CHAPTER ONE

The wrong current

TAMSIN

The man selling me the right to retrieve his cargo wanted me to pay for the privilege of drowning.

“Twenty percent,” I said. “You keep the rest, once it's out of the water.”

“Ten. It's only six feet down.”

“Then you can go and stand on it.”

Master Pell wore the harbor’s ceremonial white and had planted himself just beyond the fishmongers’ reach. At regatta time they could tell who’d set foot on a working boat by the backs of his white trouser legs. Pell’s were immaculate. Behind him the first sails rounded the western marker to a cheer from the tavern steps.

Six brass pumps waited in a lighter with a split seam. I'd checked the wreck; Jory had our tackle ready. We could have them clear before supper, and one would pay our berth rent through the month. I kept my eyes off the slip where we owed the rent.

“Fifteen,” Pell said. “And you accept liability for scratching.”

“Shall I polish them down there?”

Jory pushed through the crowd with folded paper tucked beneath her chin and both hands full of line. She dropped the coils at my feet.

“Have we agreed?”

“We've established that the sea must be more careful with his brass.”

Pell drew himself up. There was quite a lot of him to draw. “These are precision instruments.”

“So is she,” Jory said. “Twenty percent.”

I'd have thanked her if she hadn't brought the paper.

She handed it over. The dockmaster's red stamp had bled in the humidity: FINAL EXTENSION. We'd had two final extensions already. This one specified a locksmith.

“Tomorrow,” Jory said quietly.

“I can read.”

“I know. You read it yesterday and put it under a bowl.”

“To keep it flat.”

“Tamsin.”

The six pumps bobbed beneath their painted floats. I was still working out what we could get for one when I noticed the yellow buoy beyond Pell’s shoulder. All the pump floats leaned one way. The buoy leaned the other.

Its little metal flag trembled as it strained upstream toward the East Sluice, against the outgoing tide.

“Seventeen and a half,” Pell said. “I'm not bargaining all afternoon.”

I took three steps to the edge. A crushed orange rind revolved below me. Twice round, then it slipped toward the sluice, against the channel's slow drift.

Jory joined me. “Regatta wake?”

“Not like that.”

The East Sluice stood between two limestone piers, newly whitewashed for the festival. A garland of tin fish shivered across its inspection balcony. When they rebuilt it last year, they'd blocked our berth to make room for a morning of speeches. The man taking down the bunting told me to put the lost job on the works account. I tried. There wasn't a column for it.

Now somebody was banging on metal under the service pier.

Not hammering. Three fast blows. A pause. Two more.

I put my fingers in my mouth and whistled across the water. Our old red awning sheltered the barge's workbench, spread with the innards of a winch. Everything we owned that was too heavy to steal lay under that awning or in the rented store beside it.

“Get the stern line off,” I told Jory. “Move her out of this cut.”

Jory followed my gaze to the buoy. “You need the skiff?”

“No time. Bring it round to the service steps when you're clear.”

Pell caught my sleeve. “We haven't concluded.”

I looked at his hand until he took it away. “Someone's under the pier.”

“A repair crew, presumably.”

More blows rang through the timbers. Near the pier, a man bent to peer between the planks and began shouting for a line.

Pell said, “If you leave, I give the work to Joren.”

Our tackle was ready. If I stayed, the pumps would be up by supper and Jory could put that notice in the stove. An easy job for once, and mine. Then the man at the pier shouted again.

“Give him my regards.”

I ran.

People in the crowd kept getting in my way. A woman turned with a tray of candied peel; a boy stood stock-still holding his regatta pennant; three sailors took up the entire width of a stair. I went over a bollard and squeezed between two barrels, scraping my shin.

The banging stopped.

At the service pier, a ferryman's empty launch bucked against its mooring. One hauling rope vanished beneath the platform. The man who'd shouted for a line was on his knees, reaching into a gap too narrow for his shoulders.

“He went to clear the propeller,” he said. “He was standing. Then the water pulled him under.”

“Where's his head?”

“I can't see.”

I took the rescue knife from my belt. The buoy jerked so sharply that its flag disappeared under the water.

“Get everyone off this pier,” I said. “And find me a blanket.”

Empty fish crates screened the lower steps from the crowd. I pushed my clothes and sandals between them and put the knife on the last dry step, its orange cork handle within reach. I checked twice. Once I was small, most useful things were either too heavy or impossible to grip.

Water reached my thighs. It was warm enough to feel harmless. I crouched until it covered my head.

Ten seconds, still. I counted with the pulse in my ears and kept one hand on the stone. At eight, a current caught my hip. I held on. At ten, the familiar inward fold passed through me. My weight gathered somewhere beyond my reach; my bones, limbs, and breathing changed. The stone under my hand became a cliff.

I was a cuttlefish, no longer than the forearm I'd left behind.

I felt every shivering tether and moving hull around me. Faces above the surface broke into pale shapes; I couldn't have picked Jory out of the crowd. But beneath the

launch dragging at its rope, I felt something much larger pulling water through a narrow mouth.

The sluice.

I flattened against a piling, taking its mottled brown into my skin. The fringe along my body carried me forward without all the wasted effort of human swimming. A boot thrashed against a crossbrace under the pier.

The ferryman hung almost horizontal. A loop of hauling rope had tightened round his ankle. Caught on the post, it held him while the current dragged the rest of him away. His hands clawed beneath the boards. There was a little air trapped between the lowest beam and the water, but his mouth couldn't reach it.

I touched his wrist.

He jerked away. Of course he did. A drowning man didn't need an unfamiliar animal added to his troubles.

I swam up to the air pocket, came back and touched his hand again. I couldn’t tell from his eyes whether he understood. On my third try his head turned to follow me. He found a bolt beneath the beam and pulled himself up far enough to get his mouth and nose into the gap.

A breath burst out of him in bubbles.

I followed the rope down to a rusted notch in the pier's iron foot. Its loose end was trapped beneath his boot. Cut the taut length and he'd be free. My knife was twenty feet away, and I no longer had hands.

A pressure wave hit me from the landward side.

For an instant the pier, the launch, and the ferryman all seemed to lean toward the gate. The pull eased, but a deeper vibration followed it, squeezing along my skin as though someone were pressing the water through a fist.

Wrong. The pulse had come from inside the gate's masonry.

When his fingers slipped off the bolt, I pushed up under his forearm. I couldn’t carry him, but he found the bolt again. If I went now, I might have time to get my hands back before he lost his grip.

At the steps, I settled fully beneath the salt water and held on through another pull. Ten seconds. The return loaded my chest and thighs with sudden weight; my knees struck stone. I surfaced coughing, human and cold, although the water hadn't cooled.

One cycle. I'd meant to spend it on brass pumps.

The blanket lay above my clothes. I left it, took the knife, and pushed off.

Human swimming was brutally slow. The current slapped my bare shoulder into a piling. Under the beam, I forced my eyes open against the salt sting. He was still holding the bolt. I put my free hand over his. “Stay,” I managed in the little air gap. “Cutting the rope.”

He nodded, quick and frantic.

I worked the blade's blunt tip beneath the hauling line and sawed. The first strands parted; the rope shuddered and drew tight against what was left.

With a foot braced on the iron support, I cut again.

The ferryman shot backward. I caught his sleeve and lost the knife. Its cork handle rose between us, bright as peeled orange, then the current carried it toward open water. I actually watched it go. Of all the things to mind just then, I minded that.

A flailing kick caught me. I got behind him, hooked an arm under his chin, and turned his face toward the steps. He was heavy, terrified, and trying to get higher in the water. Beneath us the gate was gathering itself again.

“Don't climb me,” I said. “Hold my wrist. That's it.”

His fingers closed hard enough to hurt. I worked along the pilings rather than fighting across the current, hand over hand. Feet thundered overhead as people finally cleared the pier. A sailcloth sling dropped through a gap in the rail.

“Here!”

I got him into it. Two people hauled while he coughed, cursed, and asked in the same breath whether his boat was safe.

“Ask me later.”

Now I could dress and reach the barge. Jory could move her alone, but the spare winch and good timber were still in the store. Together, we might at least save the tool drawers.

The next pulse caught me before the first step.

It lifted my floating knife into sight. A young harbor officer bent from the quay and caught it. Then the entire channel dropped beneath me, as if someone had taken the floor away.

Across the cut, Jory stood at our stern with an axe.

I shouted her name.

The sound came through the stone before it reached my ears.

I threw myself up the steps. The blanket caught beneath my knee, and I dragged it with me as the gate housing split along a whitewashed seam. Green water punched

through the inspection balcony. Tin fish flew in the sunlight. For one stupid moment I could make out each separate fish, bright little shapes loose from their string.

Then the wave hit the service pier.

Planks came apart in a rolling crack. Behind the crates, I flattened myself down, pulled my feet under the blanket, and covered my head. Something heavy hit the wall above me. Water filled the stairwell and dragged at the blanket before withdrawing with a clatter of broken tiles and shells.

Mortar gritted against my tongue.

Beyond the crates, someone called the ferryman's name. Somebody else shouted that the road was cracking. I raised my head too soon. I needed to see the barge.

She lay sideways in the channel.

For one cold second I thought Jory had gone over. Then a small figure appeared against the red awning, hauling on our emergency sweep. The stern line trailed from a clean cut. Our barge swung clear of the wrecked berth, missed a mooring post by less than a hand's width, and drifted into the open basin.

The store had no roof.

Water poured through the space where its door had been. The cabinets were gone. One plank of Jory's carefully dried stock wheeled across the cut. Behind it came the wooden box where I kept every receipt worth arguing about. It struck a stone and opened. Pale paper spread over the water.

I dressed behind the crates. My hands couldn't seem to find the ends of things, and my shirt stuck to my wet back. One sandal had gone. I left the other, wrapped the blanket round my shoulders, and stepped out into the noise.

The young officer barred my way with an arm. “You need to stay clear.”

“The woman on the barge needs a tow.”

“There's a cordon.”

“Then put a towrope in it.”

He looked toward the basin. A launch was already approaching Jory, and his arm dropped a little.

“Your name?”

“Tamsin Kedge. My knife.”

He checked the cork handle tucked through his belt. “Recovered from the incident. It'll be logged.”

“I used it to get him out.”

“I'm not saying you didn't.”

The ferryman sat against a barrel with the people who'd hauled him up, vomiting water into a folded regatta programme. He raised a shaking hand. I raised mine back. His launch had disappeared. Good thing I hadn't promised him anything about it.

In the gutter by my bare feet lay a bronze fragment curled around a piece of milky tideglass. It was still hot, so I caught it in my shirt hem to turn it over. One broken edge shone beside a patch of old green corrosion.

“Leave that, please.”

That wasn't the officer. A man had come down the cleared quay with a square leather case. Tall, dark-haired, perhaps in his thirties. His ordinary gray coat had its cuffs turned back and no insignia. He crouched beside the broken housing, his right hand stopping short of the exposed stone.

The officer saluted someone behind him. “Captain. We were just removing the loose fitting.”

Captain Renn's coat was astonishingly clean. I knew him by sight. Everyone who worked the harbor did. He took in the wreckage, the ferryman, and the fragment I held, then asked the officer for the names of the injured.

“Take statements. Clear the approaches. The salvage boats must stop work.”

The man with the case said, “That fitting stays.”

“Mr. Saye, this isn't your site.”

“It is if you want an independent certificate.” He opened his case and laid a metal rule beside the broken coupling. “Photograph this before anyone moves it. The fracture and the seating.”

Saye.

I knew the name before I knew his face. Five years had thinned him, or perhaps I only thought so because he wasn't on a platform in a Board coat now. I remembered the back of his head as he'd turned toward a surveyor. Better still, I remembered the signature beneath the word evacuation.

He looked up at me. “Tamsin Kedge?”

“You've managed to remember.”

His gaze dropped to my fragment and returned. “I saw you give evidence at the Bell Quay review.”

“Apparently you listened better to my name.”

Renn said, “Mr. Saye, the first reports suggest interference with the gate. Unauthorized salvage in a restricted channel.”

The officer reached for the bronze. I stepped back. “You have my knife. You can give me a receipt before you take anything else.”

Saye rose slowly, staying clear of the officer's reach. “She can keep that piece while we record it. And give her a receipt for the knife,” Saye said.

I didn't want to notice his voice. Low and unhurried, without the bright official reassurance I'd come to hate. Worse, he'd examined the broken fitting before deciding whom to blame. I wished I hadn't noticed that, either.

“I didn't touch your gate,” I told him.

“I don't think anyone could have caused this from the service pier.”

Renn turned on him. “You have been here for two minutes.”

“Yes,” Saye said, pointing. “Look. No tool marks on the seating.”

He opened a notebook and faced me again. Over his shoulder, my receipt box sank beside the white new wall.

“You were underwater before the failure?”

I tightened my grip on the fragment. “Yes.”

“Tell me exactly what you felt.”

CHAPTER TWO

The man with the warrant

ILAN

By sunset, I'd heard three accounts of the accident from people who had been there and seven explanations from people who had not.

The latest explanation came from Captain Renn, whose polished boot was holding down the corner of my measuring sheet.

“Salvage activity,” he said. “It does not have to name an individual.”

“Move your foot.”

He moved it. I laid my ruler across the paper. Beyond the cordon, the lantern lighters were moving up the street away from the wreckage. The regatta committee had decided to go ahead with the evening illuminations. I had no time to argue about it.

The maintenance chart in my hand was another matter.

“The last three inspections record wear against the bearing collar,” I said. “There should be a groove here.”

I pointed my pencil at the exposed collar seat. Where the coupling had failed, a smooth crescent of pale bronze still carried its original machining lines.

Renn remained upright. “And the explosion could not have removed it?”

“It could have broken it. It could not have put the machining back.”

I had the collar photographed beside the chart. Neither the assistant nor the photographer looked pleased to have been called away from ceremonial portraits.

Renn waited for the lens to be covered.

“There are injured people. There are families who need to know whether they can sleep in their homes tonight.”

“The adjoining piers are safe if you keep those loads off them. I gave you the list. That doesn’t depend on knowing what broke this gate.”

“And when rumors close every ferry?”

“Then we need the right explanation. A quick one won't reopen them.”

He turned toward the basin. Under an emergency lamp, two damaged boats had been lashed together. A man on the nearer one was carefully emptying a shoe. I'd watched people trying to restore small pieces of order all afternoon. Perhaps the shoe was the part of this disaster he could deal with.

Tamsin Kedge had delivered her account in precise, impatient pieces: the buoy pulling inland, pressure against her whole body, a brief easing before the next pulse. When I'd asked whether she meant a sound, she'd said, “If I pressed on your ribs, would you call it singing?”

I'd written that down before recognizing the rebuke.

I put two fingers on the tideglass left in the base. It was made to take force from the moving gate and feed it back, but even along the broken rim I could feel how much force the glass was still holding.

I took the tuning fork from its padded slot and set the note going against the heel of my hand. The stud picked it up. At college we’d had a diagram of the return vibration. Down at the yards they called it backsing; a man could have his head inside a fitting and tell you exactly when it started from the buzz in his back teeth. The photographer’s assistant took a step away.

“Small release,” I said. “Nothing connected downstream.”

The glass eased. My forefinger went on trembling when I took the fork away. Backsing was one thing; I’d seen what happened to a tuner who tried to work through that tremor. The reading could stay untidy.

“Overload,” Renn said. “That's your conclusion?”

“It’s how it broke. I still need to know where the extra load came from.”

He produced a folded order. “The site has to be cleared tomorrow. Public access, restoration work, and ordinary shipping. I can give you until then.”

I opened the license wallet inside my coat. As an independent inspector, I could preserve evidence of a mechanical hazard for one day. After that, the clearance crews could dismantle the gate in front of me.

“Until this time tomorrow,” I said. “With the seating and both coupling pieces preserved.”

“Your retainer is for an initial assessment.”

“I understand.”

“An uncertified assessment may not be payable.”

I understood that, too. My office rent depended on the retainer. On my desk, an envelope held the landlord's second note. I knew precisely where it was because I'd turned it face down, a habit I had once assumed belonged to other people.

Beneath the measurements I wrote:

“Failure of East Sluice. Cause undetermined. Evidence inconsistent with the supplied maintenance history.”

Renn read it upside down. “You've made this harder than it needed to be.”

I signed.

Across the water, the first lanterns were being lowered from a bridge. Their reflections traveled toward the damaged gate, then stopped among pieces of somebody's roof.

* * *

I found the barge at a temporary mooring behind the onion market.

Good Measure had been painted twice on her bow. The older lettering showed beneath the newer, both in the same stubborn red. A borrowed rope secured her to a vegetable-delivery landing. Tools hurriedly removed from the workshop awning littered the deck, and a narrow stair led into a cabin too low for me to stand in.

Tamsin sat on its top step, eating bread as though she'd forgotten food until someone handed it to her. Her hair had come loose from its knot and was drying in dark, uneven waves against her neck. On one side it had flattened into a ridiculous ridge. I wanted to smooth it with my palm. The unwelcome thought stopped me halfway aboard.

Jory Quell looked up from the broken winch on her bench.

“Either come on or stay off. You're dragging the fender.”

I stepped on.

Tamsin finished chewing. “You can stand there. I haven't been charged for that bit of deck yet.”

“I wanted to check what you felt against my survey.”

“Is this another statement?”

“No.”

“Then you can answer one of my questions first.”

I placed my case by my foot. Jory pulled the awning farther over her workbench and stayed there, making no pretense that she wouldn't listen.

“Bell Quay,” Tamsin said.

“Yes.”

“Did you ever go back?”

I'd been back four times: twice to the cleared strip, twice to the old pumping room. A simple answer, and the wrong one. I realized that only as I began speaking.

“I surveyed the retaining wall after the evacuation.”

“Of course you did.”

“I remember your father giving evidence.”

“Nessa. He has a name too.”

“Nessa Kedge.”

She laid her bread on the step. “He made sails in the front room. He could cut a full panel if he moved the table and opened the doors. We had a pulley on the beam because his shoulder was bad. The room the Board put him in had a stair so tight we couldn't get the cutting table around it.”

I remembered him at the review, slight, with rope scars on both hands and a courtesy that had plainly cost him effort. He'd asked when temporary meant to end.

“We took the legs off,” Tamsin continued. “Still wouldn't go. So he sold it. For less than the wood, because the buyer knew the courtyard had to be cleared by morning.”

“The wall was unstable. With that tide forecast, leaving people there would have been—”

“I haven't asked why we left.”

I stopped.

She looked past me toward the onion sheds. A porter was closing the heavy wooden shutters one at a time. Each fell into place with a sound that traveled across the basin.

“You know what I thought when they marked the houses? I thought we'd come back to them. They told us to take documents and a change of clothes. My father left his best shears hanging by the window. He put oil on them first, in case it was damp while we were gone.”

I looked down at my closed case. I had nothing in it that would have helped him get those shears back.

“I recommended repairs. Temporary evacuation while they were done.” I heard how thin it sounded. “Not demolition.”

“But they did.”

“Yes.”

“And the barriers are still there. People living two streets up can look through them at the place we aren't allowed to put a chair.”

“Your report was on the fence,” she said. “A copy under glass, with your name at the bottom. Every time we went to ask for our things, there it was.”

“I couldn't direct the relocation office.”

She picked up the bread and set it down again. “Did I say you could?”

“No.”

“You keep answering someone else.”

Shouting would have been easier to answer. Behind her hung a shirt darned at both elbows, and three mismatched mugs shared a narrow shelf. I’d brought a survey

because I thought it might help her. Now I was standing in the home she'd made after I signed the evacuation recommendation, explaining which parts of the job had belonged to someone else.

"Your father's business. I'm sorry."

"He's alive. He has friends. He still makes things when he wants to. Don't turn him into a sad example so you know how to talk to me."

"I didn't intend—"

She stood with the bread in her hand. "I need to see whether our towman wants paying tonight."

"Tamsin."

One foot on the gangplank, she waited.

I had another technically correct sentence ready, this one about the temporary works I'd proposed. Even in my head, I sounded as patient as I did with contractors who misunderstood a drawing.

She hadn't misunderstood anything.

"I'll leave the measurements," I said.

"All of them."

"Yes."

She stepped ashore. A lantern beyond the market briefly lit her profile: the straight nose, a small pale scar crossing one eyebrow. I watched until she'd left the light, then bent to gather the papers I'd promised.

Jory resumed work on the winch.

"She's not usually short of words," she said.

I couldn't tell whether that was a warning or a kindness. I picked up my case without making her explain.

* * *

The property office was closed, but the young officer from the quay remained at his desk, trying to fit a description of Tamsin's knife into a space designed for a serial number.

“Cork-handled rescue blade,” I suggested.

“I've got that.”

“Then you have everything relevant.”

He held it over a tray containing a child's buckle, a tin fish, and part of a pocket watch. “Captain said evidence.”

“Of a witnessed rescue. You have the photograph and her name. Does she stand accused of an offense involving it?”

His attention went to the door. “Not that I've heard.”

I gave him something to put in the record. “Released on receipt to independent inspector for return to named owner,” I said. “You can note my license number.”

“And if the Captain asks?”

“Give him my address.”

“He's got it.”

“Yes, I expect he has.”

Outside, spent lamp oil mixed with frying onions. At a stall I nearly ordered two packets of chickpeas, then remembered Tamsin's unfinished bread and her face when I'd tried to pity her. I bought one. Her knife and the measurements. I could start with those.

My office was above a maker of funeral ribbons, ten minutes from the market. I climbed the outside stair, unlocked the door, and finished eating beside the drawing table. Standing, although the chair was clear. I'd been sitting when the call about the gate came. I felt I had to finish the interrupted day before I could sit again.

I pulled an old East Sluice plan from the rack.

The original bypass ran from beneath the service pier into the limestone behind the gatehouse. A later amendment had connected the main gate to Crownworks controls and marked the bypass with a single word.

SEALED, according to the amendment.

Beside it I placed Tamsin's account. Her first pulse had come from inland, well below the normal outfall. Before any structural failure, the maintenance buoy had leaned that way. A sealed passage might contain standing water. It couldn't draw the channel backward.

The mouth lay below low water, reachable without crossing the failed gate. On paper the steps ended at the service pier. On a falling tide the boat crews used the heelway beneath them to load the low decks. I’d walked it during my training, bent double under the pier. It would get me to the dive site. After that I’d need someone small enough to enter.

Late as it was, I was already thinking of Tamsin in terms of what she could do for me. I disliked the thought. I still needed her help.

I drew the entrance and the passage we hadn't checked, included every measurement, and folded my witness statement into the packet.

Back on Good Measure, Jory sat cross-legged under the awning sewing a torn bag. Lantern light warmed her brown hands. She noticed the knife before she looked at me.

“You got it back.”

“It was improperly retained.”

“Most things are, until somebody bothers.”

I laid it on the bench in its receipt. “The measurements she asked for. There's an active flow where the old plan shows a seal. I want to examine the entrance at dawn.”

“Want to examine it, or want her to?”

“I can inspect the mouth from the service steps. I can't enter the channel.”

“That's a yes, then.”

I hesitated. “It would be paid work.”

“From the Board?”

“From me.”

Her needle stopped. “You should say that at the beginning.”

“I'll be there at first light. Please tell her. If she doesn't come, I'll make the observations I can.”

“And if she does?”

“We agree the job before it starts.”

Jory pulled her thread through. “Put the papers under the weight. Night wind comes through here.”

I did as she asked. Water from a spilled jug shone on the bench. Beside a stripped gear, Tamsin’s bronze fragment rested in a shallow bowl. She’d kept it.

At the market arch, halfway through planning the morning's ropes and screen, I realized I'd left my dividers on Jory's bench.

By the time I returned, she'd gone below. Water poured inside the cabin, followed by the low murmur of two women talking.

The dividers were beside my diagram. Someone had moved the papers to the broad top step, within reach of the cabin lamp. The knife was no longer there.

Across the dotted line of the sealed bypass, a wet bare footprint was drying on the paper.

CHAPTER THREE

Terms of immersion

TAMSIN

At dawn, the service steps smelled of broken stone and dead oysters. I'd slept four hours, woken hungry, eaten the last of Jory's bread, and spent the walk arguing with a man who wasn't there.

The man himself had made a screen out of two canvas survey flags and a length of cord. Behind it he'd swept the steps and left me a dry basket with a folded towel, well above the waterline. It was all so carefully arranged that I wanted to move something just to feel I'd had a say.

Instead, I held out my hand.

"Half before."

Ilan took a purse from his coat. "We haven't agreed a price."

"Twelve marks. Six now. Six for the dive, whether or not you like what I find."

He counted six silver marks into my palm. Long fingers, closely cut nails, a little scar across the base of his thumb. I kept my eyes on the money until he took his hand away. "One entry," I said. "No asking for another five minutes because I'm already down there. I get copies of everything. And what I feel goes down as an observation, not some tale my aunt told me."

"Yes."

"You've agreed very quickly."

"Would you like me to take a moment?"

I closed my hand over the coins. "I'd like you to mean it." From the heelway I'd seen how little dry stone the tide had left him. Once it covered that last step, he'd have

to take his neat screen down or let the water do it for him. If I needed him, he'd have to leave his measurements and listen.

“I do.”

I added one condition to his written terms: I decided when the dive ended. He signed without taking offense.

The tide was low and beginning to turn. Temporary stop planks blocked the shattered main gate. Under the service pier, the bypass mouth showed as a dark half-circle, taking water in brief, hesitant pulls. Another hour and we wouldn't be able to see it.

“There should be an inspection chamber beyond the bend,” Ilan said. “It’s on the old plan. Don’t count on air in there.”

“Good.”

My harness waited in the basin at the foot of the stairs, sent over by Jory. Two soft bands joined with mesh, a pouch for light objects, and a release toggle big enough to find in a hurry. Getting into it with eight arms took practice. Getting out needed to take none.

I tested the toggle. “This cord is only for signals. Don't haul on it unless I ask.”

“How will you ask?”

“Long pull, hold it, long pull again. One short means I'm all right. Two means give me line. Three means stop the work and let me retreat.”

He showed me the separate guide clipped to my harness. He could feed slack from the steps, letting me move sideways.

“If it binds?” he asked.

“I release it. If I lose the signal cord, three hard taps on that drainpipe means the same as three pulls.”

He tapped the exposed pipe with his fork handle. Three knocks carried down into the water.

“Don't tap back unless you hear me,” I said. “I need to know the difference between a message and you feeling helpful.”

“Understood.” He put the fork away.

I tested the water with my foot. Salt, warm, ordinary. A raised stone lip caught the seawater in the basin, giving me somewhere still enough to change back when the current picked up.

“There's a freshwater wash line on the old plan,” he said. “Disconnected.”

“If it's connected again, I come out. Fresh water scrambles everything. Up and down, where my arms are. Enough of it will kill me.”

“I'll check the surface control.”

“Before I go.”

“Yes. Before.”

He checked the valve box and brought me over to see the dry, capped wash line for myself. I approved. Reluctantly.

At the screen, he asked, “What helps afterward?”

I'd been preparing for the usual questions. How long could I stay down? How much could I carry? Had I ever considered retrieving jewelry for people who paid properly? This one caught me with my shirt half untucked and no answer ready.

“Water. A towel. Don't put either of them where I have to stand to reach them.”

He lowered the basket by a step.

“Don't grab me if I shake,” I added. “Ask first. I might just be cold.”

“All right.”

He faced the broken gate, leaving me behind the canvas, and began checking the knots on the outer rope. I watched the back of his head longer than the knots required.

Then I put the six marks in my trouser pocket, laid my clothes and knife within reach of the basin, and lowered myself into the salt water.

Ten seconds beneath the surface. Once the fold had made me small, I worked into the harness, eased its soft bands clear of my fin, and tried the release with two arms. I tugged the signal cord once. One tug answered.

The sunrise had no color I could name from here. Pale sheets of light crossed the steps. Below them I felt the shape of the entrance and followed the guide inside.

At first, a human shoulder would have fitted through. Broken shells covered the floor. Past the first bend, a flat lintel brought the height down to less than a foot. I slipped underneath, taking the wall's mottled gray into my skin.

There should have been a seal.

Instead, a circular valve sat in a newly fitted iron frame.

Freshly scraped stone edged the frame. Greased fabric still hung from a bolt.

The valve was partly open. Water drew through the gap, bowing my signal cord into a long curve.

I stayed out of it.

In the wall recess, old guide cord stirred on a hook. Its clean-cut end stood out against the dark, swollen knot.

The knot held against my touch. Ilan would have to make do with my account of it.

A bronze tag hung beneath the new valve. I brought an eye close, but the marks blurred. Ordinary writing, unreadable in this body. I twisted its thin wire until it broke and tucked the tag into my pouch.

One tug. Still all right.

The answer came from above and behind me.

Then the pressure changed.

First, a flattening across my skin. The little ripples that told me the chamber's shape disappeared beneath a broad inland force. I headed for the bend at once. A shudder traveled from the valve through the water, and its gap widened.

Salt water struck the back of my mantle in a hard rush.

I went sideways into the wall, harness scraping stone. The current had reversed. Now it drove out of the inland pipe toward the harbor. A release. Whoever had ordered it could wait until I was out of its way.

The jet shot beneath the low lintel. It could flatten me against the stone. At the end of my guide's slack, I could just see a side pocket where the water turned more slowly.

Three tugs.

The cord jerked taut. If Ilan was hauling on it with the current pushing the other way, the harness could pin me there. I reached for the toggle.

Then the weighted guide loosened.

Slack drifted in from the entrance. I rode it sideways out of the jet and into the pocket, flattening against its ceiling.

The signal cord bumped my arms. A single answering tug: heard.

I reached for the harness toggle, then hesitated over the tag in its pouch. I was tiring, and here I was bargaining with a scrap of bronze.

If the tag had to go, it could go.

The pocket held. Grit rattled over me like thrown seed, and pressure ached through my skin. I waited until the pulse weakened.

Two tugs. More line. Enough to turn.

Slack came immediately. I swung out with the remaining flow and let it carry me under the lintel and round the bend. Beyond the mouth lay the recovery basin.

I slipped out of the harness and wedged it beneath the bottom step, where I could retrieve it once I was human.

The basin was deep enough to cover me curled on my side. But with the flush pushing at its lip, I struggled to keep still.

I settled completely beneath the salt water and counted.

At seven, the flow outside strengthened.

At ten, my knees touched my chest. I brought my feet underneath me, caught the step, and rose human into the screened alcove, making a noise I intended to call a cough if anyone asked.

“Water,” I said. Anything less obvious would have to wait.

A jug appeared at the screen's edge. Ilan's sleeve was soaked to the elbow. He set the jug on the step with its handle facing me and placed the towel beside it.

“Do you need help out?”

“Not yet.”

He moved away.

I drank too fast, stopped, and tried again. Clean well water replaced the salt in my mouth. Safe to drink now that I was human. My hands shook against the jug, and a dull violet stain spread along the inside of my forearm.

“Stop that,” I told it.

“Was that for me?”

“No.”

Wrapped in the towel, I retrieved the harness from under the step and laid the bronze tag on the stone. For all its trouble, it was a very modest-looking thing. The pouch had kept it safe. I'd have liked somewhere equally reliable to put the rest of me.

After getting my trousers on, I sat to pull my shirt over my head. Halfway through, I needed a rest. Sitting with a shirt stuck over my nose was bad enough without having to explain it to someone.

Fortunately, Ilan didn't ask.

I came out from behind the canvas with wet hair trapped in my collar and the tag in my palm. He stood with his back to me, watching the passage mouth. Sunlight had reached his nape. The hair there curled against his damp collar, less orderly than the rest of him. I found somewhere else to look before he turned.

“You released the guide,” I said.

“You gave the signal.”

“People sometimes decide I didn't mean it.”

“What did they suppose you meant?”

“Usually something convenient.”

He considered that and handed me the other six marks. I'd forgotten the money. That was unlike me.

“Is there somewhere you'd rather sit while I write?”

“Here.”

A broad dry step, a wall for my back, and enough sun to warm my shoulders. An excellent place to sit. I wished I didn't need it quite so badly.

He crouched one step below, notebook on his knee. As I described the valve and the freshly cut cord, his drawing followed my finger. I told him how the pulse had spread across my whole back before I could place it. His pencil stopped.

“Write that too.”

“I was finding a place on the diagram.”

“Put it outside the diagram.”

He did.

The violet along my arms had faded to patches of rose. I pulled my sleeves down and waited for him to ask about it, but he went on drawing. Once I realized he meant to let it pass, I could tell him the rest.

“How many entries can you make safely?” he asked.

“Today, none for you.”

“After a flush like that, I mean. Does it change what you can manage?”

I let out a breath. “Three cycles between proper rests, usually. Out and back counts as one. Less if I’m hurt, cold, or swimming hard. Four can put me on the floor. Midnight doesn’t start the count again.”

“One yesterday and one today?”

“One yesterday. One now. Not much sleep between. I'll eat and rest before I decide anything else.”

He wrote that down, too.

“May I see the tag?”

I laid it on his notebook. With human eyes, the marks were perfectly ordinary: CW, a little stamped crown, and figures in a row.

“CW four-one-seven,” he read. “Crownworks control inventory.”

“This isn't Crownworks.”

“No.”

“Could they have borrowed it?”

“Yes. There would be a transfer record.”

He didn't sound confident about finding one. His thumb held the page against the breeze. The fine tremor I'd noticed at the broken gate was gone this morning, although he used his other hand to settle the pencil into its slot. I wondered how the hand felt. I didn't ask.

He turned the notebook toward me. “The tag stays with you. I’ll make us a rubbing each.”

I studied the drawing, not his fingers. “And the money?”

“What about it?”

“Was that the Board's?”

“Mine.”

Jory had told me. Still, hearing him say it changed the feel of the coins in my pocket. I'd named my price and he'd paid it. I owed him nothing else, but I didn't quite feel that way.

“Then get a receipt,” I said.

“I intended to.”

By the harbor offices, I'd eaten a boiled egg and a whole flatbread. The world had stopped tilting. The tag rode in my shirt pocket.

At the inventory window, the clerk checked one index, then another. He came back carefully, as if we were sleeping dogs he hoped not to wake.

“I'm sorry,” he said. “There is no valve with that number.”

CHAPTER FOUR

A city on paper

ILAN

The inventory clerk had been apologizing ever since I asked him to check the number again. “You don’t need to apologize,” I said.

“I'm sorry, sir.”

Tamsin made a small sound beside me. I chose not to interpret it. Some color had returned to her face, along with her disapproval of our surroundings. The marble counters and ceiling fans had once pleased me. This morning the fan above our window spread the smell of wet ledgers without cooling anyone.

“Four-one-seven,” the clerk repeated. “Crownworks. Nothing in the current index.”

“Then the closed transfers, please.”

“I can't authorize that.”

“Who can?”

He glanced at the door labeled MAINTENANCE ACCOUNTS. Before he answered, a woman emerged carrying a folder under one arm and tea in her free hand. Her sleeves were rolled in exact, narrow folds. She stopped behind him to read the rubbing on the counter.

“Inspection license?”

I laid it beside the rubbing. “Still current. The hazard notice gives us access today.”

“Temporarily,” she said, returning my license.

Tamsin rested an elbow on the marble. “Is this the point where we find out the valve only exists until lunch?”

The woman's mouth almost curved. “Sivra Anik. Maintenance accounts. I can give you the file the index doesn't have.”

She set down her cup and retrieved a gray folder from a shelf just behind the junior clerk. It had been within his reach all morning. A red tab read TRANSFER COMPLETE.

“Why wasn't it entered?” I asked.

“Pavi, take your break,” Sivra told the clerk.

He left quickly.

“The boy started last week,” she said.

“I didn't ask whether he entered it.”

“No. You didn't.”

The valve had left Crownworks stores on a signed, stamped invoice. The spaces for its supplier, destination and cost were empty.

Tamsin touched the page's edge. “That's efficient.”

“Which part?” Sivra asked.

“You don't have to change the story if you don't write it down.”

I held the form to the light. If the destination or the price had been rubbed out, the paper should have shown it. All three spaces were smooth. Someone had signed the invoice blank.

“May we have a certified copy?”

“The copying desk charges by the sheet.”

“I'll pay.”

I paid for copies and noted who had supplied them, making clear that neither clerk had filled in the forms.

Sivra read what I'd written. “You're particular.”

“I've been the person at the front desk.”

“Not for a while.”

“No.”

I kept the file between Tamsin and me while we checked the copies. “The original pressure log,” I said. “The one covering yesterday's gate movements.”

“Executive access. Your notice covers East Sluice, not the central engine.”

“The valve connects them.”

Sivra folded her arms across the gray folder. “That is an argument for the executive office. It isn't a stamp I own.”

I gathered our copies.

“Thank you for the file.”

Her eyes flicked toward the pocket holding Tamsin's tag. “Keep your property with you.”

In the corridor, Tamsin said, “You let her tell you no.”

“She told me whose no it was.”

“And saved the boy a reprimand.”

“He didn't move the valve.”

She tucked her copies inside our folded dive agreement. A raised voice came from the compensation hall, followed by the scrape of a chair shoved hard across the floor.

“That,” she said, “sounds more like my department.”

* * *

At the nearest counter, a woman in a fish-stained apron stood with both palms on the marble. Two men behind her carried a door between them. Presumably evidence: its waterline reached almost to the latch.

“You can see how high it came,” one man said.

“We accept that there was damage,” the clerk replied. “We are discussing eligibility.”

Beside me, Tamsin stopped moving.

The clerk’s map showed the low waterfront in amber. I’d spent years recommending repairs along those streets, yet on the morning’s damage tally I couldn’t find a single repair berth. Tamsin pressed the edge of her wet sleeve to the blank strip. When she lifted it there was a dark mark where the berths should have been.

“Temporary commercial occupation,” he said. “The emergency provision covers permanent registered holdings.”

“Our rent is permanent enough,” said the woman.

“That isn't the applicable distinction.”

“What happened to repair-yards coverage?” Tamsin asked.

The clerk turned to his sheet with what looked like relief. “Reclassification under the new harbor schedule. You'll find the notices posted in the west vestibule.”

“When?”

“Last month.”

“We paid the coverage fee at renewal.”

“Before reclassification.”

“And were we paid it back?”

“I don't administer refunds.”

The hall hummed with quiet appeals that went nowhere. A child slept across two chairs. Someone counted coins on a windowsill for duplicate documents. At a farther counter, an old man tried to recall the number of a house whose number plate was gone.

I followed the amber hatching with my finger. The places likeliest to flood were the ones losing cover.

Tamsin supplied her berth number. “Kedge and Quell. Joint owners of the business. The store lease is in both names.”

“Yes. Temporary commercial.”

“The building had stone walls.”

“It's a category, madam.”

“It had our equipment in it yesterday.”

Two guards near the door had begun listening. Tamsin glanced their way without shifting from the counter. One hand kept our copied records flat on the marble. Her pulse beat quickly at her throat. I looked back at the map.

“I want the claim lodged,” she said.

“You may lodge an ineligible claim, but it will be rejected.”

“Then write down why.”

He reached for a printed rejection slip.

“Not that,” I said. “She is objecting to the classification itself. The fee was accepted for the renewed term.”

His eyes settled on the license wallet I still held. “Are you representing her?”

“No.”

“He's showing me the form,” Tamsin said.

The forms stand by the door held one last appeal, stuck to a waiting-room conduct notice. I peeled it free and brought it to her.

“This goes to the district review office,” the clerk said with a sigh. “It won't release emergency funds today.”

“No,” I told Tamsin. “It won't.”

Her grip on the form made me briefly expect her to tear it. Instead, she asked for a pen.

I held the loose pages while she wrote. At the lost equipment, she stopped to count on her fingers, then began again in smaller letters. Everything they'd built up together, now needing a price beside it.

“I don’t know every cost. And Jory needs to sign.”

“You can lodge it now. Add the rest with Jory.”

The clerk stamped her objection and the copy she would keep. The guards moved on.

The woman in the apron leaned over. “Where'd you find that form?”

“The stand,” Tamsin said. “Last one.”

“Well.”

Tamsin turned the blank back of her copy toward me. “What do they actually need?”

Between us, we wrote out a bare appeal. She handed it to the woman and asked the clerk for plain paper.

“You can copy it,” she told the room. “They have to stamp an objection. Even if they hate it.”

“I didn't say that,” he protested.

“No,” she said. “You didn't.”

Outside the hall, she rested against the wall and closed her eyes. I wanted to offer my arm, but she hadn't asked for it. I waited until she opened them.

“Does the district office have any teeth?”

“It can order a review and emergency spending. Local officers still have to enforce it.”

“Teeth in someone else's mouth.”

“Sometimes.”

She studied her stamped paper. “Better than a promise from a man with a nice coat.”

My own cuff was beginning to fray. It did not seem a useful defense.

* * *

Celene Brant saw us before midday. Being made to wait would have troubled me less.

Her office overlooked the central basin and Crownworks' pale machinery hall. The new controls kept water inland until the sea fell, with fewer workers needed overnight.

I'd supported it. I still supported the sensible parts. That made arguing with Brant harder than simply deciding she was wrong.

“Mr. Saye. Miss Kedge. Sit down.”

Tamsin chose the chair nearest the door. I laid my inspection notice on the desk before taking the other seat.

Brant read the first page. At fifty-eight, she still had the face newspaper profiles called reassuring. I'd once found it reassuring myself. Her only jewel was a small gold

pin shaped like the harbor's three central islands. She put on the glasses hanging from their chain rather than pretending she could read the fine print without them.

“An unrecorded valve transfer,” she said. “An incomplete maintenance history. You have had an energetic morning.”

“We need the pressure log.”

“You need to distinguish a local mechanical failure from a fault in the whole system.”

“The log would help.”

She folded her glasses. “The Crownworks has kept the southern market dry through three tides that would once have closed it. Ferry crossings are more reliable. Maintenance costs are down. Those are real benefits.”

“Yes.”

“I'm pleased we agree on something.”

“Our store was dry before yesterday,” Tamsin said.

Brant turned toward her, apparently unruffled. “And you are entitled to a proper assessment of its loss.”

“Your compensation desk doesn't think so.”

“I said an assessment.”

A precise distinction, quietly delivered. Tamsin smoothed the corner of her stamped objection and kept it in her lap.

Brant turned back to me. “You know how the harbor works. I would rather have that knowledge here than wasting itself in appeals.”

“I'm not appealing my dismissal.”

“No. You made your objections to the procurement process very publicly. The contractors concerned are no longer employed.”

“And the invoices?”

“Still under examination. You can be correct about an invoice and wrong about how best to handle it.”

Several people had offered me versions of that sentence. None had restored the salary I'd lost for reporting the fraud. I watched a drop of condensation work its way down her water jug.

“The senior inspection post is open,” she said. “Once East Sluice is resolved. If the evidence supports a local fault, we can repair it and put you where you’re needed. Without a panic about every gate in Nacre.”

“If supported.”

“Of course.”

That salary would cover the rent. Better still, I'd see drawings before the works were buried and speak to crews who now pretended not to recognize me. I could get in before the damage was done. It was an old, familiar argument.

I'd taken that bargain before.

Tamsin watched Brant rather than me. Her dry hair was gathered in a loose knot, one strand escaping at her temple. I wanted to explain to her what the post could make possible. That desire embarrassed me more than Brant's offer.

“We still need the gate movements and basin levels,” I said.

Brant consulted my notice again.

“The archive can supply completed records. Current records stay in the control room, and entry waits for a safety review.”

She rang for her assistant and signed an access slip. “No one benefits from obstructing a legitimate inspection, Mr. Saye.”

Tamsin rose first. “Could we have that last bit on our copy?”

Brant gave her a nearly warm smile. “The signed permission should suffice.”

The archive lay on the lowest dry floor, smelling of limewash and old damp. A porter checked our slip and unlocked it.

“Central instrument series,” he said. “Along here.”

The shelf was empty.

Basin levels, gate cycles, calibration: the labels remained, with a rectangle of cleaner paint where a cabinet had stood.

“Where did they go?” Tamsin asked.

“Storage rationalization,” the porter said. “There was a work order.”

“May I see it?”

He fetched a clipboard from the door. It named the office that had ordered the move, but not where the records had gone. A cleaning receipt was attached underneath.

Tamsin put her finger beside its time. Nine forty that morning.

We'd already been waiting at the inventory window.

CHAPTER FIVE

The price of a witness

TAMSIN

By the time I reached the night market, I'd slept, helped Jory straighten a bent propeller shaft, and learned what it cost to lose all the little things we'd forgotten buying for the store.

You could name the big losses in a minute. It was the little things we kept reaching for before we remembered. A jar of split pins, a drawer of good screws, even our second kettle. Each time Jory added something to the list I heard her pencil start up again.

Now we needed supper. I'd promised something hot, and enough of it. At the onion stall, a woman turned fritters in a pan whose handle had been worn pale. The thick, sweet smell wrapped itself round me. For a moment I wanted nothing harder than standing there until somebody put food in my hand.

“You should have charged him more.”

Sivra Anik stood beside the chickpea-flour sacks. Without a counter in front of her, she seemed smaller, though just as determined to take up her share of space. A plain blue shawl covered her work clothes. In her basket sat one bruised pear.

I checked behind me. Ilan was getting change at the tea stall. He'd found me at the market entrance with the archive removal order, and I'd asked him to supper. He'd looked pleased before asking whether Jory minded. I'd told him to bring enough tea for three.

“For what?” I asked Sivra.

“Whatever you did to get that tag.”

“You followed us?”

“You were both buying food. It wasn’t difficult.”

“Hungry people usually buy something,” the fritter woman said.

“Six,” I told her. “One now. Wrap the rest.”

Sivra waited while she served somebody else. Across the market, Ilan lifted a tea jar to smell it. Sivra watched with a look that made me want to defend him, which was ridiculous. He was buying tea. I'd never thought about him having a favorite kind.

“I kept a copy,” she said quietly.

“Of the log?”

“Some of it. The part that disappeared from the summary.”

“What do you want?”

“A way out. Enough for a room, fares, a few weeks to find work.” She pressed her basket against her hip. “And leave the night clerks out of it. They entered what they were given. If they want to talk later, let them decide.”

I took my fritter and burned the roof of my mouth. At least that bought me a moment to think.

“I don't have relocation money.”

“You own a business.”

“Have you looked at it lately?”

She didn't plead or try to make helping her sound noble. I preferred it.

“There must be someone who would pay for what you've got,” I said.

“There are several. I'd like to remain alive after accepting.”

“That sounds expensive.”

“It is.”

Regatta visitors carrying folded pennants passed between us and Ilan. The lanterns had been relit after last night's curtailed celebrations. In their greasy light, even the fruit looked tired.

Our reserve wouldn't buy Sivra a new life. My hand started toward my pocket, though the oilskin envelope wasn't there. I stopped it.

“My bunk, for tonight,” I said. “If Jory agrees. Otherwise I’ll ask around. I can’t promise a room I haven’t got.”

Sivra looked disappointed. Fair enough. “And the clerks?”

“I won't give their names to the Board. I can't promise what someone else will do with a document I haven't seen.”

“Your engineer might.”

“He's not my engineer.”

“No? He follows you around carrying paper.”

“He offered to do that.”

Saying that aloud hadn't helped. Sivra looked toward Ilan. He'd noticed us now, but stayed by the tea stall.

“He wants his place back,” she said. “People who want to get back inside don't always notice what they bring through the door.”

I remembered Brant's bright office and the offer hanging in its cool air. “He's had a chance.”

“He'll have another.”

The vendor set my hot packet on the counter. I paid out of the six marks I hadn't spent yet, aware of every coin leaving my hand. Ilan was still waiting. I gave him a small signal to stay there. He did.

“What did they change?” I asked.

“The level where the basin’s meant to stop filling. They raised it on paper.”

“How much?”

“Enough that the promised reserve isn't there. At ordinary tides there's room. At the big one there won't be.”

She said it flatly. Around us, oil hissed, the tea seller laughed, and a ferry bell sounded from the next quay. The exceptional spring tide was due in eight days. I imagined water running between these stalls, with all these people still here.

“Will you show us?”

She reached into her basket, then stopped.

Two harbor officers had come through the west arch. One questioned the lantern seller. The other held a folded sheet with only its stamped heading visible.

Sivra gripped the basket until it creaked.

“They weren't supposed to finish checking the offices until morning,” she said.

The nearer officer was the one who'd taken my knife. Had he told me his name? I couldn't remember, and this wasn't a promising time to ask.

He hadn't spotted Sivra.

I put the wrapped fritters down and raised my voice.

“Six? There are five.”

The vendor stared. “There are six.”

“I'm looking at five.”

“You're holding the sixth.”

I looked at the half-eaten fritter in my hand. I'd prepared to be convincing. I hadn't prepared for the evidence.

“Then this one shouldn't count. It's mostly onion.”

“What do you think I sell?”

People turned. One man waiting for his order laughed. I leaned across the counter to block the view from the west arch. Behind me, Sivra stepped into the gap between the stalls.

“I was promised chickpea fritters.”

“No, you stood in front of a sign saying onion fritters and ordered six of them.”

Beyond the vendor, Ilan appeared between stacked trays and the tea seller's canopy. He looked from me to Sivra, set his purchase down, and held the canvas aside.

The young officer stopped at my shoulder. “Is there a problem?”

“Yes,” said the woman.

“No,” I said, much too fast.

She pointed at me. “She's trying to get free supper.”

That accusation made me forget why I'd started the argument. “I've paid you.”

“And complained about onions.”

“I like onions.”

“Then go away.”

I picked up my packet. Behind the young officer, his companion caught sight of Sivra's blue shawl beyond the tea stall, said something sharp, and headed after her.

I stepped in front of him with supper in my hands.

“Oh, good. Can you explain whether the compensation desk has to refund a coverage fee when—”

“Move aside, Miss Kedge.”

He knew me too. Yesterday had done wonders for my reputation.

I moved just far enough for him to pass, hooking an empty display rack into his path with my heel. I only meant to delay him. He tripped, grabbed a pole, and pulled half the tea canopy down on his own head.

I ran into the service alley.

The quiet behind the stalls lasted three strides before shouting followed. Ahead, Ilan and Sivra headed for the pale square of the eastern exit. I remembered the laundry quay beyond it. I'd forgotten the municipal improvements.

The way out was locked.

A new iron grille barred the sluice walk. Through it we could see the path beside the drain. A fist-sized padlock held it shut.

Ilan tried the latch. Sivra set down her basket with great care.

“I thought you knew the way,” she said.

“It was open last month.”

“Very reassuring.”

At the alley mouth one of the officers shouted for us to stop. There was broken glass along the tops of the walls and a debris screen across the drain below us. Small, I might squeeze through it, but I’d have nowhere to change back and I’d be leaving Sivra and Ilan for the officers.

A delivery cart stood under a shelter by the grille. Its wooden brake staff lay across the axle.

“Take that end,” I told Ilan.

He came without asking for the plan. Together we lifted the oak staff, heavy and smooth with use. I pushed its narrow end behind the brass hasp. New screws, old stone. There was our way out.

“You'll break it,” Sivra said.

“Yes.”

“Public flood works.”

We bore down. A screw tore free, and the loosened hasp sliced my palm. I swore and caught the wood higher up, blood making it slippery.

The officers were halfway down the lane.

“Again,” I said.

The hasp tore loose as the staff split. Ilan caught the swinging grille before it hit Sivra. I lowered the broken wood beside the drain instead of throwing it in. Somebody else didn't need that trouble.

“Through.”

Sivra went first, lifting her shawl clear of the handrail. Ilan followed. I pulled the gate shut behind us and shoved the other piece of staff through the bars. It wouldn't hold long.

From a laundry balcony, someone called, “What are you doing to that lock?”

“Send the bill to the Harbor Board.”

The young officer reached the grille and saw my makeshift bar. “Miss Kedge! Don't make me write this up as damage to a public sluice.”

“It is damage to a public sluice.”

He stared at me, apparently appalled by the assistance. I used his pause to follow the others downstairs.

Ilan took the path behind the drying sheets toward the lower landing.

Behind us, the wood broke. I tucked my bleeding hand against my shirt and kept moving.

* * *

At the lower landing, Ilan knocked on a laundry lighter.

A woman opened the hatch, took one look at Sivra, and said, “No.”

“We need the passage to the drying yard,” Ilan said. “There's no trouble for you if—”

“There is always trouble for whoever owns the boat. Go round the bow. Don't step on the clean sacks.”

“Thank you.”

“Didn't say yes.”

We went round the bow. A plank crossed the narrow slip behind it to a walled yard full of washing. The woman lifted it the instant I stepped off. Above us, the officers' lanterns traveled along the wrong side of the wall.

For several minutes, none of us spoke. Behind a sheet smelling of boiled cotton, I listened to water dripping from its hem. My hand throbbed. The crushed packet under my arm might no longer hold anything worth eating. I kept it anyway. Proof that I'd meant to have an ordinary evening.

When the voices faded, Sivra sat on an overturned wash tub. Her hands shook before she pressed them between her knees. Ilan offered his coat, and she wrapped it tightly round her shoulders. I turned over a bucket and sat down too.

He knelt in front of me.

“Let me see that?”

I opened my left hand. The hasp had cut across the pad beneath my little finger. Shallow enough to make me feel foolish about all the blood; deep enough to hurt when I gripped anything.