. They were things I could take with me.

A year was nothing if it let me come back to *this*.

SAINT

The cold that lived in my bones was gone for the first time since I left Cragsmouth.

Isolde slept soundly beside me, despite the fact that she'd face the Trade Council when she woke. She hadn't so much as blinked when she realized there was no way out of it, and I'd half expected her to disappear, slipping out into the night and back to wherever she'd come from. But I was learning that even though she'd left Bastian and her life behind, she wasn't the running kind.

Her hair fell across her cheek, hiding the trail of freckles that crested her cheekbone, and her breath was so soft that I could hardly hear it over the sound of the rain and Nash's snoring upstairs. Even Clove had managed to close his eyes for a rare few hours of uninterrupted sleep. But I hadn't been able to let go of the image of Isolde sleeping beside me, one hand curled against her chest. If she was leaving, I was going to remember it.

The bare cot was draped with a few unraveling quilts and we'd lain there watching the raindrops streak down the window without talking until her breaths pulled long and deep. This girl who'd dropped onto the *Riven* dragging a sea of demons behind her felt like the only unmoving thing. A point on the tilting horizon.

I'd never been given anything, not even from my father. He'd believed in earning. Making myself worthy of something. But I was painfully aware that there was nothing I could do to merit that feeling of warmth at my side. And I wouldn't pretend to.

Carefully, I reached over Isolde's sleeping frame and into the pocket of her jacket for the purse that she kept hidden there. The leather had been worn smooth by her fingers, and the stone's weight was heavy in my hand. I opened it, letting the stone roll into my palm, and I held it to the moonlight. Violet ribbons danced, suspended in the almost-opaque black gem, like a flicker of fire frozen in time.

This one small stone had tipped the balance of Isolde's life until she was tumbling into mine. It was a thing that could build cities or burn them. Make kings or slay them. And I could feel the weight of it the moment she had shown it to me.

There was that thing in me, too. That voice that said that this gem in my hand could mend every unraveling thing—my ship, my debt to Henrik, my trading operation. Bastian, the Trade Council, the Narrows. If there were ever a broken oil lamp just waiting to catch flame, this was it. And I'd never had that kind of power within reach before.

I sat up slowly, letting my arm slip from beneath Isolde's still body. Her face turned to the moonlight as I stood, and my hand closed over the gem tightly until I could feel its points against the tender healing skin of my palm. She'd trusted me with it, but she shouldn't have. Isolde saw the

almost-man trying to build a ladder he could climb. She didn't know I'd made that ladder with the bones of the dead.

The door barely creaked as I closed it behind me and stepped out into the alley. The rain was finally beginning to let up and the city was quiet with a calm that only existed in Ceros in the middle of the night. Tomorrow would come with its own worries and problems, but for now, the stars were stretched out across the black skies as brightly as they were on Emilia's croft.

I could feel that warmth I'd left with Isolde pull away from me as I started up the alley, and when a pair of eyes found me in the dark, I pulled a copper from my belt.

As soon as the moonlight hit it, a small boy stepped out from the shadows, his trousers rolled up at the ankles to reveal muddy bare feet. His black hair was wet and curling into ringlets over his eyebrows, as if it had been trimmed just enough for him to see. He blinked once before he looked up at me.

"I want you to sit up in that window." I pointed overhead. "Anyone besides me comes to that door, and I want every bastard in the Pinch to draw their knife."

The boy nodded.

"If you're still there when I get back, I'll have another copper for you."

He snatched the coin from my fingers and scurried away into the black. The sound of his bare feet slapping in the mud disappeared around the corner and I watched the window that looked out over the street until I saw his face appear behind the fogged glass.

I took the bridges toward the merchants' district for the first time. Now that I had a trade license, it wouldn't be the last. There would be deals to strike, contracts to negotiate, and investments to be made if we were going to take the Narrows back, like Clove said. I had a feeling I'd come to know these streets well. Better than I wanted to.

It only took three coppers to find out where the man I was looking for lived. That was the problem with these coin-rich fools. They'd forgotten they had something to fear.

The door of the gray stone house was painted red and set with a brass knocker that was cast in the shape of a ship's helm. On either side, green velvet curtains were pulled closed behind the window glass, but the glow of candlelight seeped between the panels. In another few minutes, the sun would rise over the water, and the house would begin to stir.

I reached up, taking hold of the knocker and rapping three times, more loudly than was necessary in case the bastard wasn't awake yet. The flit of light behind the curtains moved and footsteps shuffled behind the door before it was yanked open. On the other side, a young woman in an apron looked up at me with wide eyes.

"May I"—her gaze raked over me—"help you?"

"I'd like to see the merchant."

"At this hour?"

"He'll want to see me," I said, keeping my hands in my pockets. The stone was still clutched in my fist like a coal fished from the fire.

The woman was wary, and she should have been. She was probably the only person in the house with the sense to be worried.

She stared at me for another moment. "Wait here."

I caught the door with my hand, holding it open. “Tell him it’s regarding those silks he’s expecting.”

When I let go, the bolt locked and the footsteps trailed away, leaving me standing on the street alone. In the distance, the shops of the merchants’ district were beginning to show signs of life. The sound of water being poured into the street, a door scraping over the cobblestones. The pale light of morning was creeping into the city by the time the door opened again.

This time, the woman stepped aside to let me in. “May I take your jacket?” she asked, stumbling over the words. I doubted there was decorum for a meeting like this.

“No. I’m not staying long.”

Inside, the smell of baking bread and sizzling pork was already in the air. The candles at the top of the stairs were lit, illuminating the shadows of the house as the sun slowly made its way up the sky.

The woman set a hand on the carved wooden banister and began to climb. “Follow me.”

I took the steps behind her, eyes roaming over the gilded-framed paintings that hung on the walls. Scenes of the rye fields, the cliffs. Ships in the harbor. It was a version of the Narrows that wouldn’t exist much longer if Oliver Durant had his way.

A door at the end of the hallway was open and candlelight reflected on a glass case inside. I stopped in front of the threshold, examining the room. It was a study, the walls fitted with shelves that held books and leather folders and mullein boxes. The wood floor was covered by a handwoven rug edged in gold tassels. Nothing that could have been made here in Ceros, and that was the sum of all I needed to know about the man who sat behind the ornately carved desk.

Oliver Durant.

His wide face was wreathed in a thick beard that was too white for his apparent age. His hair was neatly combed, his tailored vest buttoned closed as if he’d been up and at work on his ledgers before the sun rose. I was sure he had. He set his hands on the arms of his chair, watching me like he was half expecting me to draw my knife.

The woman motioned for me to enter and pulled the door closed behind me. But Oliver didn’t take his eyes off me.

“And who the hell are you?”

I crossed the floor with patient steps, taking note of the room’s contents. The table against the far wall was set with a gem lamp and several trays of newly cleaned stones. He was a gem merchant who’d decided he had need of a gem sage. Maybe to vet the stones he was buying or to be sure any fakes he traded passed muster. That, or he was like the merchants Henrik talked about, collecting sages to pick them off one by one. The fewer there were, the more power and security men like him held.

“My name is Saint,” I said, taking the leather chair on the other side of the desk. I set one foot on the opposite knee, leaning back into it. The soles of my boots were still covered in mud, a detail that Oliver hadn’t missed.

His eyes narrowed on me. “Where have I heard that name before?”

I turned the stone over in my pocket again. There was no telling. The merchant’s house, the Trade Council, the tavern. I’d lost track of which stories had traveled where. I didn’t care either.

“I have a problem, and you’re going to fix it,” I said.

“I have my own problems, I’m afraid.”

“Yes, you do. Because I know about your gem sage trade.”

He shifted in his seat, trying to keep his composure. But he was nervous, eyes darting around the room before they landed on me again. “So, you’re here to squeeze me dry before you report the contract, is that it?”

“It doesn’t serve my purposes for the Trade Council to know about your deal with Simon.”

“Then you want me to turn on the courier? The *Luna*?”

“That won’t help me either.”

“Then what do you want, son?”

“To make a friend in the guild,” I answered.

He scoffed, finally releasing his hands from his chair and folding them over the buttons of his vest. “I don’t exactly make a habit of befriending people who threaten me.”

“I’d reevaluate that if I were you. In another year you’ll be begging the favor of traders like me.”

Oliver’s gaze sharpened, turning curious. “You’re a trader.”

“I am.”

“Is this about a trade contract? Because I’ve got plenty of those to go around.”

“It’s about coin. Three hundred and fifty-six coppers, to be exact.” It was the exact sum I would owe Henrik when I arrived in Dern.

“Copper,” he repeated.

“That’s right.”

“Why didn’t you say so? I’ve got plenty of that too.”

I nodded. “I’ll also need you to make sure the *Luna* doesn’t secure any trade contracts with the Gem Guild. And I’m making you personally responsible for seeing that this little gem sage trade between the Narrows and the Unnamed Sea goes away. For good.”

“I can’t possibly—”

“You can. And you will. Or you’ll lose that merchant’s ring and any chance you had at moving up in the guild.”

A tinge of red surfaced beneath his skin, his cheeks flushing over his beard. “How do you suggest I control every merchant in this city?”

“I think you’ll figure it out.” I set my foot on the ground, leaning forward. “And if you or anyone else touches that gem sage you had couriered from Bastian, I’ll cut the tongue from your mouth and feed it to the seabirds. Then I’ll tie you to the anchor and drag you over the nearest reef until the flesh is peeled back from your bones enough that no one in the Narrows will recognize you. You’ll live the rest of your days in Waterside, begging for the rotten fish the ships can’t sell on the docks.”

He paled, swallowing hard.

“Do we have an understanding?”

“I believe we do.” His voice cracked.

“Good.” I got to my feet, taking the time to button my jacket.

Oliver pushed his chair back, pulling open a drawer in the chest behind him and retrieving a purse of coin from inside. He set it on the desk between us. “Is there a designated time frame for this little arrangement?”

“Yes,” I said, picking up the purse and tucking it into my pocket. “For as long as it suits me.”

I was smart enough to know my leverage would lose its weight with time, but there was no telling how long that would take. By then, I’d have found other ways to make Oliver Durant and the likes of the Gem Guild need me. I was sure of that.

He let out a heavy breath, standing from his chair, and he hesitated before he extended a hand. But I didn’t take it. Instead, I turned on my heel, pacing back to the door.

“Happy to make your acquaintance, Mr. Durant.” And I meant it.

It wasn’t until I reached the stairs that I heard the fist slamming down onto the desk and the curse that followed. His husky voice was no more than a cracked whisper as I slipped back onto the street.

“Urchin *bastard*!”

ISOLDE

The first day of my year on the *Luna* began with birds singing.

I woke in the Pinch with the sunlight streaming through the window. The rain had finally broken during the night and the sea air swept through the city, bringing the sweet scent of a passing storm. I couldn't find it in me to be sad or to dread what was coming. There was too much hope in me for what would come after.

I spent the early hours studying Saint's map of Tempest Snare and making notes for him on a piece of parchment for which routes to try first through the jagged reefs. By the time I came back to him, he and Clove would be ready to dredge and we'd start turning over hauls in Ceros before anyone even knew what we were up to. We would keep them small and parsed out, not too much to draw attention, but in a few years' time, we'd be commissioning a fleet to sail alongside the *Aster*.

Saint came down the steps with one hand raking through his drying hair. His face was washed and his shirt was changed, but he still looked like he was taken right out of one of my father's old books about the sea myths. If he were here now, he'd say that the sea was in the helmsman's eyes.

A trail of mullein smoke drifted past the window, where Clove had a pipe clenched in his teeth. He'd been as quiet as Saint, getting up and dressed quickly before heading outside to wait.

"Ready?" I asked, standing from the stool and setting down the quill.

The map rolled closed in front of me and Saint eyed the notes I was making, turning the parchment so he could read them. He said nothing before his gaze lifted to me and he nodded.

I reached into my pocket and took out the purse of midnight, pressing it into his palm. His fingers closed over mine as the question lit in his eyes.

"Keep it for me?" I asked, swallowing against the lump in my throat.

Saint thought about it for a long moment, his hand still tightly holding mine. He looked unsure. Afraid of it, almost.

"Yeah," he said finally. "Until you come back."

"Thank you."

My voice took on the weight of the words, bending their shape into something that was hard to say. I wasn't sure what exactly I was thanking him for. I was mostly just glad he existed. That I'd been lucky enough to find him.

His hand tightened on mine before he let it go, and he tucked the midnight into his jacket.

"See ya, dredger." Nash crossed his arms over his chest, watching me from across the room.

Saint had made it clear Nash wasn't invited to the Trade Council Chamber, and he'd looked almost

relieved. If he could keep his head on another few days, he'd be back in Dern like the last two weeks had never happened.

He gave me a smile, but it wasn't one of his easy ones. "I'll see you next time you're in Dern?"

"You will." I held out my hand and he shook it. "Keep that mouth of yours shut and you might be able to keep from getting yourself killed."

The smile came more easily at that. "I'll try."

My hand slipped from his and Saint opened the door to the street, where two little boys were watching Clove like birds perched on a tree limb. He ignored them, taking one more drag of his pipe before he dumped it out and crushed the smoldering mullein beneath the heel of his boot.

We started for the bridges without a word, and the trapped dank heat of the Pinch bled away as we climbed the ladder. It was replaced by a brittle cold carried on the wind, a gust I imagined had come all the way from Bastian. I was one of thousands of faces in this city, I thought. I was no one. And I believed for the first time that it could stay that way.

The market was open and busy when we reached the Trade Council Chamber. The city was lost to its rhythms, and I found comfort in that. This summons, this charge against Saint, the contract I'd signed with Zola ... they were just ripples. A fading light that would be followed by the same dawn that rose in the sky day after day.

I stopped in front of the door, Saint to my left and Clove to my right. "Can I tell you something?" I said, giving Saint a mischievous smile. "I'm glad I walked into the tavern that night."

But Saint didn't return it. He looked down into my face, eyes jumping back and forth on mine. "So am I."

Clove opened the door and the hum of voices came tumbling out. The hall that led to the chamber was empty, but as we made our way past the portraits of the guild members, the crowd came into view. The chamber was filled to the brim, making Saint's steps falter.

My eyes skipped over the long room, finding the Trade Council seated against the opposite wall.

Clove's deep voice was behind us. "It's the first charge brought against a Narrows-born trader. I guess no one wanted to miss that."

He was probably right. Ceros had its own laws and leaders now. The pomp and circumstance of seeing them in action would be a novelty for some time yet. And there wouldn't be a merchant in the city who didn't want to see the guild masters in action.

The voices died down as we wove through the crowd and the whispers began, filling the corners of the huge room. I kept close to Saint, following behind him with Clove at my back, and when he made it to the center of the chamber, the Trade Council's eyes found him.

Across the tiled floor, Zola was already waiting. His black eyes were focused on me, the sneer on his lips revealing a slice of teeth. He'd done exactly what he said he would do, and the look on his face only confirmed that he knew he'd won.

Lander, the merchant from Sowen, was at his side. He watched Saint warily, cowering with his injured hand tucked into a sling across his chest as if he was afraid Saint would cross the space between the platforms and wrap his hands around his throat. I wouldn't have been surprised if he did.

The Gem Guild master's eyes sharpened on me when I stepped onto the platform beside Saint and he sat up straighter in his chair. He recognized me, and that would bring its own complications.

He surveyed me a moment before he leaned to one side, whispering into the ear of the woman beside him. But her attention stayed on the parchment open before her.

The heavy knock of a gavel bellowed through the room and, slowly, the whispers quieted into a soft murmur. The faces that surrounded us were here for the business of it, but they were also here for sport. The only ones who seemed utterly disinterested were Saint and Clove. But they'd have to learn to play this game eventually, and now was as good a time as any.

"Helmsman of the *Aster*." The man at the end of the table stood. "Please step forward."

For once, Saint obeyed. He lined his boots up with the edge of the platform, jaw ticking.

"A formal charge has been brought against you by the helmsman of the *Luna*, for poaching contracted crew." He pulled a slip of paper free, holding it in the air. "A dredger."

The whispers swelled again as the attention of the crowd found me, and I was instantly grateful that Daya had given me the clothes. For the first time, I blended in with them, no trace of the Unnamed Sea visible from the outside. The inside was a different matter.

"We have a witness here, a Lander..." He searched the page in his hands for the name.

"That won't be necessary," Saint said.

Across the room, Lander looked relieved. There was no telling what Zola had offered him to stand up there and speak against Saint. But anyone who looked at him could see he was terrified.

Edgar Moranton, the master of the Gem Guild, spoke next. "Do you have a response to this accusation, then?"

"I do not."

The first man sighed impatiently. "Well, is it true?"

"Yes." Saint's abrupt answer rippled through the room, the deep tenor of his voice hovering in the unnerving silence.

The guild masters who sat the table were all looking at him now. They didn't know this man who measured his words and bartered with their truth. No one did.

"I must say." Edgar fumbled with the parchment in his hands, chancing a look in my direction. "I am disappointed."

"When we said you'd have your pick of crew, this isn't exactly what we meant." The woman at the end folded her hands on the table. The bronze placard before her bore the seal of the Sailmakers Guild.

To that, Saint had no reply.

I stepped forward. "The contract was signed and broken by me and me alone. The helmsman of the *Aster* had no knowledge of it."

Saint stiffened beside me, his eyes finding my boots.

"Unfortunately, you're not the one who will pay for the mistake," the woman said, her words growing heavy. "The helmsman is responsible for his ship and his crew. He's the one who holds the trade license and is subject to the laws of this council."

"I'm prepared to provide restitution," Saint said, steering their attention back to him. He was going to make short work of this, and I was grateful. The longer I stood there, the more I felt the scrutinizing gazes of the merchants around me.

"Good." The man at the other end of the table nodded. "This should be rather simple, then. There

will be a fine paid to this council in the amount of—”

“I’d like to purchase the contract,” Saint interrupted.

I froze, sure I hadn’t heard him right.

The man’s fingers slipped from the parchment. “Purchase it?”

“That’s right.”

He looked down at the contract still unfolded in his hands, reading it over. “That’s a lot of coin, son.”

“I don’t have any coin.”

Behind Saint’s back, Clove met my eyes, the crease in his brow so severe that it looked like it had been carved there with a knife. He was just as confused as I was.

The master of the Smiths Guild laughed. “Well, what exactly do you plan to purchase it with, then?”

Saint reached into his jacket and pulled a rolled parchment free, holding it at his side. It was tied in a rough twine, but the black ink at the edges of the paper was visible. I didn’t recognize it.

It wasn’t until I looked back to Clove that I realized the color had completely drained from his face.

“Saint,” I whispered.

“A ship.” Those two words were like quick strikes of lightning.

My pulse raced, making my head feel light. The platform beneath my feet suddenly seemed to be tilting.

There wasn’t a single sound in the room now. That was the last thing anyone could have expected him to say.

“There’s a pier in Dern, where a newly constructed schooner is anchored and waiting to set sail,” Saint continued. “This is the deed.”

The master of the Sailmakers Guild rose to her feet, leaning on the table with both hands. “A ship,” she repeated. “For a dredger?”

Saint stared at her, letting his silence answer for him. He wasn’t just careful with his words. He didn’t like repeating them either.

Across the room, no one looked more shocked than Zola. He shifted on his feet, his reddened face darkening by the minute.

“Saint,” I tried again, keeping my voice low.

I reached for the sleeve of his jacket, but he ignored me, stepping off the platform and making his way to the Council’s table. He handed the deed to the master of the Sailmakers Guild and she stared at him for a long moment before she opened it and read the words inked onto the page. When she was finished, her eyes flickered up to Edgar.

“It seems to be genuine,” she said.

“This can’t be…” Zola flung a hand at Saint. “I can’t imagine you would allow such a ridiculous —”

“Are you telling us you don’t think the worth of a ship covers the cost of a one-year contract with a dredger?” The woman cut him off.

“No, that’s not what I’m saying.” He spoke through gritted teeth.

“I want to be sure you understand the charge, sir,” she began again, looking to Saint. “You’ve been accused of poaching a fellow trader’s contracted dredger, the restitution for which is a fine of eight hundred coppers and the return of the dredger to the ship she’s contracted to.”

“I understand.”

“But you want to purchase the contract instead? With an entire ship?”

“I think it’s a fair offer.”

“A bit more than fair, I’d say,” she said, looking to Zola. “With the *Luna*, the *Aster* is the makings of a fleet. Is there any reason you find this offer deficient?”

“No,” he growled.

“Then we have a deal.” Saint turned to Zola, who appeared as if he were going to fall off the platform. He extended his hand.

Arguing further would only make the Council wonder what made me so valuable, and Zola wouldn’t risk that. I hoped.

He swallowed hard before he stepped down to the floor and took Saint’s hand, shaking. The crowd of merchants was already breaking up when the doors at the back of the room opened, and the Trade Council stood, gathering their books and papers.

I stood there, still frozen in place as Saint walked toward us, and then his hand was at my back, guiding me through the room. My breaths were coming too deep now. Too fast. The air was too hot.

It wasn’t until the sunlight hit my face that I felt like I could begin putting together what exactly had just happened. “What the hell are you doing?” I whispered. “Go back and tell them you changed your mind. That you’re not giving him the *Aster*.”

“No” was his only reply.

I looked to Clove, expecting him to agree. But there was a shadow of a smirk on his lips now as he looked between us. He understood something here that I didn’t.

“Did you mean it when you said you wanted to build something that’s not theirs?” Saint asked, keeping his voice low. He met my eyes, waiting.

I let out a heavy breath. “Yes.”

“So did I.”

This time when I looked to Clove, he only shrugged. “He’s the helmsman.” That twinkle lit in his eye again.

“You’re mad.” I looked between them. “Both of you.”

They didn’t deny it. How could they?

Something shoved into me hard as a man shouldered past and a pain shot through my arm before I was being spun around. Zola’s face was suddenly before me, his hands dragging me by the jacket into the flood of people headed into the market. We were slipping into the alley before I could even get my feet steady beneath me.

As soon as he let go, his fist flew back, coming down across my face. Light exploded around me, the deafening ring in my ears throwing me off-kilter until I tumbled back into the brick wall. I dropped to the ground, pressing a hand to my mouth. The taste of blood was already covering my tongue.

In the next moment, Saint and Clove had pressed through the crowd, Saint’s knife drawn as he stalked toward Zola. Clove caught him by the jacket, wrenching him back before he could drive it into

Zola's gut.

"Don't." Clove's voice was a resonant warning as he wedged himself between Saint and Zola. I could barely hear his words over the ringing in my ears. "You kill him, and everything you just did in there doesn't matter."

I wiped my lip with the sleeve of my jacket, getting back to my feet unsteadily. "He's right. Let it go."

Nearly every merchant in Ceros had been in that room and if Zola suddenly disappeared, there would be no question about who was responsible. And the Trade Council had no restitution for an offense like that.

Clove held out his hand for the knife and Saint hesitated before he gave it to him. But before Clove's hand had even closed over the handle, Saint was rearing back, his closed fist flying through the air and catching Zola in the jaw.

His head whipped to the side and he fell to one knee, blood dripping from his lip in a steady stream on the dirt beneath his feet. His chest was rising and falling in a panic now, eyes ablaze.

At the mouth of the alley, Lander was watching us with wide eyes, his pathetic hand still clutched to his ribs.

Clove pointed Saint's knife in Zola's direction. "Touch her again and I'll kill you myself. Those laws don't apply to a navigator."

"I won't have to." He spat on the ground, a stream of red trailing his chin as he looked to me. "Your mother has crews combing the Unnamed Sea for you. All I have to do is show up at her door."

A sinking feeling pulled heavy inside of me. His loss with the Trade Council would cost him the coin he'd been promised when he delivered me to Oliver Durant. And it was the kind of sum that paled in comparison to the enemy he'd make of Simon.

"Wonder what she'd give me for the trouble," Zola added.

"I know exactly what she'd give you," I said. "A blade in your chest."

His gaze hardened.

"All I have to do is tell her whose ship I left Bastian on."

Zola had built himself a cage with this deal and I could tell by the look in his eye that he knew it. He'd probably never sail the Unnamed Sea again as long as he lived.

Saint helped me to my feet, wiping the blood from my mouth with his thumb before he ran his knuckles softly across my tender cheek. I could already feel it bruising.

"I'm fine," I said, wishing my voice were more convincing.

He stepped aside, waiting for me to pass him before he followed me toward the street. When we reached it, Lander scrambled backward, out of the way, but Saint stopped in front of him when his back hit the wall.

"You owe me a debt," Saint said. "And one day, when you're least expecting it, when you're sure I've forgotten"—he took another step toward Lander, making him grimace—"that's when you'll pay it."

31

SAINT

The *Riven* had never felt more like home.

The ship creaked, wood popping and masts groaning against the steady winds taking us to Dern. The cargo hold was empty, but not for long. In another week, it would be filled with rye and grain and fishermen's goods. Whatever we could manage to secure in trade to be taken on to Sowan and Ceros.

We'd readied the ship in silence. Even Nash had had the good sense to keep his mouth shut as we raised the new sail over the bow. The trader's crest was supposed to fly over the *Aster*, but there was something that felt right about seeing it catch the wind over the *Riven*. In a way, we'd been born on this ship, Clove and I. It was only right that she take us across the Narrows as traders for the first time.

It wasn't until the shore was out of sight that Isolde found her way to my quarters. She stood at the door as I added Oliver Durant's coin to the ledgers, bringing them back up from the deficit for the first time in weeks.

"Maybe there's still a way to get it back," she said, her voice small.

I set down the quill and closed the ledger, looking up at her. Her hair was tucked behind one ear, its ends brushing her shoulder. I didn't know if I'd seen that look on her face before. Like she was guilty of something.

"It doesn't matter."

"It matters." She gestured to the small cabin that surrounded us. "You *need* a ship."

As if she could hear us, the ship moaned, tilting just a little.

"Not that one," I said.

Isolde's gaze narrowed on me as she stepped into the room. "What does that mean?"

"The *Aster* is a schooner," I said. "Fit for mid-sized inventories crossing the deep water of the Narrows. We need a ship that can navigate the shallows of Tempest Snare."

All at once, she seemed to put it together. "A brigantine," she murmured.

That was exactly what I'd been thinking. Something with a low drag and rigging that could maneuver unpredictable winds. The *Aster* wasn't made for that.

A small laugh escaped her lips. "Of course."

I stood, coming around the desk to stand in front of her. She was beginning to feel like a permanent fixture in my surroundings. A part of the landscape that made up my life. And I couldn't help feeling like it was rarer than that gemstone in my pocket.

"Besides, I don't want to sail a ship you're not on."

“Then where’s my contract?” She smiled.

“I won’t sign a contract. Not with you,” I said. “If you’re here, with me, it’s because you want to be. The minute that changes, you’re free to go.”

She stared at me, and for a moment, I worried that she was really considering whether it was what she wanted.

“So, that’s it?” she asked. “No deals or contracts or promises?”

I followed the line of freckles across her cheek, down to her jaw. “There is one promise you have to make me.”

She lifted her chin, waiting as I reached into my pocket and pulled the purse she’d given me from inside. When she realized what it was, she looked at it, confused. “What?”

I swallowed, holding it between us. “Don’t ever tell me where you got this.”

She almost smiled again, as if it were a joke.

“I’m serious, Isolde.” My voice deepened. “Promise me you’ll never tell me. Ever.”

“Why?”

I’d thought through it more ways than one. That stone was the answer to too many problems. It had the ability to wipe the world clean before it destroyed it again. I wasn’t the kind of man who could weigh that cost or wield that power. I’d given up a ship for this girl without thinking twice. I’d give a sea of midnights, if I had to. And something told me that eventually, it might just come to that.

“There are some things I shouldn’t be trusted with.” I pressed the purse into her hand. “Promise me.”

Her eyes met mine for a long, quiet moment before her fingers wove into mine. “All right. I promise.”

She lifted up onto her toes and kissed me, arms winding around my neck until she’d rid the air of the cold between us.

This time when I held her, it felt different. Not like before, when I was trying to keep her from slipping away. Now, she was the shore. A place to come back to. And I didn’t know if it was the sea that had given her to me or if she was a fate of my own making. There was a part of me that didn’t care.

“I wanted you too. The minute I saw you.” She whispered my own words against my lips—words I’d once thought could be the end of me.

Now, I was certain they were.

Rosamund's pier felt like a tomb without the *Aster*. The wooden arches that had once bowed over the ship reached up to the high ceilings, where one of the roof sections had been left open to the dimming sky. Strokes of pink and orange swept across the clouds and a few stars were already waking.

Clove, Isolde, and I sat on the edge of the slip, our feet dangling out over the water where the *Aster* had been anchored only a few days ago. Now, it was on its way to Ceros with Burke at the helm. Clove had gone up to the ridge that looked over the harbor to watch them sail it away, but I hadn't had it in me. My blood was nailed into the hull of that ship. My bones had built it. There was a version of myself that would live in its skeleton for as long as it sailed the Narrows. And when it found its end in the deep, it would take that part of me with it.

Clove lifted the rye, refilling our glasses. We'd swiped one of the good bottles from the barkeeper and our only plan between now and morning was to finish it, with the exception of the meeting I had scheduled at the tavern.

"How much?" Clove asked, swallowing the rye down.

He and Isolde had been at it for hours—working out the plans that needed to come together in order for us to start dredging the Snare. Equipment, coin, schedules.

"Another hundred or so," she answered.

Clove hissed, pouring yet another glass.

When I first told Clove about Isolde's idea to dredge Tempest Snare, he'd looked like he was going to be sick. The fishermen from Cragsmouth didn't sail those waters because there were too many dead souls in them. Narrow waterways flowed around half-submerged masts and toothlike coral where a vast stretch of reef had eaten up scores of ships, blown into shallows by erratic, angry storms. There was no telling what kind of hauls were sunk there, and anyone who'd been foolish enough to go looking hadn't come out.

It wouldn't just make us rich. It would fund the first fleet of the Narrows to take on the Saltblood bastards who sucked the blood from its veins.

"Lines and hauling crates aren't free, Clove. And we can't dive without them," she continued.

"Then we'll have the cost of the turnover."

"Not much." She let herself lie back on the wooden planks between us, staring at the rafters overhead. "Most of what we find down there will be in the hulls of sunken ships. Those stones and metals will be clean and cut for the most part."

I hadn't thought of that.

Clove gave me an approving look over her head. We were learning by the day just how much she knew about trade and merchants and the inner workings of the guilds. That was worth tenfold what she could do with the gems.

“When will the map be finished?” Isolde turned her head to look at me.

“Another month. Maybe two.”

“There isn’t a helmsman or a merchant in the Narrows who won’t pay for one.”

She was right about that too. “Best not to make it known where it came from. I know a forger in Sowan who can make the copies and sell them.”

“A forger?”

Clove tossed the bit of frayed rope he’d been winding around his finger into the water. “They do more than copy contracts and signatures. He’s set up for it.”

“So, what? You take a cut?”

“Cuts are the safest way to make coin in these waters,” I said. I’d learned that the hard way. The minute people could trace a fortune to you, you were a dead man. “Cuts of the maps, cuts of Henrik’s hauls, cuts of the rye ... that’s how we’ll fund the dives.”

They both looked satisfied with that. The plan was a solid one, built in levels that couldn’t cave in on one another. That was the only way to build the kind of trade we were undertaking.

“We’ll be swimming in copper in ten years’ time,” Clove murmured.

“But that won’t be enough,” I said absently. “Not as long as it’s gems that run the trade.”

Isolde sat back up, shifting to turn and face me. “What do you mean?”

I shook my head. “You were right. Gems aren’t the answer. There are more gem merchants in the Unnamed Sea than ships in the Narrows. More reefs to dredge. More guild members. We’ll never beat them at it,” I thought aloud. “But maybe we don’t have to.”

Clove was listening now, his eyes sharpening. “What are you thinking?”

I took the bottle from his hand, turning it over so that the label faced me. “What’s the one thing you can sell at any port, no matter its size?”

I handed the bottle to Isolde and she set down her glass, taking it from me. “Rye?”

“We’re already trading rye,” Clove said, still not catching on.

“Not like this, we’re not.” I pulled the ledger from my jacket, opening it to the last page.

Clove tried to read over my shoulder. “I’m not following.”

“The future of the Narrows won’t be built on gems or silver or silks. That’s not who we are.” My mind was racing with it now as I scratched the numbers down. “The Unnamed Sea built their power with gemstones. We’ll build ours on rye.”

“How? It’s just a tavern drink.”

“Not anymore.” I gestured to the bottle. “In a few years we could be trading this in Bastian.”

Isolde’s eyes widened at the thought. “You think that could work?”

“I know it can.”

“But there’s nothing to govern it,” Clove interrupted. “The rye crofters don’t even have a guild.”

“Not yet, they don’t.” I closed the ledger, handing it to him. “Send a message to Emilia. Tell her to plant every damn field she can in those hills.”

“All right.” Clove’s smile stretched wider. “And Rosamund?”

“Tell her we need the best brigantine she’s ever built.”

“It’ll take at least a year. Maybe more.”

“Good. That’s about how long we’ll need to pay for it.”

Clove reopened the ledger, reading the last few entries recorded there. “I’ll figure up the first payment.”

I pulled the watch from my pocket, checking the time. “I have to go.” I got to my feet and Isolde’s hand slipped from my knee.

“Rosamund will want a name for the contract, Saint.” Clove looked up from the page. “For the ship.”

I clicked the watch closed, dropping it into my pocket. “*Lark*,” I answered, the word coming out a little more unsteady than I intended. “We’ll call her the *Lark*.”

That was where it had begun, I thought. That bird lying on the deck. The boy who’d thrown it into the water.

The muscle in Clove’s jaw clenched before he gave me a tight nod. I watched him swallow before he repeated after me. “The *Lark*.”

SAINT

The village was nearly dark as I made my way up the street, the harbor bell silent. It would take a few routes before our ship had inventory, but Gerik's eyes had nearly fallen out of his head when he saw me pull that license from my jacket. I was pretty sure I'd caught a gleam of pride in them too.

The *Riven* would hold out, I told myself. She'd stay afloat long enough for another ship to take us to the Snare. And the sea would see to it.

The tavern was nearly empty, still waiting for the evening crowd that would pour in from the merchant's house. But the booth at the back had its usual occupant.

Henrik Roth had both elbows on the table, hands clasped before him as he stared out the window that overlooked the street. The bottle of rye with my name on it was already waiting on the counter and I picked it up, snatching two glasses from the stack.

The fire was blazing despite the warm evening and the doors were propped open, letting the breeze sweep into the tavern. It made the flames on the lanterns bend, casting shadows up the walls.

Henrik didn't look up as I took my seat, his usually combed hair falling from place just enough to land on his brow. There was something different about him. Something unkempt.

I poured the rye, unsure if I even wanted to know what that look meant. Maybe he'd heard what happened to the gems or about the attention we'd gotten in Ceros. He wouldn't be happy about either.

I took the purse of coin from my jacket and set it on the table before I slid his glass toward him.

He finally blinked. "You're late," he said.

"No, you're early."

He almost smiled, in a way that made him look a little more like himself. "You're right."

He swallowed his rye, letting the glass come down hard on the table. I studied him, still trying to sift out that look in his eye.

"Want to count it?" I asked.

"No."

"What are we trading this time?"

"We're not," he said. "I'm wrapping up my business in the Narrows."

I stilled, hand tightening on the bottle. "Wrapping it up? Why?"

"My father's died."

He said it so matter-of-factly that I was almost certain I'd heard him wrong. But Henrik met my eyes, letting the truth of it settle. There was a grief there. One I knew well.

"I'm sorry," I offered.

“I’m needed in Bastian and I’ll be focusing my trade there.”

I nodded. “Understood.”

Henrik was the oldest of the four Roth siblings and I guessed he would be taking his place as the patriarch of the family. That had likely always been the plan.

“It was just a matter of time.”

He sounded as if he were trying to reassure himself. Like there was some open wound it might stitch closed if he remembered.

“You’ll let me know if there’s anything I can do for you.”

I studied him, unsure if I’d heard him right. That was a rare, generous offer on his part, but I nodded just the same.

He refilled his own glass, not waiting for me. There was more behind the words than he was saying. A request.

“Is there something you need from me?” I asked.

Henrik stared into his glass, turning it once. “Yes.”

I sank back into the booth, unbuttoning my jacket and letting it fall open to the cooler air. I had a feeling I’d need it. “Then I do have something I need from you.”

“Name it.”

I pulled Isolde’s purse from the pocket of my vest, sliding it toward him. He took his time opening it, letting the stone fall into his open hand. When it did, his brow wrinkled.

I watched him study the gem for a few seconds before he lifted it to the light. “What the hell is it?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“What do you want me to do with it?”

“Put it in something. Something small that can be carried or worn. Anything that will hide what it is.”

“I can do that.”

I watched him slip it back into the purse. “No one lays eyes on it except for you,” I insisted. “*No one.*”

“All right.” He tucked it into his jacket, along with the coin.

I poured another round before I asked, “What is it I can do for you in return?”

Henrik wet his lips, his demeanor changing suddenly. I was absolutely sure I’d never seen him that way, as if he were afraid that the air itself couldn’t be trusted with whatever he was about to say.

“There’s a boy in Waterside. A baby.”

I stared at him, waiting.

“I want you to make sure he doesn’t stay there.”

A hundred questions raced through my mind. It was possibly the last thing I’d ever expect him to say.

“How am I going to do that?”

“Keep an eye on him. Look out for him.”

The way he didn’t meet my eyes told me everything I needed to know. He had a child in Ceros, with one of the women in Waterside. That was what he was doing in the Narrows every few weeks. And now that he was rising through the ranks of the Roth family, he was leaving them behind.

“I can do that.”

I wasn't sure I should, but I wasn't going to refuse him. Henrik had taken a chance on me when no one else had. He'd trusted me and taught me how to trade. He'd done it for coin, sure. But I also had a strong suspicion he did it without his father's approval.

“Thank you.”

I let another silence fall between us before I stood, leaving the bottle behind for him to finish. He was a man who needed to be alone with his drink. And I could let him have that.

I started toward the door, stopping short before I turned back. “This kid got a name?”

“Yeah,” he answered, eyes still fixed on the reflection of light in the glass of rye. He swallowed hard before they lifted to meet mine. “His name is West.”

EPILOGUE

ISOLDE

Tempest Snare was where it began. It was fitting that it would end there too.

I pulled the flat-edged chisel from my belt, a stream of bubbles trailing up from my lips. That tight feeling in the center of my chest was like the hands of a clock, slowly twisting tighter, ticking, ticking, ticking.

I had maybe three minutes before I needed to surface, but I wouldn't need that long. Two clean strikes would have the lock of the rusted iron-framed chest freed.

I liked to work the reef alone through the afternoons when the water was warm and the current was calm. The turquoise waters of the Snare were clearer than I'd ever seen them after two straight days of no storms. The sediment had settled so much that it was like looking through glass, everything beneath the surface touched by cascading beams of sunlight.

It was gilded. Otherworldly. And the only place I loved more than the reef was the netting that stretched across the jib of the *Lark*, where Saint and I slept in each other's arms most nights.

I could see the belly of the ship no more than twenty-five feet above, a perfect dark oval on the surface.

The lock broke beneath the weight of the chisel and a cloud of algae erupted in the water, clouding my vision as I opened the trunk. This wreck wasn't as old as some of the others, the wood softened but still intact. Inside, I raked through the disintegrated remains of parchment until my fingers caught hold of what I was looking for. A small coin crate.

The pinch in my lungs surfaced right on cue and I took the crate from the chest, letting it fall into the metal basket at my feet before I gave the rope three tugs. In a matter of seconds, it was lifting away from me.

I kicked off, following it at a steady pace to let my body rise slowly through the changing pressure of the water. When I finally hit the air, a gasp broke from my lips and I blinked until the water cleared my strained vision.

There, leaning on the portside railing of the ship, Saint was watching. He was always watching.

The dark scruff on his face was thick after weeks out at sea, making his blue eyes sparkle. "Was about to come down there and get you."

"You wouldn't last two minutes down there." I smiled, still trying to catch my breath.

I fit one foot into the loop at the end of the line and the crank clicked as I rose from the water, the wind catching me. But I couldn't feel it. I'd been under too long.

Clove was perched on the steps to the upper deck, the quill clenched in his teeth as he silently

marked the depths of the trench we were working. It had taken almost two years, but we'd finished mapping almost a dozen veins of the Snare.

Saint reached out for me and when I took hold of him, his brow cinched. He pulled me onto the deck, hands pressing to my shoulder, my throat, my cheek.

"You're cold, love." He said it almost to himself.

"Tea."

Clove said the word almost automatically, rising to his feet and dropping the log on one of the steps as Saint draped the quilt over my shoulders. His arms wrapped tightly around me, hands moving over my skin to bring the warmth back into my limbs.

"Emerald?" I said, trying to keep my voice from shaking with cold. I could hear the gemstone before I'd even opened the crate.

"A lot of it," Saint answered.

The new map he was working on was fixed to the table behind him. He'd specially commissioned the desk from a woodworker in Ceros so that it could be set up beside the railing. That way he could see the surface of the water when I was diving. I didn't mind. It meant that his face was the first thing I saw every time I came up from below.

I resisted the urge to touch the parchment with my wet hands, but I loved the smell of the ink when he was working. It was almost finished, a detailed rendering of the rugged shoreline west of Sowan. There was no end to the parts of the Narrows that needed mapping and I suspected Saint would spend the better part of his life attempting to complete the job. It was only one of the enterprises he'd begun since we set sail on our first trade route.

Clove reemerged from the passageway with a steaming cup of tea and Saint let me go so that Clove could set it in my hands.

I took a small sip, mostly interested in what the tea's warmth would do for my fingers. "We should head back, leave the rest for next month. There are only so many places we can keep stashing gemstones."

"Emilia's expecting us, anyway," Clove said, picking up the log he'd abandoned. The ink was still staining his fingertips.

We had a system now. Dredge and sell, but not all of it. The rest we found other uses for. Nothing that would draw attention, just enough movement to give the gem merchants in the Narrows an advantage. I imagined the Gem Guild in the Unnamed Sea, baffled by the influx of stones, especially when so many had originally come from their own waters.

That was the irony of it. The tales of the Narrows were different than the ones I'd heard as a child. They weren't just the stories of the traders who sailed these waters or the people who lived on its shores. They were the story of the sea itself. Her love and her anger. Her favor and her cruelty.

Once, a man who ran the gambit shop in Dern told me that the sea gives and she takes. That for every gem dredged from the reefs, she required restitution. And she was patient. She waited to call in her debts.

We'd had no way of knowing just how many ships had sunk on those reefs or how many of them bore crests from the Unnamed Sea. There was a trove of wealth that had been snatched back from Bastian, and no one had thought to come looking for it. Not in the teeth of Tempest Snare.

The wreckage seemed to go on for miles, the poor souls who'd sailed those ships long dead. But the bellies of those vessels still held the jewels and coin that had set up our post in the Pinch and would soon have three new ships under construction in Dern. Nash himself was heading the builds.

It would be slow, and it would be steady, but it was the very fortune Bastian had taken from the sea that was now chipping away at its crumbling, gilded edges.

The stories the gambit told me are true, I thought. *The sea gives.*

Saint believed that she would never betray him. He'd given his heart to her, after all. Like he'd given it to me. But something told me the deep wouldn't share a love like that forever.

One day, she would *take*.

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Sky in the Deep

The Girl the Sea Gave Back

Fable

Namesake

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ADRIENNE YOUNG is a foodie with a deep love of history and travel and a shameless addiction to coffee. When she's not writing, you can find her on her yoga mat, sipping wine over long dinners or disappearing into her favorite art museums. She lives with her documentary filmmaker husband and their four little wildlings in the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina. She is the author of the *New York Times* bestselling Sky in the Deep duology and the Fable duology. You can sign up for email updates [here](#).



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