The Salt Crown

Book One of the Nine Seas

Future Best Seller

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This sample book uses a few varieties of chapter themes, styles, drop caps, and scene breaks to show you a brief example of what your book might look like when using Quillen.

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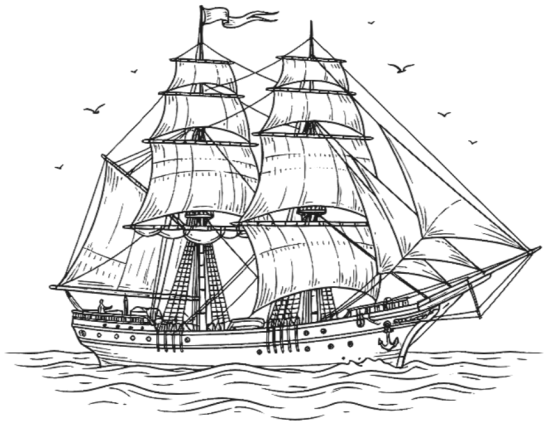
And they read the sample book and they liked it.

— Quillen Team





CHAPTER ONE

The Silent Bell

The bell had not rung since midwinter, and in Calder Vey people had begun to notice.

They did not speak of it, at least not at first. On the upper terraces, where a dry hem was still something to be proud of, it was possible to go a whole week without listening for the sea at all. Lower down, where the steps were green and the cellars smelled of eel, people stopped in the middle of their work and tilted their heads toward the Glass Reach. Then they remembered themselves and carried on, a little louder than before.

Nessa Corr listened for it from the top of the south wall, with the wind in her teeth and four hours of the watch still ahead of her.

High water had come and gone. She knew it the way every tidecaller knew it, as a slackening behind the breastbone. The bell should have answered. One long bronze note, carried over eight leagues of open water,

so faint that wallers swore you heard it in your back teeth before you heard it in your ears.

Nothing.

“You’re doing it again,” said Brannoc.

He sat with his back to the parapet and a jar of brack between his boots. He was a big, patient man who had mended this stretch of wall for thirty years and had opinions about all of it, most of them concerning mortar.

“Doing what?”

“Waiting for it.” He held the jar up to her. “Seventy-nine days. If it was going to start again to please you, it’d have done it by now.”

“Someone ought to be counting.”

“Someone is. Me. I just said.” He took the jar back unopened and squinted at her. “Drink something, girl. You look like a boiled sock.”

She took a swallow to be polite. Brack was brewed to cover the taste of the cisterns, and it did its job so thoroughly that it covered most other things as well. When she had finished coughing, she saw the light.

It was small and pale, low among the reed beds at the foot of the wall. A second kindled beside it, then five more, then so many at once that the whole marsh seemed to be holding up candles. The herons stood perfectly still, each with its breast aglow, every long head turned the same way.

Brannoc was on his feet before the jar had finished rolling.

“*Wet*,” he said, and then he roared it down the length of the wall, where the next man took it up, and the next. “Wet! Wet on the south! Get your dry boots out of bed!”

“There’s no surge due.” Nessa was already pulling off her own boots. “The tables say slack water until morning.”

“Tell the birds.”

The surge came without any of the manners of a surge. There was no long drawing back, no gathering swell. The sea simply stood up, a dark shoulder of water a hundred paces out, and began to walk toward them.

Nessa went down the ladder stair until the water took her to the knees. It was bitterly cold. A caller had to stand in it, and no amount of training made that pleasant. She set her feet, found the weed-slick edge of the lowest step with her toes, and let out half a breath.

Short phrases for small water, her first warden had told her, rapping the words into her skull with a bell-striker. *Long ones for large. And never begin a phrase you cannot afford to finish.*

She began a long one.

The words did not matter. She used a rowing song of her mother's, because the shape of it was easy and because she could sing it with her mind on other things. The sea heard the breath beneath the words. She felt it catch, like a rope going taut across her palms, and the dark shoulder slowed.

Salt left her. It went out through her skin and her eyes and the soft inside of her mouth, and the thirst moved in behind it. She held the note. Above her, Brannoc was shouting for sandbags, and somewhere further along the wall another caller had taken up a lower part, steadying the flank.

The wave bent. It leaned against nothing at all, heavy and sullen, and slid back into itself.

That should have been the end of it. Nessa let the phrase taper, as she had been taught, so the water would not spring back. In the last of her breath she heard the song continue without her.

It was her mother's rowing song. It came from somewhere beneath the surface, in many voices, and it was exactly half a beat late.

Faces rose in a ring about the foot of the stair. They were pale as the underside of a fish, with wide, lidless eyes and throats that swelled and shivered as they sang. She counted seven before she lost the courage to count. The nearest lifted one long hand from the water and rested it on the

step, an inch from her bare foot.

She could not run. Her legs belonged to the cold, and her voice, God help her, was still trying to answer.

The creature tilted its head. It stopped singing, and when its mouth moved again it spoke, in a wet and careful voice that was very like her own.

“Where is your bell?” it asked.

Brannoc’s fist closed on the back of her collar. He hauled her up three steps in a single heave, swearing without a pause, and swung the iron end of his mallet against the nearest mooring ring. The clang was flat and ugly. It was enough. When Nessa had blinked the salt from her eyes there was only the black water, slapping at the stones, and one after another the herons putting out their lights.

“What did you see?” said Brannoc.

She tried to tell him. All that came out was a croak, and he held the jar to her lips while she drank, and drank, and was no less thirsty at the end of it.

On the wall above them a rider in Charterhouse blue was asking for her by name.



CHAPTER Two

The Charterhouse

Qurrel Vane received her in the map room, which was the only warm place in the Charterhouse and smelled strongly of wet dog, although there was no dog.

The First Voice was smaller than Nessa remembered. At eight years old, newly taken from her mother's door, she had thought Vane the tallest person in the world. Now she saw an old woman in a plain grey coat, with salt-white eyebrows and hands that would not quite close. Forty years of working the walls had done that. It was the reward for talent: they let you live long enough to feel it.

"Sit," said Vane. "Water first."

The cup was real glass, blue-green, and it hummed very faintly when Nessa touched it. She held her hand quite still until it stopped.

"The rider said I was to come at once."

"The rider was asked to be polite about it. Was he?"

"He let me find my boots."

"Then he exceeded himself." Vane lowered herself into the chair opposite. "Brannoc Hale has made a report. It is largely about the state of the mortar. Near the end, he mentions that you were standing on the south stair having a conversation."

"I didn't converse. It asked me a question."

For some moments the only sound was the fire. Vane did not ask what sort of thing *it* was, or whether Nessa had been drinking, or any of the questions a sensible person would ask. She only closed her eyes.

"Tell me the words exactly."

"Where is your bell."

"*Your* bell," said Vane. "Not *the* bell."

"Does it matter?"

"It matters enormously. It means they believe we made them a promise, and that we are the ones who have broken it." She opened her eyes. "The Bell of Aumery did not stop, Corr. A bell that has rung through eight centuries of tides does not tire. Someone dived to the tower, cut it from its yoke and took it away."

Nessa stared at her. The tower of Aumery stood in four fathoms at the lowest ebb, in a thicket of drowned spires that would open a hull like a gutted fish. The bell itself was said to be as tall as two people.

"That isn't possible."

"Not without a pilot who knows the spires. A large raft. A number of strong swimmers, and a caller to hold the water off them while they worked." Vane ticked each one off on a crooked finger. "Which of those, would you say, is the hardest to come by?"

There was only one honest answer, and it was sitting in this house, in a hundred narrow beds, with its name written in a ledger.

"One of ours," said Nessa.

"One of ours." Vane turned her face to the window. "And Maro rises before the year is out."

The lower archive lay beneath the high-water mark, behind two iron doors and a clerk who clearly thought it should have been three.

Vane did not come down. Her knees, she said, had retired before the rest of her. Instead she gave Nessa a lamp, a key on a cord and a single instruction, which was to read the slate at the end of the room and then to forget that she could read.

It was not a large slate. The edges were chipped, and the letters had been scratched rather than carved, by someone in a hurry or someone very cold. Nessa knew the first line before the lamp had fully reached it. Every child in Ossary did.

Anwen went down where the grey water lay,

she carried no sword and she carried no gold,

She had sung it skipping rope. There were nine verses, and the ninth finished with the queen climbing home in triumph, the crown shining on her head, and everybody shouting.

The slate went on.

And what will you give for your children to sleep?

A bell for the door, said the voice from the deep.

And what if my bell should be broken or still?

Then send us your singers, as many we will.

Nessa read it through a second time. Her mouth had gone dry again, and this time it had nothing to do with the working. The wardens who drowned at each Great Tide had their names cut over the front door, in gilt. She had polished those names as a novice. She had been proud to be trusted with the ladder.

“They leave that part out upstairs,” said a voice behind her.

The lamp swung. A young man was sitting on a document chest in the dark, wearing a Reedfolk coat of woven oilcloth and a Charterhouse prisoner’s cord about one wrist. His feet were bare. He looked as though

he had been waiting a long while and had not minded.

“Who let you in here?”

“The same old woman who let you in. She thinks we should be friends.” He raised the corded wrist. “She has a strange idea of how it’s done. I am Teodar, of the raft born on the Sel. I have piloted the spires since I was ten.”

“Did you take the bell?”

“No.” He considered it. “I showed the way to the people who did. They told me they were wardens come to mend it.”

“And were they?”

“They wore your blue.”

Somewhere overhead a door boomed shut. Teodar glanced at the ceiling, then slid down from the chest and came close enough that the lamp showed the tide-knots braided into his hair. One of them was black.

“There is a list, singer,” he said. “It is made in the spring before each Great Tide, so that there will be someone to give. Your old woman has this year’s in her coat.” His voice was not unkind. “Did she tell you whose name is first?”

She had not. But she had poured the water herself, into the good glass, and asked after Nessa’s mother, and at the foot of the stairs she had held on to Nessa’s hand a little longer than there was any need to.

Far out across the Reach, where nothing at all should have been ringing, something struck a single bronze note.

About the Author

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