

# SAIN'T

A NOVEL

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YOUNG



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# 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.

Lower Vale'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 Lower Vale, 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.

*Lower Vale. Look for the blue door with the black lantern on Forsyth Street.*

That warm light in 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 fit 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 Lower Vale 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, that 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 illegitimate one. Lower Vale 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 merchant's 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 on 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, feeling 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

**M**y 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 that 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 that 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 importantly, 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, it 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 helmsman 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.

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations,  
and events portrayed in this novel are either products of  
the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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