
A NARRATIVE ADVENTURE

WHAT THE SEA KEEPS

A story of fire, fog, and what we owe the dead



FOR 1–4 PLAYERS • CHARACTERS OF 3RD–5TH LEVEL
THREE TO FOUR SESSIONS • COMPATIBLE WITH FIFTH-EDITION RULES

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A NARRATIVE ADVENTURE FOR 1-4 PLAYERS

*A dragon is dying in a sea cave.
Every morning, a girl brings it a basket of fish.
No one in the village knows why.*

What the Sea Keeps is a complete narrative adventure, and a mystery wrapped around a grief. A fog-bound herring village wants the wounded red dragon beneath its dark lighthouse dead. On foggy nights, the drowned walk up out of the harbor and knock on the doors of the living. A kind old man met on the road is not who he says he is. And the answers, when they come, are not really about monsters. They are about a family, a debt that can never be repaid, and the question every character at your table will eventually have to answer: *what do we keep, and what do we let the sea have?*

It is built to be the session your players are still talking about years from now. Not because of treasure or kills, but because of a girl with a basket, an old man with a tin whistle he never learned to play, and a light on a cliff that has been dark for six years.

67

pages

17

scenes in three acts

5

structured
conversations

6

set-piece fights

8

characters

4

endings

WHAT MAKES IT DIFFERENT

STORY FIRST, DICE SECOND

A simple token economy rewards vivid, honest, cinematic play. Rolls land in four tiers, and players narrate their own triumphs. Every fight has stakes beyond hit points.

CONVERSATION AS PLAY

Five structured downtime scenes, each a small game: a soldier's scar game, a net-mending ritual, a children's game on a long night watch. Every NPC's answers are written out, layered with what they aren't saying.

WONDER, HORROR, AND GRIEF

A cave lit by glowing anemones. The drowned walking in the fog. A dream told in smoke. A finale on the highest tide of the year.

CHARACTERS WITH SOMETHING TO HIDE

Every major character is written with a surface, a subtext, and a breaking point, with the exact words they say when the truth finally erupts.

NOTHING IS WASTED

Small details planted in the first hour return in the last. A one-page map traces every one, from the joke where it first appears to the moment it pays off.

ANY TABLE, HANDLED WITH CARE

Companions scale the story from one player to four. Six open backstory Threads let players write themselves in. Content guidance and marked scenes help you set how close the camera goes.

MOMENTS YOUR TABLE WILL CARRY HOME

☞ *A drowned father, knocking softly at his son's door in the fog, asking to be let in.*

☞ *A girl feeding a dragon herring one at a time, and the number she says when the basket is empty.*

☞ *A village song, and the verse a fisherman wrote for his daughter.*

☞ *A box beneath a hearthstone, and what an old man finds inside it.*

☞ *A tin whistle that has never once been played.*

☞ *A light on a cliff that was dark for six years.*

IN THIS PREVIEW

The opening chapter, the rules for story-first play, the backstory Threads, the village of Saltmarrow and its song, and the first three scenes of Act One, all with the page numbers of the full edition so you can see where you are in the book. At the end are three short glimpses of later scenes, chosen to show the heart of the story without giving away its secrets.

PREVIEW EDITION

WHAT THE SEA KEEPS

A story of fire, fog, and what we owe the dead



FOR 1–4 PLAYERS · CHARACTERS OF 3RD–5TH LEVEL
THREE TO FOUR SESSIONS · COMPATIBLE WITH FIFTH-EDITION RULES

*“What the sea gives, the sea will keep,
and the herring run silver, and the water runs deep—
but I’ll keep a light, and I’ll keep a flame,
and the sea can’t keep a love that’s calling it by name.”*

— *The Herring Wife’s Lament*, as sung in Saltmarrow

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67 PAGES · 17 SCENES · 5 STRUCTURED CONVERSATIONS · 6 SET PIECES · 4 HANDOUTS

Published by Tide Moon Tales · tidemoontales.com

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

What the Sea Keeps is a mystery wrapped around a grief. On its surface it is a story about a dragon: a great red wyrm lying wounded in a sea cave beneath a dark lighthouse, a frightened fishing village that wants it dead, and a bounty large enough to tempt anyone. Underneath, it is a story about a family, a debt that can never be repaid, and the question every character will eventually have to answer: *what do we keep, and what do we let the sea have?*

This book is written for a Game Master who wants to run a story the players will remember, not because of the treasure they found or the monsters they killed, but because of a girl sitting beside a dragon with a basket of fish, an old man holding a tin whistle he never learned to play, and a light on a cliff that was dark for six years and is never dark again.

Read the whole adventure before you run it. The emotional weight of the final act depends on small things you plant in the first: a joke about how much a man could eat, a verse of a song, a habit of cutting the heads off fish. Those details are scattered on purpose. They are the kindling.

WHAT YOU NEED

This adventure uses the fifth-edition rules for combat and checks, but it leans on them lightly. Stat blocks are kept brief and live in Appendix A. You will need the usual dice, a way to track a small currency called **Embers** (glass beads, coins, or red tokens work well), and a willingness to let a scene breathe when nobody is rolling anything at all.

CONTENT AND CARE

A NOTE ON DIFFICULT THEMES

This story deals directly with **grief**, the **death of a parent**, a **town burned with its people inside it**, **drowning**, and a **child whose dead father knocks at his door**. It ends with a death that is chosen. None of these are played for shock, but they are meant to land.

Before the first session, talk with your players. Ask whether any of these themes are ones they would rather see handled at a distance, with the camera turned away, than in full view. A scene can fade to black and still hurt in the right way. The adventure marks its heaviest moments with a ♦ so you can find them and decide in advance how close the camera goes.

NOT IN THIS PREVIEW
PAGES 2-4

THE STORY IN BRIEF

Forty-eight years of secret history, told in full for the Game Master: what happened in the hill town of Corrow, what happened in the cave during the Ember Winter, and what really happened on the night of the Black Squall. With a timeline of Saltmarrow.



HOW THIS ADVENTURE PLAYS

This is a story first and a game second. That does not mean the dice don't matter; when a drowned man has your arm and is pulling you under the harbor water, the dice matter enormously. It means the dice exist to create drama, not to replace it. The rules in this section are small tools to keep the story at the center of the table.

THE THREE PROMISES

Before the first session, make these promises to your players, out loud:

1. **Talking is playing.** Some of the best scenes in this adventure involve no dice at all. A conversation around a fire is not a break from the game; it is the game.
2. **The camera follows you.** When you do something, describe it so the rest of the table can see it. A good description earns rewards, and the story will bend toward it.
3. **Failing is not losing.** When a roll goes badly, the story does not stop. It gets more complicated, more expensive, or more painful, and often more interesting.

EMBERS

Embers are the adventure's narrative currency. They reward players for the kind of play this story wants: vivid, honest, brave, cinematic. Each player begins the adventure with **one Ember** and can hold **up to three** at a time. Use physical tokens; the act of sliding an Ember across the table is part of the pleasure.

EARNING EMBERS

Award an Ember when a player:

- **Paints the shot.** Describes an action so vividly that the table can see it: not "I attack," but "I vault the gunwale, catch the rigging, and come down on it blade-first."
- **Tells a true thing.** Answers a downtime conversation prompt with something honest and costly about their character.
- **Pulls a Thread.** Brings their backstory Thread into a scene in a way that matters (see page 9).
- **Hears the subtext.** Notices and names what an NPC is *not* saying, in character.
- **Lets it hurt.** Chooses a complication, failure, or loss because it serves the story.

Be generous. In a typical session, every player should earn two or three.

SPENDING EMBERS

A player may spend one Ember to:

- **Lean in.** Gain advantage on a roll, declared before rolling.
- **Try again.** Reroll a die they just rolled and take the new result.
- **Flourish.** On a hit or success, add a cinematic effect: disarm, shove, knock prone, frighten, or something the table agrees fits.
- **Not today.** Turn a hit against a companion NPC or another player into a near miss, describing how you saved them.
- **Flashback.** Declare that you prepared for this moment earlier, and describe a short scene showing how.
- **Look closer.** Ask the GM one question about what an NPC is feeling. The GM must answer truthfully, but only with a gesture or detail, never a direct statement.

CINEMATIC ROLLS

When a roll matters, use this rhythm:

1. **The player describes the intent.** What are you trying to do, and what does it look like as you begin?
2. **The GM names the stakes.** “If this goes wrong, the drowned man drags you off the jetty.”
3. **Roll.**
4. **Read the result in four tiers:**

RESULT	WHAT HAPPENS	WHO NARRATES
Triumph Beat the DC by 5+, or a natural 20	You succeed beyond what you hoped. Add a bonus effect or gain an Ember.	The player narrates it fully.
Success Meet or beat the DC	You do what you set out to do.	The player narrates; the GM may add one detail.
Success at a Cost Miss by 1–3	You do it, but something is lost, broken, or set in motion. The GM offers the cost; the player may accept it or take a plain failure.	The GM narrates the cost.
Fail Forward Miss by 4+	It doesn’t work, but the story moves. A new problem, a revealed secret, a door that closes and another that opens.	The GM narrates; the player describes their character’s reaction.

In combat, when a player’s attack drops an enemy, ask the question every great table knows: *“How do you want to do this?”* and let them describe the blow.

SET-PIECE FIGHTS

Every fight in this adventure is a **set piece**: a scene with a place, a purpose, and something besides hit points at stake. Each one is presented with:

- **The Stage:** the location and its features that players can use (nets, lanterns, slick rocks, rising water).
- **The Stakes:** what the fight is really about, which is usually something other than survival.
- **Beats:** moments that happen at certain points (“At the start of round 3, the tide comes in”) to keep the fight moving and changing.
- **Ending It:** how the fight ends, which is often before every enemy is dead.

Encourage players to use the stage. A drowned sailor knocked into a lantern bursts into steam. A net thrown from a loft pins three of them. These are worth Embers and should usually be worth more than a plain attack.

CONVERSATIONS

Each act contains at least one **structured conversation**: a downtime scene built around a small game or ritual with prompts. These are designed to be fun first and revealing second. Each one includes the NPCs' own answers, which are layered: what they say on the surface, and what they mean underneath. Do not explain the subtext. Play it, and let the players find it.

A few guidelines for running conversations:

- **Go around the table, but let players pass.** A pass is a choice too. Come back to them.
- **NPCs answer honestly, within their character.** An NPC who is hiding something answers truthfully but sideways.
- **Reward vulnerability with Embers,** and reward humor too. A conversation that is all tears is exhausting; one that is all jokes is empty. The best ones swing.
- **End on an image, not a summary.** When the conversation reaches its natural end, describe one small thing: the fire settling, someone falling asleep, a look exchanged. Then cut.

RUNNING FOR ONE TO FOUR PLAYERS

Because the size and shape of the party can't be known in advance, this story is carried in large part by its **companion NPCs**. Three of them can travel with the party:

- **Aldous Varr**, the old dragon-hunter, joins in Act One and is a capable fighter.
- **Maren Hale**, the girl with the basket, may join in Act Two. She fights with a fishing gaff and knows every path on the cliffs.
- **Hesketh Pell**, the grieving net-maker, may join in Act Three, armed with his family's old iron harpoon.

PLAYERS	COMPANIONS IN FIGHTS	ENEMY NUMBERS	NOTES
1	Aldous and Maren both fight	Use the "1–2 players" numbers	The player starts with 2 Embers. Companions act on the player's turn, after the player.
2	Aldous fights; Maren supports	Use the "1–2 players" numbers	Each player may "call" a companion once per round.
3	One companion fights	Use the "3–4 players" numbers	Companions act on their own initiative, run by the GM.
4	Companions mostly narrate	Use the "3–4 players" numbers	Companions handle side-threats in narration ("Aldous holds the door").

Companions should never steal the spotlight in a fight. They hold doors, catch people who fall, shout warnings, and take hits that give the players a reason to be furious. Their spotlight comes in the conversations, where they are the center of the story.

PACING AND SESSIONS

The adventure runs well in **three sessions of three to four hours**, one per act, with the Epilogue at the end of the third. If your group loves conversation scenes, it may stretch to four; the natural break is in Act Two, after the Bloodsnappers fight.

The Spring Tide is five nights away when the party arrives. You don't need to track time strictly, but you should let players feel it. Mother Gannet counts down the nights. The fog thickens. The Knocking grows bolder. The clock is a pressure, not a punishment.

THREADS: BACKSTORY FOR YOUR PLAYERS

A Thread is a loose end in a character's past that this story can pick up and pull. Before the first session, offer each player the list below and invite them to choose one, or none, or to invent their own. A Thread is a frame, not a script: the player decides the details. Your job is to know where in the story each Thread will be tugged.

Each Thread includes a **question** the story will eventually ask that character, and the **scenes** where it is most likely to surface. When a player brings their Thread into a scene in a way that matters, award an Ember.

THE ASH THREAD

You lost someone to fire.

It might have been a house fire, a war, a burning ship, a pyre you weren't allowed to stand near. You have decided whether you still smell the smoke. Optionally, your family came from Corrow, and someone of your blood died in a fire long ago, in a hill town whose name this story will speak. If so, this story will remember them, and so will someone else.

The question: Can you sit beside the thing that burned and still see a person?

Where it surfaces: *withheld in the preview*

THE SALT THREAD

You were born on this coast, and you left.

Maybe you grew up in Saltmarrow itself; maybe in a village just like it, a day's walk down the shore. If you were from Saltmarrow, decide one thing: Tobin Hale taught you to swim, or Ilsa Marrow let you climb the Lantern stairs once when you were small, or Maren was the little girl who followed you everywhere. Saltmarrow remembers you. Decide whether you want it to.

The question: What did you run from, and is it still here?

Where it surfaces: *withheld in the preview*

THE KEPT THREAD

You carry something you cannot put down.

A letter you never sent. A ring that was never given. A debt, a lie, a promise to someone now dead. Decide what the object is, and keep it on your character sheet. You don't have to tell anyone what it means. Not yet.

The question: Is it an ember or the tide? Something to keep burning, or something to let go?

Where it surfaces: *withheld in the preview*

THE CHANGED THREAD

You were once something worse than you are now.

A soldier who did things under orders. A thief who hurt the wrong person. A cruel child who grew into a kind adult. You have changed, and almost no one alive knows what you were. Someone in this story has lived the very same life, and will recognize it in you. They may speak to you when they will speak to no one else.

The question: Does being good now pay for being terrible then? Does anything?

Where it surfaces: *withheld in the preview*

THE LANTERN THREAD

Someone you love is lost and never came home.

They went to sea, or to war, or out the door one morning. There was no body and no goodbye. You have never been sure whether to grieve. If they were lost at sea, the Tidewife may be keeping them.

The question: Can you call their name and let them go?

Where it surfaces: *withheld in the preview*

THE DEBT THREAD

Someone gave something up so that you could live.

A parent who went hungry. A friend who took the blade meant for you. A stranger who pulled you from a river and drowned. You have been trying to be worth it ever since.

The question: What do the living owe the ones who paid for them?

Where it surfaces: *withheld in the preview*

WEAVING THREADS IN

You don't need to rewrite the adventure for each Thread. Look for the moment where an NPC says something that lands differently for that character, and give the player a beat to respond. When Maren asks, during *Tide or Ember*, whether a person who did something terrible long ago can be forgiven, the character with the Changed Thread hears a different question than everyone else. Look at that player when she asks it.

NOT IN THIS PREVIEW

PAGES 11–15

THE CAST

*Maren Hale, the girl with the basket. Aldous Varr, the old man on the road.
Hesketh Pell, Tobin's oldest friend. Reeve Odalys Pell. Mother Gannet, Keeper
of the Drowned Book. Pip Tarrow, a boy with a door. The Tidewife, She Who
Keeps. And the dragon in the cave. Each drawn with a surface, a subtext, a
voice, and the line where they finally break.*



SALTMARROW

Saltmarrow is forty cottages of grey stone and black tar clinging to a cleft in the cliffs where a small river meets the northern sea. It has a harbor wall, a smokehouse, a chapel to nobody in particular, a tavern called the Gutted Gull, and more drying racks than people. Everything smells of herring, woodsmoke, and wet rope. On a clear day you can see thirty miles of grey water. There have not been many clear days lately.

Above the village on the northern headland stands the **Widow's Lantern**, a tall tower of black stone with a great glass lens at its crown. It has been dark for six years. Beneath the headland, reachable by a cliff stair cut into the rock or by boat at low tide, is the sea cave the village calls **the Kiln**. Nobody remembers why it is called that, except Mother Gannet.

PLACES IN SALTMARROW

THE HARBOR WALL

A curved arm of stone with iron rings for mooring, a bell on a post, and nine boats tied up idle. The tenth boat's mooring ring is empty. Someone has tied a black ribbon to it. On fog nights, this is where the drowned come up.

THE GUTTED GULL

Low-beamed and smoky, run by the enormous and gentle **Brannoc Sweet**, who waters the ale and doesn't charge widows. The party can take rooms here. Brannoc keeps a chair by the fire that nobody sits in; it was Tobin's.

THE NET LOFT

A long upper room above the boat sheds, strung with nets in every stage of repair. In the evenings, the village gathers here to mend and talk. Hesketh Pell runs it.

HALE COTTAGE

The last house on the north path, at the foot of the headland. Tobin and Maren's home. Warmer inside than any house should be, even with the fire out.

GANNET'S HULLS

Mother Gannet's cottage, built from three upturned boats, at the top of the village. The Drowned Book lives here, on a lectern made from a ship's wheel.

THE REEVE'S HOUSE

The only two-story house in Saltmarrow. The bounty notice is nailed to its door.

THE WIDOW'S LANTERN

One hundred and eighty-one steps to the lamp room. The great wick is soaked through; the oil cistern cracked in the Squall. Ilsa Marrow's shawl still hangs on a hook by the door.

THE KILN

The sea cave beneath the headland. See Act Two.

THE SMALL THINGS

The power of this story's ending depends on an accumulation of ordinary detail. Saltmarrow should feel lived-in and specific. Whenever the party moves through the village, roll or choose from the table below, and describe one small thing. Many of them are about Tobin Hale, because Tobin is everywhere in this village; he is in its jokes and its habits and its furniture. By Act Three, the players should feel they knew him.

D12	SOMETHING SMALL
1	A woman hangs out washing, and every shirt on the line is patched at the left elbow in the same red wool. "Tobin's wool. He had a whole bale of it. Gave it out every winter."
2	Children play "Drown the Dragon" on the strand, one of them roaring with arms outstretched. A mother hauls them in by the collar, furious and crying.
3	In the smokehouse, one rack of herring hangs apart from the rest, every fish with its head cut off. Nobody will say whose it is.
4	The chapel bell rings for no reason. It has been doing that since the Squall.
5	An old man sitting on the harbor steps teaching a boy a knot. "Tobin showed me this one. Called it the Hale Hitch. I've no idea where he learned it. No one else on this coast ties it." (Remember the knot.)
6	Someone has left a single herring on the doorstep of Hale Cottage, gutted and headless.
7	Brannoc at the Gull wipes down Tobin's empty chair with the same care he'd give a grave.
8	Fog in the street, so thick that the party hears footsteps pass close by and never sees who made them.
9	A girl sitting on a wall plays a tin whistle, badly. Watch Aldous if he's with you. He stops walking.
10	Nails in a door, fresh ones, hammered in a hurry. On the inside of the door frame, scratches.
11	An old woman says, apropos of nothing, that she never once saw Tobin Hale wear gloves in winter, not once in thirty years.
12	At dusk, a single figure on the headland: Maren, climbing the Lantern. An hour later, she comes down. The light never comes on.

THE HERRING WIFE'S LAMENT

Every soul in Saltmarrow knows this song. It is sung at weddings, at wakes, at net-mending, and by children skipping rope. It is the oldest song on the coast, and it is not just a song: it is the bargain with the Tidewife, set to a tune so nobody would forget it. Its last verse was added by Tobin Hale, for Maren, when she was small. Sing it, or read it, at least once in Act One. It will be sung again at the end.

My love went out on the grey morning tide,
with his net on his shoulder and his knife at his side.
He said, "Keep the lamp lit, and keep the coals red,
and I'll come home to you, love, I'll come home," he said.

*So what the sea gives, the sea will keep,
and the herring run silver, and the water runs deep,
but I'll keep a light, and I'll keep a flame,
and the sea can't keep a love that's calling it by name.*

The fog came down like a widow's veil,
and the bell on the harbor rang out like a wail.
I climbed up the tower, a hundred steps and more,
and I called out his name till my throat was sore.

(Chorus)

If I don't come home by the turn of the year,
then gut the fish clean, love, and don't shed a tear.
Cut the heads off for the bairn, for she can't abide the eyes,
and I'll be the warm in the window, and the light where it lies.

(Chorus)

The third verse is "Tobin's verse." Maren couldn't bear the eyes of a fish when she was little, so he cut the heads off for her, every meal, for years. When the village sings this verse, people look at Maren and smile. She doesn't smile back anymore.

ACT ONE

THE GREY COAST

In which the party meets a kind old man, comes to a frightened village, is offered a great deal of gold, and learns what knocks on doors in the fog.

ACT ONE AT A GLANCE

Purpose: Establish the village, its people, and its grief. Introduce Aldous as a friend. Plant the small details about Tobin. End with horror.

Scenes: 1. The Road and the Stranger · 2. Saltmarrow · 3. The Net Loft · 4. The Knocking

Key plants: Aldous's burned hand and Corrow; Tobin ate thirty herring; Tobin's warm hands; the Lament's third verse; the girl with the basket; Hesketh's silent hands; Pip's door.

SCENE 1

THE ROAD AND THE STRANGER

Mood: Warm, easy, a little melancholy · **Type:** Conversation

Open the adventure on the coast road, a day's walk from Saltmarrow. How the party came to be here depends on your campaign. Some options:

- Word of the bounty reached them in Port Halvard: *five hundred gold crowns for the head of the red dragon of Saltmarrow.*
- They are escorting a cart of salt to the village, its first supplies since the Squall.
- A character with the **Salt Thread** has had a letter: *Come home. Something terrible has happened.*
- They are simply traveling north, and the road goes through.

The road north runs along the top of the cliffs, and for the last hour the sea has been on your left: grey, enormous, and breathing. Gulls hang in the wind like kites. The heather is brown with the end of winter. Ahead, where the road dips toward a stream, someone has built a small fire in the lee of a milestone, and an old man in a patched cavalry coat is sitting beside it, frying something in a pan and singing a song so filthy that the gulls seem embarrassed.

He sees you and stops, mid-verse, entirely unashamed. “Ah. Company. Thank the gods, I’ve been talking to this sausage for an hour and it’s a poor listener. Sit, sit. There’s enough for everyone if nobody’s very hungry.”

This is **Aldous Varr**. Play him as the most charming person the party has met in months. He shares his food. He asks their names and remembers them. He tells them he is a retired soldier, that he is going to Saltmarrow to see the sea “properly, up close, once before I die, since I’ve spent sixty years nearly managing it.” The long oilcloth bundle on his back is, he says, a fishing rod.

He coughs, a wet, deep cough that he waves away: “Damp. I’m allergic to it. Unfortunate, given where I’m headed.” A character who succeeds on a **DC 13 Wisdom (Medicine)** check recognizes it as something worse: the grey, rattling cough of ash-lung, the sickness of people who breathed too much smoke, years ago.

If the party mentions the dragon or the bounty, Aldous goes very still for a moment, then asks, with careful casualness: “Red, they say? What color red?” Whatever they answer, he nods slowly and changes the subject.

Aldous asks to walk with them to Saltmarrow. “Safer in numbers. And you’re much better company than the sausage.” As the afternoon fades, he suggests they make camp and proposes a game.

CONVERSATION: SCARS AND SONGS

The game: “Soldier’s game,” Aldous says. “Everyone shows a scar and tells how they got it. Everyone else guesses whether you’re lying. Guess wrong, you drink. Guess right, the liar drinks. Losers sing.” He produces a flask of something that smells like it could strip paint.

How to run it: Go around the fire. Each player shows a scar (it can be on the body, or a scar of another kind: a broken thing they carry, a habit, a fear) and tells its story, true or false. The others call “true” or “liar.” The player reveals. Award an Ember for any story told with real feeling, true or false, and for any song sung with conviction.

PROMPTS, IF PLAYERS NEED HELP

- A scar you got doing something brave and stupid.
- A scar someone you love gave you, by accident.
- A scar no one can see.
- A scar you got protecting someone who never knew.

ALDOUS’S SCARS

First, the funny one. He rolls up his trouser leg to show a nasty puckered bite mark on his calf. “Bear. Big as a hay cart. I was nineteen and stupid. It came at me out of a thicket and I put my spear right through its—” Let the players guess. “...Goose. It was a goose. I was trying to steal its eggs. I was nineteen and stupid.” (Entirely true. He loves this story.)

Second, the sad one. He touches a thin white line through his eyebrow. *“Friend of mine in the cavalry. Bottle. We were both drunk, and he thought I’d been with his wife. I had.”* A rueful laugh. *“He died at the Fallow Ford two years later. I carried him off the field. We never did talk about it.”* (True.)

Third, the lie. If anyone asks about his burned hand, he holds it to the firelight and turns it, so the scars gleam. *“Kitchen fire. Grease pan. Very undramatic.”*

Subtext: This is the only lie he tells all night, and he tells it badly; he is too practiced at the other stories and not practiced at this one at all. A player who calls “liar” is right. Aldous will smile, drink without a word, and say, *“Aye. It was.”* If pushed gently, he says only: *“A town called Corrow. In the hills. Long time ago. It isn’t there now.”* Then he changes the subject. If pushed hard, he gets up and goes to check on the horses, or the road, or nothing at all.

ALDOUS’S SONG

If Aldous loses (or if anyone asks), he sings, not the filthy song, but something quiet: a wordless, wandering little tune, hummed low, that doesn’t quite resolve. If anyone asks what it’s called, he says, *“Haven’t the faintest. Something I heard once.”* He touches the tin whistle at his throat when he says it.

Remember this tune. It is not finished with this story.

Ending the scene: The fire burns down. Aldous falls asleep sitting up, his hand on the oilcloth bundle, the way a soldier sleeps with a sword. In the dark, the sea breathes. Far up the coast, very faintly, a bell rings, though there is no wind.

SCENE 2

SALTMARROW

Mood: Grey, watchful, grieving · **Type:** Exploration and social

You come down into Saltmarrow in the early afternoon, out of a fog that has been thickening for hours. The village appears all at once: grey roofs, black tar, smoke rising straight up into the still air, and everywhere the racks and racks of herring drying like silver leaves. It is very quiet. There are boats in the harbor but no one is on them. A bell on the harbor wall clanks once, softly, as you pass, though nothing has touched it.

People watch you from doorways. Not hostile. Tired. A woman with a basket of washing looks at your weapons for a long moment, then looks away, and you realize she’s hoping.

Within minutes, a small boy in an enormous jumper attaches himself to the party. This is **Pip Tarrow**. He wants to know their names, where they came from, whether they’ve killed a dragon before, how many, how big, whether they have one of those swords that are on fire. He appoints himself their guide and is genuinely useful. If anyone asks about his jumper, he says “It’s my da’s,” and then runs ahead to show them something else.

THE REEVE'S OFFER

Pip leads the party to the Reeve's house, where the bounty notice is nailed to the door. **Reeve Odalys Pell** receives them in a cold front room with her account book open on the table.

"Three weeks ago," the Reeve says, "a squall came out of a clear evening and caught the whole fleet. Ten boats. Thirty men. In the middle of it, a red dragon came up out of the sea. Nine boats came home. Three men didn't. One of the nine boats, Tobin Hale's, came in empty, with no Tobin in it." She turns a page in the book, as if to check a figure. "My brother put a harpoon in it. It fell into the cave beneath the headland. It is still there. It is not dead. And since it came, the drowned have started walking."

She closes the book. "The city pays five hundred crowns for a dragon's head. I'll give you a hundred of them, and the rest goes to the widows. You may keep whatever else you find in that cave. I am told dragons keep boards."

The Reeve answers questions plainly. What she says and doesn't say:

- **About the dragon:** Nobody has gone near it except "the Hale girl," who goes down every day. *"Grief has turned her. Her father is dead. She feeds the thing that killed him. I don't pretend to understand it. I've asked her to stop. She won't."*
- **About the drowned:** They come up on fog nights and knock on doors. *"Mother Gannet says don't open the door. We don't open the door."* She doesn't mention which doors.
- **About Hesketh:** *"My brother is a hero. He has been drinking since. I would ask you not to trouble him."* A DC 14 **Wisdom (Insight)** check notices she says "hero" like a word she has practiced.

If Aldous is present, he says nothing during the meeting. Afterward, outside, he unwraps the oilcloth bundle. It is not a fishing rod. It is a lance of black ash wood, nine feet long, with a head of pale, cold-worked steel engraved with a single word: **WENNA**.

"I owe you an apology," Aldous says. "I've not been honest. I'm not here to see the sea. Well. I am. But mostly I'm here because I've hunted one particular red dragon for forty-eight years, and I've heard of red dragons in a dozen places and gone to every one, and it's never been him. It probably isn't him this time either." He runs his burned thumb along the engraving. "But I'd be glad of the company, if you'll have me. And I'll not take a copper of the bounty. I've no use for it."

If asked what the dragon he hunts looks like, he says: *"Big. Old. Red as a forge. And a notch out of the left horn, the size of my fist. A knight put it there, years back. Should've put it through his eye."*

THE GIRL WITH THE BASKET

At some point during the afternoon, perhaps as the party leaves the Reeve's house or as Pip shows them the harbor, they see her.

A young woman is walking up the north path toward the headland, alone, with a covered basket on her hip, carried the way women carry washing. She is tall and walks quickly, with her sleeves rolled to the elbow in the cold. People step out of her way. Nobody greets her. A man spits, not quite at her feet.

Pip goes quiet beside you. "That's Maren Hale," he whispers. "She feeds it. Every day. Ma says she's gone mad." A pause. "She's not mad. She gave me a toffee once."

If the party approaches Maren now, she is curt. "You're the dragon-killers." She looks at their weapons the way the washerwoman did, but with the opposite hope. "It's dying anyway. You don't need to hurry." Then she goes on up the path. If they follow her now, skip ahead to Act Two, Scene 5. More likely, it is getting dark, and Pip insists they come to the Net Loft, "because everyone'll be there, and there's cake on Fiveday, and it's Fiveday."

SCENE 3

THE NET LOFT

Mood: Warm, funny, aching underneath · **Type:** Conversation

The Net Loft runs the length of the boat sheds, a long low room under the rafters with lamps hung from the beams and nets everywhere: draped over trestles, hanging in great brown waterfalls, piled in heaps like sleeping animals. Twenty people are working on them, men and women and old folk and children, fingers moving without looking, wooden needles flicking in and out. There's a fire at one end and a kettle and, as promised, a cake. Someone is playing a fiddle quietly in a corner.

A big red-bearded man with a cup in his hand is holding court by the fire, loud and laughing. He sees you and booms a welcome. "Dragon-killers! Come in, come in! Grab a needle! Nobody in this loft sits idle, not even heroes!"

This is **Hesketh Pell**. He is warm, loud, generous, and drunk. He presses cake and tea (heavily laced) on the party and puts nets in their hands. Mother Gannet is here too, wrapped in shawls in the best chair, cackling. Pip sorts cork floats in a corner and listens to everything.

If no one in the party knows how to mend a net, someone shows them; a character can learn with a **DC 10 Dexterity** check, and failing just means everyone laughs at their hopeless knots, which is its own kind of welcome.

CONVERSATION: THE THREE KNOTS

The custom: "In Saltmarrow," Mother Gannet announces, "strangers who come to the loft must tie three knots and tell three truths, or they're thrown in the harbor. That's the law. I made it up just now, but it's the law." She explains: as you tie each knot, you say something true.

- **The First Knot** is for something you're glad of.
- **The Second Knot** is for something you'd mend if you could.
- **The Third Knot** is for something you'd let the sea have.

How to run it: The villagers go first, to show how it's done. Then each player ties their knots, one at a time, going around. Between knots, let the villagers react, tease, and tell stories. Many of those stories are about Tobin. Award Embers for true, costly, or very funny answers.

THE VILLAGERS' KNOTS

Brannoc Sweet (the innkeeper), first knot: *"Glad the herring are back in the bay. Glad of this cake, which I made, so you're all welcome."*

Mother Gannet, first knot: *"Glad I've outlived every man who ever told me to hush."* Second knot: *"I'd mend my hips, and then I'd find a sailor."* The loft howls. Third knot, and she's suddenly not joking: *"I'd let the sea have the Book. Three hundred years of names. I'm tired of being the one who remembers."* Then she cackles again, as if she never said it.

A young fisherman, Callan, first knot: *"Glad I can still feel my hands."* When the party looks puzzled, Hesketh explains, loudly: he was in the water in the Squall for an hour. *"Tobin pulled him out. Tobin always had hands like a hot stone, you'd give him a frozen net and it'd come back soft as bread."*

HESKETH'S KNOTS

First knot. *"Glad I knew Tobin Hale. Best man on this coast. Strongest swimmer. Swam in January! Every New Year's morning, straight off the harbor wall, and he'd come up laughing and steaming like a pudding. And he could eat! Thirty herring at a sitting, I watched him do it, and then he'd ask what was for afters."*

Plant this carefully. *Thirty herring.* Let it be a funny line now. Maren will say the number in Act Two.

Second knot. He starts loud: *"I'd mend—"* And his hands, which have not been still all night, stop moving. The needle hangs in the net. For three long seconds, he says nothing at all. Then: *"A throw I made. Bad throw."* And he ties the knot, very tight, and drinks.

Subtext: A player who notices his hands stop (call for nothing; simply describe it) and asks about it later has found the first real clue. If anyone presses him now, the loft goes quiet, Odalys (if present) says sharply, "Hesk," and he recovers, booming: *"Harpoon throw! At the dragon! Should've gone through the heart, didn't it? Should've killed it clean."*

Third knot. *"I'd let the sea have that thing in the cave."* Said too loud, too fast.

ALDOUS'S KNOTS

If Aldous is here, he ties his knots with surprising neatness; soldiers learn. First: *"Glad of present company."* He means it. Second: *"I'd mend a wall. An old stone wall. By a well."* Nobody understands; he doesn't explain. Third: he takes a long time. *"Pass,"* he says finally, and Mother Gannet, looking at him very hard, lets it go.

THE SONG

As the evening ends, someone starts singing the Lament, and the whole loft joins in, needles keeping time. Read or sing it (page 16). When they reach the third verse, Tobin's verse, the singing gets softer, and Hesketh stops singing altogether, and Mother Gannet says into the silence, "*He made that verse up for the girl, you know. She couldn't abide fish eyes. He cut the heads off for her every meal till she was twelve.*"

Ending the scene: People drift home in pairs and threes, hurrying. Someone looks out the loft door and says, "Fog's in," and the whole room changes. Mothers grab children. Doors are barred. Brannoc says quietly to the party: "You'd best come back to the Gull. Quick, now. And whatever you hear tonight: don't open the door."

SCENE 4

THE KNOCKING ♦

Mood: Dread, then terror, then grief · **Type:** Horror and set-piece fight

This is the adventure's first real horror, and it should be played slowly. Don't rush to the fight. Let the dread build.

The fog comes in off the sea so thick that the lamp in the window of the Guttled Gull lights nothing beyond the glass. Brannoc has barred the door. He has hung a sprig of dried thrift over it and is sitting beside it on a stool with a fire iron across his knees, not drinking. The village is utterly silent.

Then, from down by the harbor, you hear water. Not waves. Water running off something as it climbs out of the sea. Then footsteps on the cobbles: slow, wet, heavy, the squelch of boots full of seawater. They come up the street. They pass the Gull. They stop at a door a few houses up.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

And a voice, thick and bubbling, as if spoken through a mouthful of water: "Callan. Callan Dree. It's your turn. Come down to the water."

Pause. Let the players react. Brannoc whispers, if asked: "*That's old Abe Sunder. Drowned in the Squall. He comes for the ones who lived.*" The footsteps move on, door to door. "*Hesketh. Hesketh Pell. It's your turn.*" Other footsteps join them. Three drowned men are walking Saltmarrow tonight: **Abe Sunder**, old and slow; **Davey Dree**, Callan's brother; and **Jory Tarrow**.

Then, from up the street, a child's voice: "*Da?*"

PIP'S DOOR

If the party looks out (or if anyone has a reason to be outside), they see a small figure in a huge jumper at the door of the Tarrow cottage, prying at the last nail with a gutting knife. On the doorstep outside, dripping, stands a man in oilskins with his face turned away, his hand raised to knock.

GLIMPSES OF WHAT FOLLOWS

Here the preview stops, at the moment the fog comes in and something climbs out of the harbor to knock on the first door. In the full edition, the story continues for another 42 pages. What follows are three short excerpts from later in the book, chosen to show what this adventure becomes without giving away what it is about.

FROM ACT TWO · SCENE 6 · THE KILN AND THE BASKET · PAGE 29

She comes down the last of the stair with the basket on her hip. She doesn't look at you. She walks straight across the rock to the dragon's head, the way you'd walk across your own kitchen, and the great amber eye follows her all the way.

She sits on a flat stone beside its jaw. It is so close that the heat raises a flush on her cheek, and she pushes her sleeves up further, and sets the basket in her lap, and lifts the cloth off it.

Herring. A whole basket of them, silver and clean. She's already gutted them. She has cut every head off, neatly, with one stroke behind the gills.

She takes the first fish out by its tail and holds it up.

The dragon's jaw opens, slowly, a furnace door, the teeth inside it like broken pillars in a burned church, and the heat that comes out of that mouth is enough to make you step back. And it takes the fish from her fingers as gently as a horse takes an apple from a child's flat hand.

She takes out another.

While it eats, she talks. Not to it, exactly. Near it. About nothing. "Fog again last night. They came up again." Another fish. "Mag Tarrow's roof is leaking again. I said I'd go up and fix it but she won't let me in the house anymore." Another. "Salt's gone up. Four coppers a sack. Brannoc says it's robbery."

The dragon eats. It breathes. The light under its scales brightens and dims with each breath, slow as a tide.

FROM ACT TWO · SCENE 9 · THE LONG WATCH · PAGE 35

On a night watch at the mouth of the cave, Maren teaches the party a children's game her mother used to play with her. Someone names a thing; everyone else says whether it is **tide**, something you let the sea have, or **ember**, something you keep burning. It begins with fish stew. It does not end there.

"Being afraid of the dark." *"Tide. I used to be. Ma used to take me up the Lantern at night and say, look, there's no dark anywhere we can't put a light in. Then she died and the light went out and I found out she was wrong." She pokes the fire. "Tide anyway. You can't live like that."*

"My mother's shawl." It's still hanging in the Lantern. She can't take it down and she can't leave it there. *"Ember," she says. "Obviously. Ember."*

And then, late, when the fire is low, not looking at anyone:

“A person who did something terrible a long time ago. Something really terrible. And then spent the rest of their life being good. Tide or ember?”

Every player answers. The Game Master is told to write their answers down. They will be quoted back to the table in Act Three, when the question is no longer hypothetical.

FROM ACT THREE · SCENE 16 · THE SPRING TIDE · PAGE 48

It doesn't come as a wave. It comes as a breath. The harbor fills, and keeps filling, past the high-water mark, past the harbor wall, into the streets. Boats lift off their moorings and drift between the houses. The fog is so thick that every torch is a smudge of orange in a grey world. And through the fog, up out of the flooding streets, walk the drowned: not three, not dozens, but hundreds, every soul the sea has taken from Saltmarrow in three hundred years, in oilskins and wool and rags and nothing, with kelp in their hair and their eyes like the bottoms of wells. They are walking up the hill toward the headland. Toward the Lantern. And they are calling names.

And out at sea, past the harbor mouth, something vast is rising out of the water, a shape of grey water and fog, taller than the cliffs. Its hair is the slow drift of kelp. Its face is every drowned woman's face. It is coming in on the tide.



“Eleven,” she says quietly, when the basket is empty. “You used to eat...”

FIND OUT WHAT SHE SAYS, AND WHAT THE SEA KEEPS, IN THE FULL EDITION.

The full edition is available from **Tide Moon Tales** at tidemoontales.com