

Embers in the Salt

(Sample Chapters)

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This is a sample preview edition of Embers in the Salt.

Prologue

It began in water, just as she always hoped it would end. Her head snapped against stone—once, twice, with a bell-tone crack—and then she was face-down in the pit, cheek in cold water, a thin pink thread swirling away from her ear. Above, the crowd chanted in a voice that went fuzzy at the edges, the vowels blurring into animal noise. Her mouth filled with rust; her vision, bright as if someone had thrown open every window in her skull.

Then: hands in her hair, dragging her up by the roots. The man's breath, sour and heavy, so close she tasted it in the back of her throat. His grip, impossibly strong. He wanted to drown her and make it look like an accident. Her boots gone, her legs slack as rope. If she screamed, no one would hear it over the pit.

You wanted to die in water, said the part of her brain that was always watching from above. *You wanted it to mean something.*

The man slammed her again, temple to wall. This time, something gave; a pale flash of nothingness, not even pain, and then she was underwater, limbs untethered, the taste of salt and blood and grit everywhere. She lay there, blinking, as if it wasn't her at all, as if she was watching a story about someone else.

She tried to roll, but her left leg folded at the knee with a snapping twang. Not broken—she'd know that sound—but the pain was so sharp she bit her own tongue in half trying not to scream.

Her lungs shrieked for air. She used both hands, bracing her fingers against the stone, and pulled herself up. Her head broke the surface, just in time to catch a boot heel to the mouth. She snapped backwards, water rushing in, the world a slurry of torchlight and boots and sound.

No one helps you. No one ever helps.

It would be poetic, maybe, if she died this way. Crushed by a nobody in a moldy underbasement, after so many years making other people wish they'd never met her.

Two hours earlier, it had seemed like a good idea.



The man didn't look like much, but he was smart. He let her fight early, gave her room, even let her score a few showy cuts on his arms. She remembered: at the start, she'd circled him, feinting with open palms, letting the water lap at her knees, confident she could outpace him, lure him onto bad footing. The crowd loved it. She heard her own name, Syra, shrieked from the balconies. She heard "the Girl from Nowhere," "Look at her—she'll take him apart!" She made a joke of it, darting close, slapping the man on the ear just to see if he'd blush.

He didn't. He just smiled, mouth full of old teeth. He knew.

She had seen Lukas Vessein, perched high and aloof, a golden boy gone to rot. He stood at the rail with two strangers, both with the deadpan calm of people who could buy your whole existence with a shrug. The woman wore indigo, the man black, their sleeves stitched with silver patterns that caught fire in torchlight. Lukas raised his cup at her, a motion that said: You do this for us.

So she did, at first. She made a meal of it. She could have ended the fight in the first minute—three clean openings, even a novice would've seen them. But she wanted the crowd. Wanted to stretch it, to make them roar for her. She played the fool, let the man get a handful of her shirt, let him nearly catch her with an elbow. She even laughed, blood already running down her chin from a loose tooth.

This was her mistake. No, the first mistake was thinking the water made her safe. The second, thinking the man was weak. The third—the real error—was believing he wanted to win at all. He didn't. He wanted to take her apart in front of everyone.

She felt his hands clamp her neck. Her vision tunneled; a gold coin of fire, the crowd's torches all blurring into a single hateful eye. He pressed her to the wall, then eased off, and she used that moment to rake her nails across his face. She drew blood; not enough, but it startled him. He let go. She twisted, ready to run.

That's when her foot found the splintered bone on the pit floor.

Not a new thing, a leftover. Maybe lamb, maybe something else, hollow and wickedly sharp, just below the water. She'd felt the scrape on her heel in the first round, but ignored it. Now it went straight into the arch, a cold spike of agony, and her whole body locked. She collapsed. The man was on her before she could breathe, hauling her up, battering her skull against stone, then shoving her under again.

The world narrowed to a circle of water, bright with torch reflection, oily with old blood. She flailed, tried to punch, but her arm was a mile long and made of string. *This is what you get*, said the voice in her head. *You tried to be more than just meat in a room, and now you'll drown, nameless and cold.*

She thought of her mother, somewhere in the flickering dark, watching. She thought of her old mentor—Growler—laughing from a high seat, proud that Syra had made it this far just to die in a puddle. She thought of the smell of brine and smoke, the taste of dried eel, the way the old women at Watergravel said a body's last breath always returns to the ocean. She almost smiled.

The man leaned in, his mouth at her ear. "All done?" he hissed, and mashed her face deeper, the water flooding every part of her.

Something in Syra folded in half, then doubled again. Not an animal, not even a person, but a cord of pure anger, like every bad thing that ever happened to her twisted into a single hard knot.

Syra blinked hard, once, twice, then felt the man's hand relax just enough for her to writhe sideways. In that instant she used both hands to claw his eyes. She found purchase—felt the soft jelly give, the pop, the man's scream muffled by water. She kicked, but her foot was useless, so she bit instead, latching onto the man's forearm, the taste of old salt and skin. She shook her head like a dog, teeth tearing through meat. The man thrashed, tried to pull away, but she held on, even as her lungs threatened to burst.

They surfaced together, a single beast, gasping for air. He tried to get his footing, but the blood from his wrist made the stones slick. Syra twisted behind him, latched onto his back like a barnacle, and this time she went for the throat.

It wasn't elegant. She missed the jugular, got the gristle. Still, she chewed down hard, felt her own teeth chip. The man howled and flailed, but Syra held tight, her fingers hooked into his mouth, pulling the lips wide. She felt the cartilage snap, tasted the hot rush of blood, and then she was back under, dragging him with her.

The crowd was silent now. Or maybe she had gone deaf.

She rode the man's back, using her good leg to pin his head beneath the water, shoving down with all her weight. He fought, and fought, and then didn't. Bubbles rose, then nothing. She counted to ten—old fisherman's trick—then let go.

They floated together for a moment, side by side. Syra spat a wad of flesh into the water and watched it drift. She tried to stand, failed, used her arms to drag herself to the side of the pit.

Above her, faces stared down, some in awe, some in horror. At the top rail, Lukas Vessein was already moving, his two companions' attention fixed on her like judges at a freak show. Their eyes met hers, and she felt a chill that had nothing to do with the pit.

Syra pulled herself upright, blood running in sheets down her neck, one eye already swelling shut. She felt the crowd shift, the old hunger returning, the need to be seen, to be loved or hated but never ignored.

The silence broke when someone shouted, "She kissed him grey!" Laughter, then a second voice: "She gave him a grey kiss!" The words ricocheted around the room, multiplying, mutating, until it became a chant.

"Grey-kiss! Grey-kiss! Grey-kiss!"

Syra bared her teeth. Water, blood, spit. She had never been so alive.

Lukas arrived, his boots dry, his smile slow and public. He reached down, grabbed her hand, and pulled her up until they were both in the light. "Smile," he whispered. "They pay more when you smile."

She did, and the world went absolutely, perfectly mad.

After, when the dead man had been carried out and the pit drained, Syra sat with her heel propped on a broken crate, watching the blood swirl down the gutter. The two strangers in indigo and black passed by, never looking at her, but she felt their interest like a nail driven through the back of her skull.

She caught Lukas's gaze, waiting for the moment when the mask would slip and he'd tell her what this all really meant. Instead, he only raised his glass.

"To Greykiss," he said.

To the monster they'd always wanted.

Syra raised her own glass, and for once, drank it all.



One

The half-light that crept across the Elm Road district in New Merserat was the kind that left everything looking unfinished—a trick of the air, or maybe the city’s way of stalling the morning’s start. It was Syra’s favorite hour, the moment before dawn when the old brickwork sweated mist and the world belonged to those who didn’t quite fit it. She lay flat on her narrow bed, every muscle slack, eyes open, counting her own heartbeat against the city’s hush.

Above her, floorboards groaned under some neighbor’s restless feet. Through a battered wall came a staccato rasp of snoring, the rhythm as familiar as blood rushing in her ears. Water ticked from a cracked cistern somewhere in the rafters, the droplets so regular she could have timed her breathing by them. She waited until the pulse of the first real sunlight pressed through her window’s battered paper, then sat up.

Syra’s room was a converted attic, rented for half what anyone else would pay because the ceiling sloped low enough to scalp the unwary. She liked the discipline it enforced. The bed was a slab of oak with a thin straw pad, hard enough to remind her why she’d earned it. A chipped washbasin doubled as mirror, if you cared to see yourself, and a wooden bucket in the corner made for a night toilet, emptied each morning into the alley’s gully. Everything else—one blanket, one patched coat, a splintery chest she used as table—was, as the landlady put it, “optional to human existence.”

She rose, shivering, and stretched each limb in turn. Her left shoulder still protested, a souvenir from the last time she’d misjudged a fall. She flexed her hands, counting the half-healed cuts along her knuckles, the scar across the meaty pad of her thumb. Under her skin, muscle ran in taut bands, never fully at ease. Her hair, shorn close to the skull with uneven stabs, stuck out in pale

shocks. Syra grinned at her own reflection in the basin—a hard little smile that sharpened her cheekbones and made her black eyes look even meaner in the gloom.

The ritual never changed: strip, splash water, scrub every inch, then dress in precise layers. First the coarse linen undershirt, gray and scratchy but clean. Then the heavy canvas trousers, threadbare at the knees but mended with blue waxed twine. Over that, a black wool tunic—patched so many times it had lost any ambition of fitting properly—girded with a double-wrapped leather belt. She rolled her socks, tucked them tight, and slipped her feet into boots that once belonged to a dockhand twice her weight. The right boot hid a stubby dagger, sheathed in oiled calfskin and positioned to draw with either hand. The blade was nothing special, but it had never failed her.

With a deliberate slowness she palmed the small glass vial hidden beneath her chest. The contents—a thumbprint of gray-black powder, residue of some old memory—shivered in the dawn's light.

She slipped on her coat, a black thing with the lining long since rotted out, and went to the window. Elm Road was already alive with the little movements of city life: a girl lugging a pail of slops to the drain, two boys stripping last night's posters from a tavern wall, an old man hunched in a begging posture over a basket of dried fish. The fog would burn off by noon, but for now it clung to everything, wrapping each figure in its own private world.

Today, she was not free. This was her first day of punishment. It was almost funny, how little her life had changed; only now, when she wore the black coat, it meant something specific. Ten days' labor, city service, for using "undue violence" in the line of a so-called unlawful arrest. She'd broken a man's hand, but only after he'd tried to drive a spike through her cheek. The magistrate called her "a threat to common peace." Syra called it "a good morning." The irony was, she didn't even like the City Watch. She just needed the money.

Syra checked the vial one last time, then stashed it deep in her boot, beneath the dagger's sheath. She shouldered her pack, squared her shoulders, and slipped out into the hall, then up the stairs to the rooftop.

The fog was just beginning to thin, and already the shouts of the dock crew bled through the alleys. From up here, the city fell away in layers: closest, the stammer of Elm Road and the

canning yards; west, the masts of three dozen ships prickling the docks, and the sea beyond, flat and pewter. To the east, the university spires poked through the haze like a forest of knives, and northward, the honeycomb of streets feeding into the rich folk's quarter, where even the fog looked cleaner. The city wall coiled around it all, solid and unbroken except for the three main gates. Even from here, Syra could see the guards at the South Gate changing shift—slow, ponderous, a study in inefficiency.

Syra shrugged off her coat, let the morning chill bite at her skin, and began her routine. She started with balance drills, walking the ridge of the roof with her arms folded behind her back, eyes fixed forward. Every sixth step, she pivoted on the ball of one foot, dropped low, and sprang upward, landing without a sound. After twenty lengths, she switched to knife work—pulling the dagger from her boot and running through a series of cuts and feints, each one practiced a thousand times before. By the time the sun cleared the eastern wall, she was sweating through her undershirt.

At the end of the sequence, she stood facing the dawn, dagger still in hand, and tried to still her mind. A flash of a year-old memory: underground pit, lightless except for the line of oil lamps and the rings of sweat on the boards. Her opponent—faceless, a wall of muscle and hate—lunging for her throat. She remembered the taste of iron in her mouth, the sudden cold when she twisted beneath his arm, the slick crunch when her heel snapped his kneecap sideways. The roar of the crowd, hollow and endless. The aftermath: two weeks in a fever bed, but alive.

Syra wiped the blade on her sleeve and sat cross-legged on the ridge. She dug out the glass vial and set it on the tile between her knees. The powder inside shimmered, catching the new sun in a way that looked almost blue.

“Everything I am, I owe to you,” she said, voice barely above a whisper. Then, quieter: “Or is everything I owe—is to you?”

She wasn't sure which was truer, and it didn't matter. The ritual was for herself.

She cradled the vial in both hands, then tucked it back into its hiding place. The knife followed, then the coat. She scanned the rooftops one last time, checking for any shadows out of place, then threaded through the creaking stairways and slipped onto the street.

Elm Road was awake now, workers streaming north to the main yards, the old women setting out their buckets and laying traps for mice. She saw the sign-writer, the one with the blackened hands, scrawling “half-shift” notices onto doorframes. Saw the two limbless beggars arguing over a piece of broken tile, their voices hoarse and mean. The stink of brine and mildew rode the air, thick as ever.

She took the long path toward the South Gate—where her day of penance would begin—avoiding the main road. Twelve months on these streets had taught her to keep out of crowds unless she was working.

Today, she was a liability. But tomorrow? The city would need her again, and she would be waiting.

She smiled, black eyes glinting, and melted into the flow of the street.

Two

The southern gate of New Merserat was an ugly thing—three squat towers joined by a stone arch, the kind of fortification that could stop a cavalry charge but never the more creative forms of trouble. At dawn, it resembled a fortress built by children: mismatched bricks, moss furred along the base, the whole structure leaning slightly from centuries of overuse and repair. Syra arrived as the first real sun breached the rooftops behind her, painting the street in ribbons of ochre and copper.

A pair of city guards stood at the gate, arguing over a dice cup. They wore the battered blue sashes of municipal service, but Syra knew at a glance which one was in charge—the older, thicker one with a nose broken three times and a habit of cradling his club in both hands. The junior guard, nervous and not yet ruined by city life, flicked his eyes toward Syra, then away again.

“Service crew’s on the east side today,” the shift boss said, voice already hoarse. “You’re assigned to inspection and loading. That means you stand where I tell you, and you don’t touch nothing you weren’t told to.” He grinned, showing teeth black with rot. “You don’t check papers, you don’t enforce. You just lift. Got it?”

Syra nodded. “Got it.”

She took her post at the side of the road, leaning against a chilly slab of wall. The early air had a raw edge, damp and not quite clean, a blend of last night’s garbage and the sea’s mineral tang. Every few minutes, a wagon would trundle up, wheels rattling on the cobbles, and Syra would join a pair of grumbling laborers in unloading crates, sacks, or—once—a live pig trussed and squealing. She worked with the kind of precision that attracted no comment: never too fast, never lazy, never drawing attention.

Whenever there was a break, she watched the guards more than the travelers. She read their postures, the way their hands hovered over weapons when a stranger approached, the little glances exchanged whenever someone too rich or too ragged appeared at the arch. The guards watched her, too, but only when they thought she wasn't looking. Syra let them think she didn't notice.

The world on the far side of the wall was spring, but only just. A muddy track led away from the city toward the forest, and beyond that, the open fields where the Salt Road cut a bone-white scar through the land. Even now, in the season's dead lull, the city's fate depended on that line—a hundred wagonloads of raw salt, harvested from marsh beds twenty miles south and carted in daily. The salt fields ran all year, but in early spring there was almost nothing to move, the beds still flooded from the rains. Syra glanced down the road, searching for the first sign of activity. Nothing yet.

The day built in pulses. By the second hour, the gate buzzed with traffic: a courier from Jaszloheddia with a satchel of stamped papers, a tanner's boy delivering a barrel of lye, three old women hauling brooms and sacks of eggs for market. Syra eyed every wagon for contraband, as instructed, though she was sure the real smugglers used other routes. Her hands were quick and light; she never broke a seal or left a mark.

Between loads her mind wandered back to the hearing—the magistrate's voice dropping like a hammer on wet clay. Last time she'd bloodied someone in the line of duty, they'd docked her pay and lectured her about restraint. No dismissal threats. No magistrates with ink-stained fingers tapping out sentences on polished oak. Now here she was, loading carts with a record stained darker than the tannery run-off. Perhaps it was mere chance. Perhaps New Merserat had finally tired of her particular brand of efficiency. Or maybe—and this thought slid like a splinter under her skin—someone had quietly tipped the scales when she wasn't looking. Brooding wouldn't change the sentence, so she set it aside and watched the road.

When it got dull, she ran little drills in her head—spot the fake limp, guess who would bribe, guess who would try to run. Mostly, they just passed through. A few talked. Those were her favorites.

Just when she thought nothing interesting was going to happen, she caught two travelers mid-conversation, voices pitched low as they shifted a barrel from the back of a rattletrap cart. One was a big man, thick in the neck and paunch, with a voice that boomed for the benefit of

everyone nearby. His companion—a wiry fellow with a bent nose and a smile that moved faster than his eyes—mostly muttered and snorted at the other’s stories.

“—I’m telling you, the salt this year’s gone strange,” the big man insisted, hoisting the barrel onto the platform. “You ever been out near the harvest pits, come nightfall? The wolves don’t bark, they just howl, long and hoarse, like the sound’s caught in their throats. And every time, the salt beds vibrate with it. Makes your hair stand up.”

The wiry one laughed, showing blackened gums. “That’s just the wind, you lummox. The beds aren’t singing, they’re shifting—you ever dump a load of that stuff on wet stone? Sounds like a kettle’s boiling over. That’s all it is.”

They argued in circles, each trying to out-lie the other, and Syra filed the details away with all the other half-true stories that kept the city turning.

By midmorning, the stream of carts had blurred into the usual mix of dust and complaints—until something unusual happened. A man appeared at the gate, alone, on foot. He was older, with a beard that looked like it belonged to someone else entirely, and clothes so colorless they seemed to repel the sun. He waited his turn, then stepped to the arch and presented his empty hands.

The junior guard stiffened. “State your business.”

The man spoke softly, and Syra caught only fragments: “... seeking work... cousin in the city...” The guard looked at his shift boss, who was already shaking his head.

“Papers?” asked the boss.

“I— They were lost, sir. On the road.”

The boss grinned again, wide and mirthless. “No papers, no entry. City law.”

The man pleaded, voice rising in desperation, but the guards were unmoved. The junior shifted his weight, uncomfortable; the boss just gestured for the man to move on.

He didn’t. Instead, the man reached into his coat—a slow, careful movement, but it set both guards instantly on edge. Syra tensed, ready for the outcome, but the man only produced a battered letter, sealed in red wax and torn along one edge.

“It’s from my cousin,” he said. “She lives on Black Rope Lane. She’ll vouch for me, I swear it.”

The boss snatched the letter, barely glanced at it, and tossed it into the mud. “Move along, or I’ll fine you for loitering.”

The man stared at the letter, then at the guards, then at Syra. He met her eyes for just a moment. His were gray, ashen, desperate. She felt something flicker—a memory, maybe, or the ghost of a former self.

The man didn’t move. The boss made a sound in his throat and stepped forward, hand heavy on the club. The junior followed, trying to look mean. They flanked the man, boxed him in, and began to push him back down the road, neither gentle nor cruel, just impersonal. The way you’d herd a stray dog. The man didn’t resist, but his shoulders bowed as they marched him away.

Syra watched, her own hands balled tight against her sides. She knew better than to intervene. The lesson had been hammered into her for years: if the world wanted you dead, it would get its wish, sooner or later.

The next hour passed in monotony: crates of dried fish, barrels of grain, bundles of timber from the eastern woods. The laborers were mostly silent, eyes glazed with exhaustion or boredom. Syra noticed how one man’s hands shook as he lifted the sacks, and how the woman beside him seemed to take twice as much weight without ever breathing hard.

At a lull, Syra wandered to the edge of the gate, staring south along the Salt Road. The morning mist had burned away, revealing the pale line stretching toward the horizon. A day’s walk out, Old Jakel’s place would be waking up. She pictured the old man, hands black with dirt, already cursing the crows in his cabbage patch. It was almost a comfort, to imagine him so unchanged by the years.

She’d trusted him, once. But she’d learned to keep that sort of faith rare and rationed. Everyone, eventually, had something to gain by betraying you. Better to live expecting it, and be surprised by anything less.

She leaned against the wall, feeling the uneven bite of the stone through her coat. A patch of wildflowers, yellow and delicate, poked through a crack at her elbow. Even here, the world found ways to break through.

As the sun climbed higher, the gate's traffic slowed. Syra caught herself staring at the Salt Road again. She'd never seen the Salt Field, not up close. She'd heard stories—the endless white plains, the stink of brine, the way the sun burned your eyes even through closed lids. The city depended on it, drew its life from it, but few ever visited.

Syra wondered, sometimes, what might happen if something stopped the salt from coming. If the city would dry up, or if it would just find some new way to feed its hunger.

She shivered, though the air had grown warm.

It was almost a relief when the shift boss barked her name, snapping her back to the moment. She squared her shoulders, wiped her hands, and went back to work, pushing the morning's unease out of her mind.

But as she bent to lift another crate, she could not shake the sense of something wrong, far out on the white plains—a shadow or a flaw, waiting to make itself known.



At dusk, Syra signed her name in the ledger with a stub of charcoal, and watched the shift boss mark her hours with the careful precision of someone who enjoyed denying people their wages. He looked up at her, squinting.

“Same time tomorrow,” he said, then paused, consulting a different ledger. “No, wait. You’re reassigned. Special detail.”

Syra waited. The man’s finger traced down the page, lips moving as he read.

“Dustfoot Square. Seven bells, sharp. Wear something...” He grimaced. “Presentable.”

The word sat wrong in Syra’s mouth, like spoiled meat. Presentable meant crowds. Presentable meant standing still while important people pretended to care about something. The council surely had devised some fresh humiliation for her—something that wouldn’t test her strength, but her patience.

Thank you for reading!

Continue with the full novel: <https://kloodprouvay.com/book/embers-in-the-salt/>

To welcome you into this world, I would like to share Syra's backstory in a prequel novelette. If you are curious to see what shaped her before the events of this book, I invite you to explore her past.

Join my Reader List at the link below, and I will send the prequel novelette to you.

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