

ORDER OF THE AKASHA

Warlock

Chapters One to Twenty

Akashic Monk

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CHAPTER 1

When the Sky Broke Open

PART 1 OF 5

Hooks and Hollow Promises

We were just fishing.

Not summoning, not seeking fate, not praying to gods.

Just two brothers by the river, laughing, casting, splashing, living in that golden space of childhood where the stars still feel close and death feels like fiction.

My name was Kael then.

And my brother, the one they would one day call Eryth the Elder Monk, still wore his smile wide and innocent, unaware that one cast of his fishing line would fracture the sky and everything we were meant to be.

He was younger than me, which I reminded him of whenever he tried to lead. That morning, he had insisted he knew a shortcut to the river. It ended at a wall of brambles. By the time I pulled him free, he had lost a sandal and acquired three scratches he swore did not hurt.

“A very fast shortcut,” I told him. “Straight into a bush.”

“We would have reached the river.”

“Eventually. As old men.”

Our father laughed behind us.

That was the part I would struggle to remember later. Not the words, not even the sound, but how easily he had laughed. Rhydian, Keeper of the Records, with a basket in one hand and Eryth’s lost sandal in the other. There was mud on the hem of his robe. For once, nobody was waiting outside a sealed chamber to ask him a question neither of his sons was allowed to hear.

He had taken us out of the Temple of the Eye before the first lesson bell. Eryth thought we were escaping our tutors. I thought our father had finally remembered we existed outside the hours between supper and sleep.

Neither of us asked him why.

The Sacred River of Eldra shone through the trees. Its shallow banks were bright with smooth stones, and long ribbons of weed streamed beneath the surface. Across the water, the valley climbed toward the pale walls of the temple. From down here, the windows of the Records chamber looked no larger than a row of closed eyes.

Rhydian set the basket on a flat stone. He slipped off his sandals and stood barefoot in the water while we argued over which rod had the straighter tip.

“That one bends because you lean on it,” he told me.

“I don’t.”

He looked at my hand. I was leaning on it.

Eryth laughed so hard he nearly dropped both rods. I pushed him with my shoulder, carefully enough that he could pretend I had not been careful.

Our father knelt beside us and opened a little tin of bait. His hands were broad, with ink settled into the creases around his nails. In the temple, those hands turned pages that required two monks to lift. That morning, they showed me how to thread a hook without tearing the worm in half.

“Patience is the first lesson of the Akasha,” he said.

“Then why do we have lessons in the morning?” I asked. “Why don’t we wait?”

Eryth snorted. Rhydian caught the smile trying to escape his own mouth.

“You find patience very useful when it excuses you from work.”

“I find it useful everywhere.”

“Then use a little now.” He steadied my wrist. “Power will always find those who wait for the right moment.”

I nodded as though I understood. What I understood was that he was watching me, and I wanted to do something worth watching.

I cast too hard. The line struck the opposite bank, wrapped itself around a root, and stayed there.

My father said nothing. Somehow that was worse.

Beside me, Eryth let his hook fall into the shallows. He did not worry about how far it went. He crouched on a half-submerged log, humming a hymn he knew mostly by its ending.

I looked away from him and began tugging at my trapped line.

Rhydian rested a hand on my shoulder.

“You don’t have to win the river, Kael.”

“I know.”

He waited until I looked up.

“Do you?”

I wanted to tell him that I did not care about the river. I cared about the quiet that came over the monks when Eryth repeated something he had heard only once. I cared about being told I was strong when I wanted to be told I was wise. I cared that my little brother could sit doing nothing and make people wonder what he was becoming.

Instead, I said, “Will you help me get it loose?”

Our father stepped farther into the water. Together, we worked the hook free.

I watched the place where it had caught. “You could have used magic.”

“Yes.”

“Then why didn't you?”

“Would that have taught you how to free a hook?”

“It would have freed it.”

Eryth laughed. Our father looked between us, then turned the hook in his fingers.

“Magic doesn't belong to the obedient, my sons. It belongs to the one willing to endure it.”

I straightened. That sounded like a lesson at which I could be better than my brother.

“I can endure it.”

Rhydian touched the point of the hook, carefully enough not to break his skin.

“Then learn what you are asking to bear before you take it into your hand.”

I nodded impatiently. I was looking at the rod already, imagining a cast that would reach farther than anyone else's.

For a while after that, I was happy.

We ate bread from the basket. Eryth dropped his piece, recovered it before the ants did, and argued that the dirt improved it. Rhydian stretched out in the grass with one arm across his eyes. When I asked him a question about the oldest room in the temple, he said there were no rooms at the river and therefore no questions about them were permitted.

“That sounds like a rule you just made up.”

“I am Keeper of the Records. I can record it when we return.”

Eryth laughed again.

I wish I had let the sound last longer. I wish I had not spent so much of that morning waiting for something else to happen.

PART 2 OF 5

The Impossible Catch

It was his line that caught the impossible fish.

At first, there was only a tug. Eryth leaned forward, his feet braced against the log. Then the rod bent until its tip touched the surface, and he stopped smiling.

“Kael.”

I set down my bread.

“Don’t pull like that. You’ll break it.”

“I’m not pulling.”

The line had gone taut toward the center of the river. Beneath it, a thin white shape moved upstream without disturbing the water.

I climbed onto the log behind him and put my hands over his. Whatever he had hooked was lighter than I expected. It rose when we lifted the rod, yet the line shuddered as though we were dragging it across stone.

“Father,” I called. “Look.”

The creature turned beneath the surface.

It was translucent, flickering with inner light, swimming against time instead of current. I had no words for that then. I only knew that its tail seemed to move a moment before the rest of it followed, and the ripples reaching the log were folding back into the place where they had begun.

Small lights traveled through its body. Some shone steadily. Others vanished when I tried to count them. At the center of its chest, if a thing shaped like that could have a chest, a dark curve interrupted the light.

It looked almost like an eye.

Rhydian was on his feet.

“Set the rod down.”

His voice changed so completely that I thought I had done something wrong.

“We can catch it.”

“Kael. Both of you. Away from the water.”

Eryth tried to release the rod. His fingers would not open.

“Father?”

A loop of pale light had wound around his wrist. It tightened when he pulled back. The skin beneath it flushed red.

I dropped to my knees and grabbed the line. It passed through my palm like cold thread, leaving no cut. I caught it again, harder, furious with a thing I could not hold.

Rhydian reached the log. He took Eryth’s wrist and covered the band of light with his hand.

For one breath, I saw a mark beneath our father’s sleeve. A circle crossed by a narrow stroke. I had seen him draw it once in the margin of a page he closed when I entered the room.

The mark darkened.

Eryth cried out. The light broke around his wrist, and our father pulled him backward into my arms.

“Take him to the bank.”

I stumbled off the log with my brother against me. He was shaking so badly that his teeth struck together. When I tried to make him stand, his knees folded.

Behind us, the rod lifted from the water.

No one held it.

It hung upright, trembling, with the starborn creature suspended below its tip. Water fell from the creature in bright drops. Halfway down, the drops stopped.

All along the river, the reeds became still.

I heard one last birdcall. It ended in the middle of a note.

Our father stood ankle-deep in the shallows, looking up.

Far above him, a thin line appeared in the blue of the sky.

It widened.

Something on the other side moved its wings.

PART 3 OF 5

The Arrival of the Sky Falcon

The Sky Falcon tore through the clouds like a blade made of thunder and flame.

I had seen its shape in the high mosaics of the temple: a hooked beak, a long scaled body, wings that curled around a burning circle. The painted creature had fit inside a ring of gold tiles. The thing descending toward Eldra covered the sun.

Lightning ran between its feathers. Fire moved beneath the scales of its throat. When it cried, the stones along the bank split open.

Eryth clapped his hands over his ears.

I could not move.

The creature turned in a vast descending spiral. Its shadow crossed the trees, and leaves fell from branches that had been green a moment earlier. Beneath that shadow, I felt something look through me. Every small thing I had hidden that day seemed suddenly visible: my envy, my hunger to be praised, the pleasure I had taken when Eryth scratched his arm in the brambles.

Then the shadow passed. I dragged in a breath and found my father still standing in the river.

He had not run.

He moved like he already knew this moment was coming.

Rhydian lifted both hands. The starborn creature drifted toward him, trailing the remains of Eryth's line. It settled between his palms, small enough now to fit there.

"They are children," he said.

The Sky Falcon lowered its head.

No voice answered. The pressure in the air increased until I tasted blood where I had bitten my tongue.

My father's robe snapped around his legs. He said something I could not hear. The little creature twisted in his hands, casting white light across his face. For an instant, he looked older than he ever had in the temple.

I tried to stand.

The first shock struck before I got my feet beneath me. The river rose in a wall, curved over our father, and broke apart above the trees. I rolled across the stones with Eryth beneath my arm. Something hit my shoulder. My hand went numb.

When I lifted my head, a narrow ring of light surrounded us.

Beyond it, the bank was burning.

The grass inside the ring remained green. Outside, stones glowed red, and our basket collapsed into sparks. I could still smell the bread.

"Father!"

Rhydian turned. He reached us in three stumbling steps and knelt at the edge of the circle. His hands were empty. There was a blackened shape on each palm where he had held the creature.

He caught my face between them.

They were cold.

"Listen to me, Kael."

I tried to pull him into the circle. His robe was slippery with river water.

"Come here. Just come here."

"Hold your brother."

"I am holding him."

His eyes closed for a moment. When he opened them, he looked past my shoulder.

Eryth had crawled forward on his hands and knees.

Our father reached for him.

I have returned to that moment more times than I have returned to any place on earth. I have moved us in my memory, put myself closer, made the light less fierce, imagined that if I had asked a different question he would have stayed looking at me.

But Eryth was there. Our father's hand closed around his wrist, just above the red mark the line had left.

"The Records," Rhydian said.

Eryth leaned toward him.

“Father, I don’t—”

“Remember.”

The Sky Falcon struck the ground beyond the ring.

I saw its talons sink into stone. I saw the hooked beak open above our father. Between its jaws, light gathered so densely that the edges of everything around it began to disappear.

Rhydian pushed Eryth against me.

Then he stood.

There should have been time to catch his sleeve. He was close enough that I could see the loose thread where I had torn it the winter before, climbing onto his shoulders. I reached for that thread.

My fingers closed on air.

A column of white fire rose around him. His outline remained inside it for a heartbeat, one arm lifted across his face. Then the fire drew upward, carrying the shape of him toward the torn sky.

Eryth screamed.

I did not. I was watching for my father to step out of the light.

The Sky Falcon rose after it. Its wings beat once, flattening the reeds on both banks. Thunder rolled through the valley, and the opening in the sky folded shut.

The suspended drops of water fell.

The river struck the stones. Birds scattered from the far trees. Eryth’s broken rod landed beside the log with a small, ordinary splash.

Our father was gone.

PART 4 OF 5

What the River Kept

I left Eryth inside the circle and ran into the shallows.

The water was warm. Ash moved beneath it in gray ribbons. I searched where our father had stood, then farther out, digging my hands between rocks while the current tugged at my sleeves.

“Father.”

I said it as though he had merely failed to hear me.

“Father, come out.”

There was no body. No hand rising from the water. No voice from the trees. The place where the Sky Falcon’s talons had struck was a sheet of dark glass, already cooling beneath the river.

Eryth called my name.

I kept searching.

When he called again, I shouted at him to be quiet.

He went quiet.

That was how the monks found us: my brother kneeling in unburned grass, and me waist-deep in the river, turning over stones I could barely lift.

One of them waded out. I fought him when he took my arm. Another helped him carry me back to the bank. I told them our father was under the water. Then I said he had been taken into the sky. I heard myself saying both and hated the care with which they looked at one another.

Nobody asked us to stay and look again.

They wrapped Eryth in a robe. Someone pressed cloth against a cut above my ear. On the walk to the temple, my brother kept trying to take my hand. I let him hold two fingers until the monks began questioning him about the creature.

Then I pulled away.

They asked where the hook had caught. They asked what Rhydian had said. They examined the band around Eryth's wrist and whispered to one another while he stared at the path.

I had been there too.

I told them about the ring of light. I told them our father had looked as though he recognized what was coming. At that, one of the monks glanced sharply at another, and they stopped asking questions until we reached the gate.

By evening, they were calling it a sacrifice.

I wanted a different word. Sacrifice sounded like something complete, a deed with a reason beneath it. I had seen our father disappear while I reached for his sleeve. Whatever reason the monks possessed, they would not give it to me.

I went to the Records chamber. The doors were closed. His sandals had been brought back from the river and placed beside the threshold, still tied together with the cord he used when he carried them.

I sat down beside them.

From inside, I heard pages turning.

That was the first thing I hated after he was gone: someone else turning his pages.

Eryth found me there after supper. He carried a bowl I had not asked for.

"You should eat."

"You sound like them."

He put the bowl down between us. There was a smear of ash beneath his ear. No one had washed it off.

"I told them you helped," he said.

"Helped with what?"

"When the line caught me."

I stared at the doors.

"It caught you because you wouldn't leave it alone."

He drew his hand into his sleeve.

I knew it was unfair as soon as I said it. I had helped lift the rod. I had called for our father to look. But my brother lowered his eyes, accepting the words, and I felt a brief, ugly relief.

At last, someone else was carrying something that hurt.

We sat until the food went cold.

"Do you think he can come back?" Eryth asked.

For a moment, I wanted to say yes. We could have held that hope between us. We could have made the monks answer us together.

“He’s dead,” I said.

Eryth began to cry without making a sound.

I looked at the sandals until I could no longer see them clearly.

PART 5 OF 5

A Brother’s Flame, A Warlock’s Shadow

The next morning, Eryth was chosen to carry our father’s mantle.

Those were the words the monks used. He was still a child, too small for the robe they laid across his arms. They spoke of instruction and preparation, of honoring the trust Rhydian had placed in him. Nobody called him Elder Monk that day. He would grow into that title much later.

But the doors of the Records chamber opened for him.

I watched from the passage as the monks guided him inside. He turned once, searching for me. I stepped back where the light from the doorway could not reach my face.

He had not asked for any of it. I knew that. It did not help.

I was older. I had been the one our father told to hold him. When danger came, I was given someone to protect. When the danger passed, Eryth was given something to inherit.

I began counting that difference as though it could explain the river.

Our room was empty when I returned. The two beds stood against opposite walls, just as they always had. Eryth had left his blanket in a knot. A pair of stones from an earlier fishing trip rested on the windowsill. We had argued over which one looked more like a dragon’s egg. Now I could not remember which was mine.

Our father’s small journal lay among the things the monks had brought from his room. It had been set aside with his spare belt and a cracked wooden cup, ordinary belongings to be divided between his sons.

I picked it up.

Most of the pages contained things I recognized: notes about damaged bindings, lists of supplies, a sketch of the river bend. Near the back, his handwriting grew smaller. He had written around a circle crossed by a narrow stroke.

The mark from his wrist.

I touched the ink. It was dry. Nothing moved. No voice rose from the page to tell me I had been chosen.

Beyond our window, a bell called the novices to their lessons.

I turned the page anyway.

There were more marks, some crossed out, some repeated until the lines cut into the paper. Beside one, my father had drawn the outline of a doorway. The wall around it bore no window, no stair, nothing that would tell me where to look.

I heard footsteps in the passage and closed the book.

Eryth entered carrying Rhydian’s folded robe. He set it on his bed and stood there with his hands still beneath it, as if he did not know how to let go.

“They said we can keep his things.”

“I heard.”

He looked at the journal.

“Can we read it together?”

“There’s nothing in it,” I told him. “Just work.”

He nodded. He believed me easily, the way he always had.

I waited until he went to wash his face. Then I slid the journal beneath my mattress and sat on the edge of the bed, listening to the water in the next room.

Our father had left something I did not understand.

This time, I would be the one who found out what it meant.

CHAPTER 2

The First Spark

PART 1 OF 5

What the Hand Remembered

The first time I struck him, I didn't mean to.

That is how I used to tell it. I meant to stop him speaking. I meant to make him understand something that had lodged beneath my ribs and would not come out. I wanted him to feel it, and for a moment I allowed myself to believe there was a difference between that and wanting to hurt him.

It happened beside the washing cistern, eight days after the river.

Eryth was carrying our father's spare robe to the remembrance service. The hem dragged because he had folded it badly, and I caught it before it reached a puddle.

“You'll ruin it.”

“I know. Give me that end.”

I did not let go. There was the repaired tear beside the pocket, the stitches our father had made too large. Someone had brushed the cloth and steamed out its creases. It smelled of the herb cupboard.

“They washed it,” I said.

“There was mud on it.”

“It was his mud.”

Eryth looked at me over the bundle. There were shadows beneath his eyes. I had decided those shadows were proof that the monks kept him up learning important things.

“They said we could lay it on the empty chair,” he said. “Just during the service.”

“His chair.”

“Yes.”

“Then they'll take it away and put you there.”

“Kael, stop.”

He said it quietly, in the careful voice he had begun using with me. I hated the care. I hated that he had learned to approach me as if I were a horse liable to bite.

“Did they tell you what to say?”

He glanced toward the passage. We could hear people gathering beyond it.

“I have to read the remembrance.”

“Go on, then. Let's hear.”

“I don't want to do this here.”

“You want everyone watching.”

His grip tightened. “I want Father.”

I shoved the robe against him. He staggered into the cistern, and water slopped over its lip. When he reached toward me, perhaps to steady himself, perhaps to push me away, I struck him.

My knuckles met the hard bridge of his nose. His head jerked back. The robe fell between us.

For an instant he stood with his hands half raised, looking surprised. Then blood ran over his lip.

I waited for him to hit me. I wanted that too. If we fought, there would be two angry brothers and a quarrel someone could break apart. Instead he lowered his hands.

“I miss him too, Kael.”

“You don't get to say his name!”

He hadn't. Even then, I knew he hadn't.

“He looked at you,” I said. “At the end. He had something to tell you.”

Eryth pressed his sleeve against his nose. Blood spread through it.

“He told you to hold me.”

“Because you couldn't even stand.”

He bent to retrieve the robe. I caught it first. There was a wet patch at the shoulder, spreading into the brushed cloth, and I began rubbing it with my palm as though the water were the thing I had done wrong.

The laundry keeper found us like that.

She took one look at Eryth and led him to the cistern. When she asked what happened, he looked at me. I expected him to say he had fallen.

“Kael hit me.”

I felt betrayed before I felt ashamed.

She gave him a clean cloth and made him lean forward. Then she held out her other hand to me.

“Put down the robe.”

“I can dry it.”

“Put it down.”

The novice master came. He examined Eryth's face, then my hand. Neither of us had broken anything. He asked whether I intended to strike my brother again.

“No.”

“Look at him when you answer.”

I did. Eryth was staring at the cloth in his lap.

“No.”

For the next seven days, I would work in the laundry after lessons. I would remain within the inner courts. The master said he would speak with us separately before deciding whether we should continue sharing a room.

“He can stay,” Eryth said.

“That is not something you need to decide while you're bleeding.”

The master was gentler with him than he had been with me. He ought to have been. I managed to resent him for it anyway.

At the service, another novice read the remembrance. Eryth sat beside the empty chair with a folded cloth beneath his nose. I stood at the back. Our father's robe lay across the chair, its damp shoulder concealed underneath.

People spoke of Rhydian's courage. They said he had given his life. No one said that there was no body. No one asked whether he had been frightened.

When the congregation rose, Eryth did not. His hand rested on the robe's pocket. I saw him press the clumsy stitches between his fingers, the way I had.

That evening, he turned toward the wall when I entered our room.

I took the journal from beneath my mattress. A smear of dried blood marked my cuff. I could not remember whether it was his or mine, though only one of us had been bleeding.

I folded the cuff inward and opened the book.

PART 2 OF 5

The Embrace of the Dark Veil

The shadows called to me before I ever cast a spell.

At first they used ordinary sounds: water inside a wall, the brush of a robe in an empty passage, my own name spoken somewhere I could not quite place. In a temple full of stone channels and listening children, none of those things needed a supernatural explanation.

I supplied one because I wanted an answer.

During lessons, we learned to hold a flame steady by regulating our breath. A bowl of water stood before each lamp. If your concentration failed, the tutor extinguished the wick and you began again.

Mine failed whenever someone walked past the door.

“Attend to what is here,” the tutor told me.

“What if what is here isn't all of it?”

“Then attending badly will teach you even less.”

The other novices laughed. He stopped them with a look, but I had already pushed my bowl away.

Eryth still came to the common lessons when his other instruction allowed it. Three mornings after I struck him, he sat across from me with a faint bruise beneath one eye. His flame steadied. A fine blue seam appeared around its gold center.

The tutor leaned forward.

Then someone outside dropped a tray.

Eryth flinched so violently that his knee struck the table. Water flooded the oil, and the lamp spat. He covered his head with his arms.

Nobody laughed this time.

I took his lamp away before the hot oil could run onto him. He stayed bent over until the tutor touched his shoulder.

Afterward, in the passage, he asked me not to mention it.

“To whom?”

“Anyone.”

I wanted to ask what had happened inside his head. I knew what had happened inside mine: the sound had become the rod striking the stones beside the river. Instead I said, “I won't.”

He nodded once. It was the first thing he had asked me for since the cistern.

In the laundry, I learned how difficult blood was to remove once someone had let it dry. The keeper gave me no speech about that. She showed me the cold-water tub and put more linen beside it.

I scrubbed, carried, wrung, and hung. Wet sheets slapped my knees. The work warmed the ache in my knuckles. Sometimes, for several minutes together, I thought only about getting the next basket upstairs.

The stairs were what made me look again at the journal.

Our father had drawn a small hooked mark beside his mysterious doorway. I had mistaken it for part of the writing. On the laundry landing, the same shape had been cut above an arch: a mason's mark, half hidden by limewash. Beneath it, a narrow stair descended toward the older water cisterns.

That night I turned back through the journal. A sketch of damaged shelving contained the hook again. So did a list of repairs. Beside the last occurrence, Rhydian had drawn three short strokes and a curve.

I held the page near the window. The curve could have been a passage. It could also have been an idle movement of his pen.

I decided it was a passage.

Over the following days I began noticing marks the temple had taught me not to notice: cuts in door lintels, filled sockets where hinges had once stood, a line of darker stone continuing behind the meal hall cupboards. The building had been altered around its older bones. My father's notes concerned those bones as often as they concerned books.

I asked the laundry keeper why the lower stair was shut.

“Because the water was moved.”

“Where does it go?”

“To a cistern with a cracked floor.”

“Beyond that?”

She looked over her shoulder. “Are you planning to mend it?”

I returned to the wringer.

I did not think of what I was doing as concealment yet. Concealment sounded deliberate. I was merely waiting until I had something worth telling.

On the last evening of my punishment, Eryth sat on his bed trying to repair our father's pocket. The remembrance service had loosened one of the old stitches. He had threaded the needle with blue because it was all he could find.

“You're pulling too hard,” I said.

“I know.”

“The cloth will bunch.”

“I know.”

I sat beside him. After a while, he gave me the needle.

His hands were trembling.

“Does it still hurt?” I asked.

“My nose?”

I nodded.

“Only when I touch it.”

I eased the tight stitch loose.

“I'm sorry.”

He watched my hands. “I know.”

That hurt more than if he had refused to believe me.

We worked along the seam together, one holding the cloth while the other drew the needle through. Halfway along, Eryth said, “I can't remember his laugh properly.”

I kept the needle still.

“I remember that he laughed. But when I try to hear it, I hear him telling us to get away from the water.”

“He used to choke at the end,” I said. “When something was really funny.”

Eryth looked up.

“Like he had bread in his mouth.”

“He usually did.”

We both smiled, briefly. Then he began to cry, and I put the robe aside so the needle would not catch him when he leaned against me.

The journal was beneath my pillow. I could feel its corner against my back. I nearly told him about the marks.

Instead I held him until he slept.

PART 3 OF 5

Below the Waterline

By the third week, the temple had stopped making allowances for our father's absence in small things.

His place at meals was removed. The crack in his wooden cup was examined and declared unfit for kitchen use. Someone asked whether we needed both beds in our room if Eryth was to spend more nights near the Records chamber.

“We need both,” I said before my brother could answer.

The laundry keeper let us keep the cup.

I used it to hold the pebbles from our windowsill. Without them, its empty shape troubled me.

My punishment ended, but I offered to carry linen downstairs when a basket needed taking. On the second afternoon, the keeper sent me with folded cloths for the cooling room. I put them where she asked. Then I took the old stair.

I had brought a candle, flint, a stub of chalk, and my father's journal. The candle came from our room. I told myself that mattered: I had not stolen it.

The first door was secured with a wooden bar. Damp had swollen it against its brackets. I worked it loose slowly, lifting one end, then the other, while every scrape seemed loud enough to carry to the kitchens.

Beyond it, the stair descended in a half circle.

I drew a chalk line on the first step. I had heard enough stories about children lost beneath the temple to dislike the thought of becoming one.

The steps led to a dry cistern. Water had once stood higher than my head; its old line stained the walls brown. At the bottom, a split ran across the floor and disappeared beneath a heap of fallen plaster.

I stopped at the edge. The candle showed nothing beneath the split.

The hooked mark was there, above a low opening in the opposite wall.

For several minutes I considered going back. I imagined asking a mason to come with me. I could show him the journal, say I wanted to understand my father's work, and make the expedition ordinary.

But an ordinary expedition would belong to whoever was permitted to lead it.

I edged around the cistern where the floor met the wall. There was enough room for my feet if I turned sideways. My shoulder scraped stone. At the far end, I had to put the candle down and crawl beneath a fallen support beam.

My father's doorway waited beyond a short passage.

At first I saw only masonry. Then the candle's light caught the shallow line of an arch. No handle. No hinges. Its fitted stones differed from the surrounding wall only in being slightly darker.

I unfolded the journal against my knee.

The drawing matched: the arch, the hooked mark to its left, the circle crossed by a stroke at its center. Here, the circle was almost completely filled with plaster.

I scraped the plaster away with my thumbnail.

“Father?”

It was absurd. I knew it was absurd before I said it, and listened anyway.

Water clicked somewhere behind me.

I held the candle against the circle. Nothing changed. I tried the breathing exercise, imagining the small blue edge I had seen in Eryth's flame. My wick guttered. Hot wax ran over my thumb.

I swore, shook my hand, and nearly dropped it.

That was all the light did for me.

I found no instruction beneath the drawing. There were measurements, a crossed-out word, a stain where our father had set a cup. He had left enough to bring me here and nothing that told me what to do.

I struck the stone with the heel of my hand.

“Why?”

The question filled the passage. I struck again, less hard because the first blow had hurt.

He had known about this place. He had gone fishing with us while carrying something he would not explain. He had put his hands on my face and asked me to do one thing, and I had done it. I had held Eryth.

My brother was alive upstairs. Our father had not come back.

I rested my forehead against the door.

For the first time since the river, I let myself remember the part that had no grandeur in it: his cold palms, the little tremor in his thumb, the way he had struggled to make me listen because he was running out of time.

I wanted those hands back. Ink beneath the nails. A split at one knuckle every winter. All the small, repairable hurts he had once brought home.

Something gave beneath my fingers.

I pulled away. A shallow hollow marked the stone where I had touched it. Gray particles drifted down my sleeve.

Ash.

There was no heat. My fingertips had gone so cold that I pressed them against my neck.

I should have left then. A thing I could not understand had changed the wall beneath my hand. I had no way to judge whether it would change me next.

Instead I put my palm back.

I thought of the empty chair.

The hollow deepened. Fine black lines appeared between the stones, edged with a silver brightness too faint to illuminate my skin. I felt a tug behind my breastbone. The memory of our father's hands sharpened until I could hardly bear it.

I kept touching the door.

Stone sifted around my feet. A narrow opening took shape, widening from my palm downward, and beyond it darkness moved as though someone had disturbed a hanging veil.

“Kael,” something whispered.

I picked up the candle and went in.

PART 4 OF 5

The Face in the Glass

The chamber was smaller than I expected.

My candle found a curved wall, a broken bench, a shallow gutter around the floor. There were no candles waiting to ignite, no scrolls laid out for me, no person who could explain why my father had drawn this door.

Shadows drifted close to the ground.

They moved against the little draft from the passage. When I lowered my candle, its flame leaned toward them, narrowing to a point. I raised it again.

In the center of the chamber, there was a mirror.

It stood in a plain stone frame, taller than a man and broad enough to hide someone behind it. Tarnish obscured the edges. My candle appeared in its surface as a small pale wound, but I could not see my own face.

I walked to the right.

The flame in the mirror stayed where it was.

I stopped.

“Kael.”

This time the sound came from close to my left ear. I turned so quickly that wax spilled across my wrist.

No one was there.

“He chose the wrong one.”

The words were clear. That clarity frightened me more than the whispering had.

I looked toward the open door. Its ash lay in little ridges across the threshold. I could get back through it without touching the drifting shadows if I stayed near the wall.

"Who?" I asked.

No answer.

"Who chose?"

A murmur ran around the gutter. It had the unevenness of many people trying to speak quietly in the same room.

"You are the light that remembers."

I wanted a voice I recognized. I wanted Rhydian to step from behind the mirror, wet and tired and impatient that I had taken so long. I wanted it so badly that the darkened glass began to look like the doorway of our room.

Then I saw his sleeve.

The torn seam hung at the edge of the reflection. His arm extended toward someone outside the glass. I moved closer, holding my breath.

The person he reached for was Eryth.

I knew the angle of that arm. I had watched it from the riverbank. The mirror gave me the moment precisely as I remembered it, except that my father's hand never completed its movement. He reached, and reached again.

"Stop."

His arm returned to his side. Lifted.

I put the candle down on the bench.

"Show me before that."

The glass clouded.

"Show me what he was doing."

A white glare washed over its surface. I jerked backward, shielding my eyes, and caught my heel in the gutter. The fall drove the breath from me. My right palm scraped against a broken edge of stone.

The candle toppled.

I lunged for it, knocking it farther along the bench before I caught it. For a few moments, retrieving that small ordinary flame was the only thing that mattered.

When I stood, the mirror was dark again.

Blood ran from the scrape on my palm to the base of my thumb. I wrapped it in my handkerchief, badly, using my teeth to pull the knot tight.

The shadows had gathered beneath the mirror. They stirred when I moved closer.

"He chose the wrong one," they whispered.

"You don't know him."

My voice sounded thin in the chamber.

The words came again. I understood how easily I could agree. I had said almost the same thing without saying it, every time I watched Eryth enter the Records chamber.

But our father had said my name. He had held my face. I had begun leaving those details out when I remembered him, because they made my anger harder to arrange.

"He spoke to me," I said.

The glass gave back a wavering shape.

For an instant I thought it was Rhydian. Then I saw the bandaged hand, the too-short sleeve, the candle held high. Me, with a smear of dust across my mouth and a frightened boy's shoulders drawn up around my ears.

I hated seeing myself afraid. I brought the candle closer.

The reflection thinned, and shelves appeared behind it.

I turned.

There was only the curved wall, bare except for a narrow vertical crack.

In the mirror, cloth hung over long, uneven shapes. Something like a worktable stood beyond them. I shifted left. The image changed its angle as if I were looking through a doorway, and a strip of bare floor appeared between the covered shapes.

My hand began to throb. The room tilted slightly. I had been below the temple long enough to miss the afternoon meal, and the cold from the door had traveled to my elbow.

I took one step toward the mirror.

The voice said my name again.

I stopped. There was no kindness in the way it said it, only accuracy.

I backed toward the opening. Every few paces I checked that it remained behind me. The shadows followed as far as the gutter, then settled.

At the threshold, I looked once more at the mirror.

My reflection was gone. The covered shapes remained.

I left with the journal pressed beneath my arm and ash grinding inside my shoes.

PART 5 OF 5

The Thing I Kept

Eryth was waiting in our room.

He had set supper on the floor between the beds, away from the cracked cup and the papers scattered across the sill. When I entered, he looked first at my shoes, then at my hand.

“What happened?”

“I slipped.”

“Where?”

“Downstairs.”

He stood, took a bowl from the tray, and poured drinking water into it.

“Let me see.”

“I've wrapped it.”

“You've wrapped dirt into it.”

I let him unwind the handkerchief. The cloth had stuck to the scrape. When he lifted it, I caught his wrist.

“Slowly.”

“I am.”

I released him.

He washed the grit away in small careful strokes. His bruise had begun turning yellow at the edges. Looking at it made me remember my own fist with a clarity I had avoided all afternoon.

"Does that hurt?" he asked.

"Yes."

"What about here?"

He touched my uninjured fingertips. I could see the pressure but barely feel it.

"A little."

His eyes lifted to mine.

I had answered too quickly.

He brought a second cloth and wrapped it around the scrape. His hands no longer trembled. Someone had shown him how to bind a wound without strangling the fingers.

"Did they teach you that in the Records chamber?"

"In the infirmary. After you hit me."

I looked down.

He tucked the end of the bandage under itself. "The master asked if I wanted another room."

"What did you say?"

"That I wanted you to stop looking at me like I'd taken something."

The little noises of the temple came through our window: a cart wheel, a pigeon landing on the roof, someone calling for the kitchen keys.

"I didn't ask them to choose me," he said.

"I know."

"You keep saying that."

I could not answer him.

He sat on his own bed and began breaking the hard crust from his bread. He used to give those pieces to our father, who claimed they were the best part. Now he laid them along the edge of his bowl.

"I don't understand what he meant," Eryth said. "At the river. They ask me every day. Sometimes they ask a different way, as if that will make me remember more."

"What do you tell them?"

"What happened."

"All of it?"

"As much as I can." He rubbed the old mark around his wrist. "I keep thinking there was something I was meant to hear."

I had imagined a secret passed into him whole, something complete and precious that the monks were teaching him to unfold. He looked exhausted by the absence of it.

"You don't have to remember everything tonight," I said.

He gave a small, unhappy laugh. "Tell them."

I wanted to. I wanted to go to the Records chamber and demand that they let him sleep. That urge was real, and it existed beside my wish to have been the one they questioned.

"Come with me tomorrow," he said.

“To the chamber?”

“To breakfast.”

I looked at the cold supper between us.

“Yes.”

He glanced toward the journal beneath my arm.

“Were you reading his book?”

I could still tell him. I could describe the door, the impossible ash, the voice that had repeated the ugliest thing I believed. He might insist we speak to someone. He might be right.

“I was looking for something,” I said.

“Did you find it?”

“No.”

It was a small word. I did not stumble over it.

We ate. Later, when he woke crying out, I sat beside him until he recognized the room. He caught my sleeve and kept hold of it. I stayed there until dawn paled the window.

At breakfast, I sat with him as promised.

By evening, warmth had returned to most of my hand. Two fingertips still felt thick and distant. I practiced flexing them while the tutor checked our copies. Nothing in my lamp behaved strangely. No voice spoke from the corners of the schoolroom.

I might have let the chamber become a thing I could doubt.

Instead, after the final bell, I took another candle.

The passage beneath the cistern was easier to find this time. My chalk marks remained. At the hidden door, ash had gathered into a crust over part of the opening. I touched its edge with my unbandaged fingers and remembered our father's cold hands.

The crust loosened.

I hated how readily I had called up the memory. I used it anyway.

Inside, the shadows stirred around the gutter. I walked past them and stood before the mirror, holding the candle low. The covered shapes waited in its depth.

I moved sideways until the crack in the wall behind me aligned with the strip of floor in the glass.

Then I turned.

The crack had widened into a narrow passage. A draft pressed against my face, carrying the smell of dust and old binding paste, the smell that used to cling to our father's clothes.

I raised the candle.

Beyond the opening, rows of shelves stood beneath sagging cloth. A collapsed stool lay on its side. Dust covered the floor without a single footprint breaking it.

I laid my father's journal on the threshold to free my injured hand, then picked it up again. I would not leave it behind.

With it held against my chest, I stood at the threshold. Somewhere among those covered shelves, a drop of water fell into a vessel I could not see.

CHAPTER 3

The Book Beneath the Dust

PART 1 OF 5

Signs in the Wind

The wind had changed.

I felt it before I moved beyond the mirror. Air traveled through the buried chamber although the door behind me had closed, drawing the sweat from my neck and carrying the smell of rain on hot stone. Somewhere in that smell waited an impression so sudden that I put out my hand: someone had come too late. Someone was still waiting.

Then it passed. I stood with my fingers spread over nothing.

Beyond the mirror, the repository lay under a coating of pale dust. Its shelves had collapsed against one another, trapping the remains of their contents. A strip of cloth hung from the ceiling. When I lifted my candle, its shadow slid across the floor against the direction of the light.

I kept my eyes on the shelves.

Most of the books had become swollen blocks. Their leather covers broke under a touch, and the paper within separated into layers as thin as insect wings. I tried to open one and brought away half its spine. The sound seemed very loud. For a while afterward, I used both hands even to move things that were already ruined.

At the back stood a reading desk beneath a fallen shutter. I pushed the shutter aside. A book lay under it, wrapped in a cover of blackened linen. I planted the candle in a ridge of old wax on the desk and eased the bundle free.

It was heavier than my father's journal, broad enough to rest across both my palms. Dark leather covered its wooden boards. One corner had been repaired with copper, now green at the edge. A handprint showed in the dust where someone had once lifted it.

I held my breath and laid my uninjured hand beside the print. The bandage around my other palm had begun to loosen.

The fingers were too long to tell me anything.

I set Rhydian's journal on the desk beside it. Inside the larger book, the pages were sound.

There was no title and no name. Diagrams crowded the margins around columns of angular writing. Some characters resembled the marks in Rhydian's journal; others tangled together until I could not decide where one ended. A drawing of a hand appeared again and again. Beneath it, the hand's shadow reached in several different directions.

I turned a page.

The corner resisted. A narrow black line crept away from my thumb before I touched it, withdrawing into the drawing. I snatched my hand back. The line settled.

For a long time I stood listening to the small hiss of my candle.

“Father?”

Nothing answered.

I tried again with the end of a loose reed. The ink did not move. With my left hand, it trembled. With my right, it retreated in a slow curve.

I wanted to carry the book upstairs. I wanted to spread it across our father's empty table and demand that someone explain why it had been left beneath the temple to rot. Instead, I looked toward the chamber door and imagined its stones closing against me forever.

I found a dry shelf and cleared it with my sleeve. There I put the book, wrapped again in its linen. I laid a chip of copper on the cloth so I would know if anyone disturbed it.

I retrieved my father's journal. When I passed the mirror on my way out, I glanced into it.

In the glass, an open book lay across my forearm.

I looked down. Only my father's closed journal rested there.

I stumbled into the wall hard enough to bruise my shoulder. The candle guttered. When I raised it, the glass showed only a frightened boy pressing his hand against stone.

I left before I could persuade myself to ask another question.

* * *

Eryth was asleep when I reached our room. One arm hung over the side of his bed. His fingers rested on the floor, curled as though he had been holding something when sleep took him.

I washed the dust from my face in the dark. Gray water gathered around the basin's drain. As I shook my sleeves, a little cloud lifted from them and drifted toward my brother.

I caught it with the wet towel before it reached him.

He stirred.

“Is it morning?”

“Almost.”

“You missed supper.”

“I wasn't hungry.”

His eyes remained closed. “There's bread.”

He had left it beneath an upturned cup to keep the mice away. I ate it sitting on the floor beside my bed. It was hard at the edges and tasted faintly of the honey he had scraped onto it.

At dawn I went to the washing court. Mist lay against the cypress trees. As the dew began to fade from their leaves, the wind passed through me carrying voices I did not recognize. I heard no words. Regret struck first, sharp enough to make me bend. Warning followed. Then a longing that seemed to pull at the roots of my teeth.

I looked for someone among the trees.

A groundskeeper was emptying a basket of cut branches beside the wall. He looked up when I gasped, then returned to his work.

The wind crossed the court. The leaves moved. I felt nothing.

I remained there until the lesson bell rang twice, ashamed of how desperately I wanted it to happen again.

PART 2 OF 5

The Price of a Line

Learning to read the book took longer than finding it.

I began with the diagrams because I could copy them without understanding their names. In the ordinary schoolroom, we learned the approved forms of invocation: where to breathe, where to pause, how to draw a line without closing the space through which force must leave. Beneath the temple, I recognized the same precautions in a different arrangement.

That recognition frightened me more than unfamiliar symbols would have.

The book had been made by people who knew what our teachers knew.

I took no pages from it. Every night I copied a little onto scraps from the binding room, using the backs of ruined accounts. At first I fitted the copies inside Rhydian's journal. When they made its covers bulge, I stitched them into a notebook of my own. His small, orderly handwriting remained separate from my cramped attempts to follow it.

The first instruction I managed to translate concerned a bowl of water.

I brought one down in both hands, spilling half of it on the stairs. The drawing showed a finger above the surface and a hollow beneath it. I held my finger there until my shoulder shook. Nothing happened.

I tried anger. The water remained flat.

I thought of the river. Of our father's sleeve. The bowl cracked, spilling water into my lap.

For a moment, I was pleased.

Then I read the next line properly.

The bowl was supposed to remain whole.

Winter came. I stole less sleep and became better at using what I had. I learned to stop an exercise when my hands turned cold, to eat before descending, to leave a loose thread across the outer passage so I could tell whether someone had followed. Some nights I did no magic at all. I sat with a dictionary borrowed honestly from the schoolroom and argued with a dead writer's grammar.

Aboveground, Eryth practiced holding a bead of light between his palms.

I once found him still at it after the courtyard lamps had been extinguished. Sweat ran down his temples. The light had a blue center and a ragged yellow edge. Whenever he looked pleased with it, the edge frayed.

“It's smaller than yesterday,” I said.

“Yesterday it was mostly burning my hands.”

He opened his fingers. Blisters shone across the pads.

I fetched water. He let me lower his hands into the basin, and for several breaths neither of us said anything.

“Does it hurt every time?” I asked.

“Less when I do it properly.”

“That wasn't what I asked.”

“I know.”

After that, I stopped imagining his lessons as a room full of people applauding.

I did not stop resenting that he was allowed to ask for help.

* * *

By the first thaw, I could make a shallow hollow in water without breaking the vessel. It lasted less than a breath. Afterward, my fingertips felt wooden, and I could not thread a needle until they warmed.

The oddities spread beyond the chamber.

One morning, I reached for a scroll that was no longer on the copying table. A spill of ink moved before my fingers touched it, flowing into a crescent around the place where my hand would have fallen.

A novice across from me stared.

“You shook the table,” I said.

He looked down at his motionless elbows.

I blotted the ink before he could answer.

Another day, I walked past the elder monks meditating in the eastern cloister. Their eyes opened together. One drew a breath so sharply that it became a cough. Another caught the prayer bowl slipping from his knees.

I stopped beneath the arch.

“Have I disturbed you?”

The nearest elder studied my face. “Where have you been?”

“The binding room.”

It was true. I had spent the afternoon there after spending the night below.

He told me to come closer. His fingertips rested against my wrist, where the skin was still ordinary, unmarked skin. I watched his expression while he counted my pulse.

“You are exhausted.”

“Then may I go to bed?”

He let me go with an instruction to report to the infirmary if the cold in my hands persisted.

I walked away very slowly. At the corner, I had to stop and press my forehead to the wall.

I had expected discovery to feel like triumph or a fight. Instead, I had wanted the old man to keep hold of my wrist and tell me what was happening.

That night I stayed upstairs.

Eryth fell asleep over a lesson, his cheek pressed to a page. I moved the lamp before his sleeve reached its flame. Then I sat opposite him with my hidden notebook beneath an ordinary history, and worked until the birds began.

PART 3 OF 5

The Long Flood

The hems of our robes were let down. Then they were replaced.

Eryth's voice broke in the middle of a recitation, and he refused to sing for a month. I became tall enough to reach the highest shelves in the binding room. People began handing me heavy things without asking whether I could carry them. The space our father had left changed shape around us, though neither of us would have admitted it.

At the return of each spring, we went to Eldra.

For a while we took fishing rods. Eventually we stopped pretending we intended to use them. We sat above the reach of the water and spoke of ordinary things until one of us could bear to mention him.

Eryth remembered a story differently every year. I corrected him until he asked whether I wanted our father remembered at all.

After that, I listened more.

My work beneath the temple advanced by similarly small humiliations. I could draw the shadow of a reed across a page while the reed remained still, but only if I kept breathing evenly. I could turn aside the heat from a lamp and leave a cool patch on my palm. When I tried to do both, the lamp went out and I vomited.

The diagrams near the back of the book remained beyond me. One showed a slab with writing inside it. A note beside it repeated a word I believed meant crystal. I mistook the surrounding marks for measurements and spent a summer obtaining nonsense.

Eryth's light grew steadier. He learned to spread it thin, to lay a bright plane across a doorway that would hold against a shove. It collapsed under a running body. He practiced falling when it failed, because his teacher made him stand behind it.

Sometimes he asked me to be the person who ran.

I was good at that.

* * *

The long flood came after an autumn of rain.

Water backed up against the temple's lower storehouses. Workers carried grain uphill while novices cleared branches from the narrow channel leading to the old sluices. Eryth and I were assigned to the eastern crossing, where a wooden walkway ran between the retaining wall and a line of willows.

I heard the wind inside the culvert before anything broke.

A pressure came against my ribs, accompanied by the smell of wet wool and a sudden conviction that I needed to climb. I caught Eryth's sleeve.

“Get off the planks.”

He looked at me, then at the brown water rising between them.

“Everyone back,” he called.

Most obeyed. A storehouse porter continued toward us carrying a sack across his shoulders. He had nearly reached the middle when the upstream support tore free.

The walkway twisted. His sack fell into the torrent. He dropped flat and caught a crosspiece as the outer rail disappeared beneath him.

Eryth went to his knees at the stone abutment. Gold light spread from his hands, thin as stretched oil, crossing the gap where the first planks had fallen. The porter tried to drag himself toward it.

The remaining support groaned.

“Rope,” Eryth said through his teeth.

I had already pulled it from the pile of salvage tools. I tied one end around the willow nearest the bank, then fed the other into the porter's reaching hand. He missed it. I threw again. This time he caught it and wound it around his arm.

“Not your arm! Around your chest!”

He could not hear me over the water.

The crosspiece broke. His weight struck the rope, and the tree bent toward the channel. The knot held. The bank did not. Mud opened around the willow's roots.

Eryth's sheet of light sagged beneath the porter's legs.

I put both hands against the tree.

In the chamber, I had learned to push cold through the space beneath a flame. Here, I felt something similar moving through the roots: a slow resistance, the living weight of the willow holding its place in the earth.

I pulled on it.

Blackness thickened along the trunk's shadow. A silver edge ran under my fingers. The sliding roots stopped.

The cold reached my elbows.

“Kael!”

“Pull him!”

Eryth let his light fold, caught the rope, and hauled. Another worker joined him. The porter scraped over the abutment on his stomach, coughing river water. Someone seized the back of my robe and pulled me away from the tree.

The willow snapped where I had touched it.

Its crown fell into the channel. The rope went with it, jerking across the stones and leaving a pale burn on Eryth's palm.

I sat in the mud while the branches vanished downstream. My hands had closed so tightly that I could not open them.

* * *

They called what happened quick thinking.

Eryth said nothing until we were alone in the infirmary. He had a bandage around his hand. Mine lay in warm water, hurting as though every bone had been cracked.

“The bark turned gray,” he said.

“It was an old tree.”

“I saw what you did.”

I stared at the bowl.

“Where did you learn it?”

“I didn't know it would work.”

“That makes it worse.”

“The man lived.”

Eryth sat on the next stool. The bandage on his palm had begun to spot red.

“Yes,” he said. “I'm glad he lived.”

He waited. I offered nothing else.

My hands recovered before the channel was repaired. For weeks, however, I could not pass a willow without looking at the bark. Down in the repository, I found the line I had skipped because its grammar had defeated me.

It described borrowing force from a living boundary.

Beneath it, in a different hand, someone had added a warning to record what failed to recover.

I copied the warning into my notebook. Then I spent the winter testing the exercise on fallen branches, trying to discover how much of the damage had been necessary.

I should also have asked why I had decided that necessity was mine to judge.

PART 4 OF 5

The Mirror and the Moth

By the autumn when I finally understood the last diagrams, I had worn a hollow into the repository's floor beside the desk.

The book had changed less than I had. Its copper corner still caught my sleeve. Its pages smelled of dust and bitter oil. My notebook had acquired a second volume, then a third, and I could read passages that once looked like wounds scratched into paper.

I had learned enough to recognize deliberate omissions.

Instructions began halfway through an exercise. Measurements lacked their starting points. A diagram would direct the reader to a numbered passage that did not exist. At first I blamed damaged pages. Then I counted the stitches through the binding and found no gaps.

Someone had built incompleteness into the book.

That evening, a moth came through the air shaft and battered itself against my lamp. I lowered the wick before it could burn. The moth circled the dim glass, settled on the book's copper corner, and opened its wings.

They were brown, with two small pale eyes.

Across the chamber, in the mirror, the moth remained in flight.

I kept very still.

The real insect lifted. Its reflection settled. A moment later the glass agreed with the room again.

I carried the lamp to the mirror. For years I had avoided looking into it for long. Sometimes it showed the chamber faithfully. Sometimes it presented a movement before I made it, or held my face after I had turned away. I had learned to approach it without questions I could not bear to have answered.

Now I set the lamp on the floor and opened the book beside it.

The moth returned to the copper corner.

In the reflection, it stood on a word near the bottom of the page.

I put a thread between the leaves to mark my place and lifted the book toward the glass. The reflected text did not reverse. It remained legible, except where my thumb covered the lower margin.

There, beneath the reflected thumb, I could see writing.

I moved my hand.

The writing vanished.

My pulse beat against the book's boards. I covered the margin again, then laid a strip of cloth across a damaged-looking diagram. In the glass, lines appeared beneath the cloth. They joined at the places I had assumed were breaks.

I had spent years staring at absences that needed to be covered before they could be read.

It took most of the night to arrange the book, lamp, and strips of cloth so I could copy what the mirror revealed. The moth left. The lamp sputtered as its oil ran low. A headache gathered behind my right eye, sharpening whenever I looked from the reflection to the real page.

The missing marks described a route.

I recognized Eldra first, its curve drawn in a form older than the temple's present maps. Then came the eastern retaining wall and an overflow stair I had passed during the flood repairs. A line descended beneath the oldest sluice arch. Beyond it, the drawing narrowed to a corridor interrupted by three sealed thresholds.

At its end rested the slab I had taken for a measuring board.

The completed caption called it a crystal Tablet.

I read the phrase aloud.

The mirror darkened at its edges.

A hand appeared against the reflected page. Broad fingers. Ink beneath the nails.

I dropped the book.

The glass showed me crouching on the floor. Nothing stood behind me. I waited until the lamp burned low before I picked up the fallen pages.

I had seen our father's hands wherever I wanted them: on the riverbank, in passing strangers, in dreams that left me reaching across the bed. I knew that.

Even so, I turned the mirror a little toward the wall before continuing.

* * *

The copied route needed testing.

I spent several afternoons helping mend shutters above the river so I could examine the eastern bank without inventing a reason to be there. The overflow stair existed. Its lower steps had been filled with silt. Under the oldest arch, reeds hid a section of brickwork smoother than the surrounding stone.

From the far side of that brickwork came a draft.

It carried no voices. That reassured me until I noticed the river pulling at the reeds while the air moved the other way.

In Rhydian's journal, I found a small drawing I had passed over many times: an arch, a row of narrow rectangles, a diagonal stroke beside the third. I had assumed they were shelves.

I held the journal against my copied map.

Brick joints. An overflow arch. A place to begin.

He had drawn the first doorway that brought me beneath the temple. Here was a second piece of the route. I could not tell whether he had meant someone to follow it or meant to remember how to keep it closed.

The uncertainty should have slowed me.

Instead, I began measuring how much rope I would need.

PART 5 OF 5

The Second Rope

I chose a night when the river was low and frost had stiffened the mud along its banks.

I had checked the weather over the northern ridge. I had watched the gatekeepers change duty and found the place where the west postern's latch could be lifted without making the hinge shriek. For three evenings I packed and unpacked, replacing things I thought I could do without, then imagining myself needing them underground.

The old book stayed in its repository. I wrapped the copied route in waxed cloth and placed it inside my own notebook. Rhydian's journal went into a separate pocket. I added a covered lamp, flint, water, bread, a chisel borrowed from the repair shed, and a small hammer with cloth wound around its head.

The rope would not fit.

I was securing it beneath the satchel when Eryth opened the door.

He looked at the pack, the rope, and the boots I had already put on.

“Going somewhere?”

“The lower stores.”

“At midnight.”

I pulled the knot tight.

He closed the door behind him.

We no longer shared a room, but he still entered mine as though it were ours. Usually I liked that. That night I wanted a bolt between us.

“Move,” I said.

“What is beneath the sluice?”

My hand stopped on the buckle.

Eryth drew a folded scrap from his sleeve. It was a discarded copy of the arch, one I had spoiled by reversing the lower steps. I had torn it across and thrown it into the brazier without making sure it burned.

“You left half in the ashes,” he said. “The other half fell beside your table.”

“You searched my room?”

“I came to bring back your winter cloak. Then I saw what you'd drawn.”

He set the scrap down between us.

Outside, someone crossed the courtyard carrying a lantern. Light moved across our ceiling and passed away.

“How long?” Eryth asked.

I knew what he meant.

“Since the weeks after the river.”

His mouth tightened. He sat on the edge of my bed, then stood again.

“Those nights you couldn't feel your hands.”

I said nothing.

“The tree.”

“I didn't know it would die.”

“Did you go back afterward?”

“To the place where you learned it?” I asked, though there was no need.

“Yes.”

“Yes.”

He rubbed the center of his palm. A pale line remained from the rope burn, visible when the skin was cold.

“Tell me what you're looking for.”

I could have given him another part of the truth. I had become good at it: an accurate detail placed where a whole answer belonged. He stood there in his plain night robe, waiting, and I found I was tired of hearing myself do it.

“A Tablet. Crystal, according to the book. There are chambers beyond the overflow stair.”

“What book?”

I told him about the repository. About the moving ink and the incomplete diagrams. I showed him the copies, but kept the page with the hand in the mirror folded beneath the others. That had no drawing on it, only my hurried account. I was not ready to hear what he would call it.

He listened without interrupting until I brought out Rhydian's journal.

“I asked you to read that with me.”

“I remember.”

“You said there was nothing in it.”

I looked at the leather cover, worn smooth where my thumb had rested for years.

“I wanted something of his to be mine.”

Eryth took a breath. For a moment I thought he would leave.

Instead, he held out his hand.

I gave him the journal.

He turned the pages carefully, pausing at the list of supplies, at the sketch of the river. When he reached the doorway, he looked up.

“Does this prove he wanted you to open it?”

“No.”

The answer came out before I could improve it.

“Does it prove he didn't?” I added.

Eryth set the journal beside the map.

“We can take this to the keeper of the lower archives.”

“And have it locked away?”

“He may know why it's sealed.”

“He may refuse to tell us.”

“Then we will have learned that.”

I lifted the satchel.

“We've had years to learn it.”

He caught the strap. Neither of us pulled.

“If the passage floods, you won't be able to climb a wet rope with numb hands.”

“I've checked the water.”

“You checked it from this side.”

I looked at his hand around the strap, at the pale line across his palm. He released the pack before I had to ask him.

“Wait here,” he said.

He returned wearing boots and carrying a second coil of rope. A hooded lamp hung from his wrist.

“You have practice before dawn,” I said.

“I'll have to explain why I missed it.”

“They'll ask where you were.”

“Yes.”

I waited for him to tell me what lie he would use. He offered none.

He put his rope beside mine and examined the map again.

“At the first sign that the river is rising, we come back. We mark every turn. And if you lose feeling in your hands, you tell me before you fall.”

“You're giving orders now?”

“I'm coming with you.”

“I haven't agreed to that.”

Eryth looked at me. There was fear in his face, and anger I had earned, and the stubbornness that had once taken us straight into a wall of brambles.

“Then you'll have to explain the route while I follow you.”

I made room beside the door.

CHAPTER 4

The Hidden Tablet

PART 1 OF 5

The Flamebind Sigil

By the time we reached the east bank, frost had whitened the ropes hanging from the ferry posts. Eryth carried our lantern beneath his cloak. I carried our father's journal and the route I had copied from the old book, neither of which looked particularly convincing in lanternlight.

The river was low enough to expose the oldest sluice arch. Beneath it, a disused overflow stair descended between walls furred with mineral deposits. Water had taken the middle from several steps. I tested each remaining edge before giving Eryth my hand.

“You can stop doing that,” he said.

“Doing what?”

“Testing everything twice because I'm behind you.”

“You could go back.”

He put his hand in mine and stepped down.

Years of lessons had changed the way he moved. He no longer stumbled over his own robe, and when he slipped, he recovered without flinging out his arms. The discipline irritated me most when it was useful.

At the bottom, brickwork closed the passage. My copied route ended here, in a knot of strokes that might have meant stone, concealment, or the underside of a wing. Rhydian's journal was more practical. In the margin beside an inventory of lamp oil, he had drawn three unequal rectangles.

I pressed the lowest of the corresponding bricks.

Nothing happened.

Eryth lifted the lantern. “Try the space between them.”

I almost refused because he had suggested it. Then I felt beneath the middle brick and found an iron catch.

The panel shifted inward with a grinding sound. Beyond it, the passage rose away from the water. Someone had built the false wall to be opened from either side.

“Father knew this place,” I said.

“He knew a great many places.”

“He hid the way.”

“That isn't the same as leaving it for us.”

I went through before he could say anything else.

The chamber beyond was smaller than I had imagined. There were no great statues, no mountains of forbidden treasure. A stone trough occupied most of the floor. Water trickled through it into a drain. Above the trough, embedded in a sloping frame, lay a sheet of crystal the size of an open ledger.

Its surface was clouded, its edges transparent. Fine lines ran within it at different depths, overlapping without quite touching. They looked less like writing than the veins of leaves pressed together.

The Tablet.

I knew it before I found the little diagram from the book repeated along its lower edge.

Eryth held the lantern closer. The crystal reflected his face and mine, but the reflections were separated by a dark streak that did not belong to either of us.

“There,” I said.

On the frame, beneath a crust of lime, was a circle crossed by a narrow stroke. Our father's mark. Beside it, in the compact hand I had studied for years, someone had scratched a warning into the stone.

Keep the witness outside the flame.

Eryth read it twice.

“We should copy that before we touch anything.”

But the lines within the Tablet had begun to separate. A hooked shape rose through them, turning toward my marked-up fingers as though it recognized the ink.

I set down the journal. I remember doing that carefully.

“Kael.”

I placed my palm against the crystal.

The chamber vanished without becoming dark.

I stood in a long hall, holding a burning book against my chest. My hands were broader than my own. A ring had cut into one swollen finger. At the far end of the hall, white-robed figures were closing a bronze door. People crowded behind me, pushing toward the narrowing light.

Someone shouted a name. I knew it belonged to me, and lost it before the echo ended.

I struck the door with my burning hand.

It opened.

For an instant I felt a joy so savage that I mistook it for recognition. I had been here. I had broken this barrier. I had saved them.

Then the people behind me began to scream.

The image tore sideways. I was kneeling in the same hall after a fire. Rain fell through an absent roof. My arms were small again, then old, then not visible at all. Beneath the wreckage, something tapped patiently on bronze.

A band tightened around my wrist.

I tried to lift my hand from the Tablet. The crystal held it without any pressure I could fight. Lines crawled beneath my skin, tracing a crooked flame around the joint. Heat entered the bone.

Eryth seized my shoulder. His other hand struck the frame.

He made a sound I had never heard from him before.

Gold flooded the crystal. I fell backward into the trough, dragging him with me. Our lantern hit the floor and went out.

For a while the only light came from my wrist.

A narrow flame-shaped loop lay beneath the skin, dark at its center, red along its edges. It had no beginning I could find. When I touched it, I smelled singed hair, though nothing on my arm had burned.

Eryth crouched beside me, breathing through his teeth.

“What did you see?” I asked.

He looked toward the Tablet.

“A door.”

“I opened it.”

“I was holding it shut.”

The trickling water sounded very loud.

“There were people outside,” he said. “They were asking me to let them in. But something was coming through with them. I could feel it pushing.”

“They were burning.”

“I know.”

I wanted his vision to make mine clearer. Instead, it gave the same terror another side.

“Past lives,” I said. The old book had used that phrase beside a drawing of overlapping hands.

“Or someone else's memories. Or something made to frighten us.” He looked down at my wrist. “Don't decide what it means because it felt real.”

In the faint glow, lettering had emerged along the crystal's lower edge. I could read only a little of it, but the caption beneath the hooked figure was plain enough.

Flamebind.

Eryth followed my gaze.

“That sounds like a restraint.”

I flexed my fingers. Heat answered, intimate as a second pulse.

“It sounds like a beginning.”

PART 2 OF 5

What the Flame Took

I did not walk out of the sluice passage with power streaming from my hands. I vomited twice on the stairs and sat on a landing while Eryth climbed back for the journal.

When he returned, he had also closed the false wall. I asked whether he had touched the Tablet again.

“No.”

“Did it change?”

“Kael, you can barely stand.”

“That isn't what I asked.”

He wrapped my arm across his shoulders. I let him, although I was heavier than he was and every uneven step drove my elbow against his neck.

At the temple gate, he told the keeper we had gone down to the winter river and I had taken a chill. This was true in a way that made me grateful and ashamed. I could not stop shaking. My wrist burned, but the rest of me felt as if the river had settled inside my ribs.

The infirmary smelled of boiled linen. An attendant pressed her fingers to my pulse, then fetched another blanket. I held the marked wrist beneath it.

“Did you fall in?” she asked.

“Only to my knees.”

“Cold doesn't trouble itself about how much of you was foolish.”

She left us broth. I could feel the salt against a split in my lip, but I could taste nothing.

Eryth sat on the bed opposite mine.

“Show me.”

“I already did.”

“Show me what it's doing now.”

I drew back the blanket. The redness had faded. The loop remained, black as a bruise seen through deep water.

He held his palm above it without touching. A thread of blue-gold light descended between his fingers.

The mark drank it.

His hand jerked away. A blister rose across the base of his thumb.

For a moment we stared at one another. The chill in my chest had eased.

“I didn't mean to,” I said.

“I know.”

There was no accusation in his voice. That made me look away.

We learned the first rule without a book: the flame did not make warmth. It took warmth from somewhere else.

Sometimes it took mine. Sometimes, when I wanted too badly, it reached farther.

The next afternoon I woke to find the water in my cup skinned with ice. The room was warm. Eryth had been sitting by the window repairing the tear in my sleeve, and his breath showed white.

He moved the cup out of reach.

“You were dreaming.”

“About the hall?”

“You said you could get it open this time.”

I lay still until my heartbeat slowed. The ice began to melt.

For several days he brought food after his lessons. He did not read hymns at me or ask me to pray. He made me name what I could see whenever the fever returned: the basin, the shutter, the loose thread on his cuff. Once I became so angry at this that I threw a spoon.

It struck the wall and fell between the beds.

“Good,” he said.

“Good?”

“You threw it with your hand.”

I laughed despite myself. Then the laugh hurt my chest, and he helped me sit up.

When I could hold a pen, I began a fresh notebook for the mark, keeping it separate from Rhydian's journal and my earlier copies. I made a record of the symptoms. Eryth insisted I put

the failed attempts on the same page as the successes. He knew me well enough to understand what I would otherwise preserve.

Heat followed attention. Fear made it spread. Anger made it fast. Neither made it obedient.

The exercises I had learned from the old book helped me contain the pressure, but containing was not the same as understanding. I could keep a cup warm until my fingers went numb, or cool a stone until sweat broke along my back. I could not predict why one effort exhausted me and another seemed almost effortless.

By the time the frost loosened from the courtyard gutters, I could work again. The infirmary attendant returned me to ordinary duties with instructions to eat more and seek fewer opportunities to drown.

Eryth and I went back to the river before the thaw raised it.

This time he stood beyond the trough while I copied the Tablet. We brought charcoal, thin paper, and a shuttered lamp. I did not touch its face. Beneath the crystal, lines sharpened as my marked wrist approached, but they remained still when I kept my breathing even.

The teaching was incomplete. Or my reading was. A sequence of figures showed a flame drawn through a narrow channel and broken against a surface. Beside it was a warning about the vessel outlasting the flow.

I copied the warning first so Eryth could see me do it.

“Would Father have used this?” I asked.

“He wrote on the frame.”

“That isn't an answer.”

“It's the answer we have.”

There were old tool marks around the mounting. Someone had reset it, turning the crystal away from the entrance. Perhaps Rhydian had concealed it. Perhaps he had found it concealed and left it so. I preferred the first possibility because it made our discovery feel like an inheritance.

Before we closed the wall, Eryth made me promise I would not attempt the sequence alone.

I promised.

At the time, I meant to keep it.

PART 3 OF 5

The First Spell

The Temple Forge had been abandoned before we were born. Its furnaces stood on the lower hillside, where ore carts had once reached them without climbing the temple road. The roof above the main hearth had fallen in. Rain entered through the gap and collected in old quenching pits.

It was a good place to make a mistake without anyone hearing.

That was how I described it to Eryth.

He studied the leaning chimney and said, “It's also a good place to be buried by one.”

We chose the smaller casting court, outside the main building. Its back wall was thick and windowless. I placed a broken furnace tile on a stump before it. Eryth checked the ground behind the wall and returned to stand beside the doorway, well clear of my line of aim.

We had spent weeks separating the Tablet's sequence into gestures I could attempt without blacking out. Draw. Hold. Narrow. Release. The old book supplied the breathing pattern. My father's journal supplied nothing except a neat list of forge repairs from a year before his disappearance.

I had read that list often enough to hate it.

The spell's name was the one fragment neither Eryth nor I disputed: Ashrend Bolt.

I lifted my marked hand.

Nothing happened.

A rook called from the broken roof.

“Again?” Eryth asked.

“I know.”

“I was asking whether you wanted to.”

I began again. Pressure gathered beneath my palm, familiar from the hidden chamber. This time I did not let it wander into the stones. I drew it toward the loop around my wrist and held it there.

Black heat gathered between my fingers. It had an edge the color of dull silver, though the center gave no light. My hand felt both swollen and hollow.

“Your shoulder,” Eryth said.

I lowered it. The pressure steadied.

I pictured the tile, not breaking, simply existing beyond everything else. Then I opened my hand.

The bolt crossed the court in a short, vicious line. It struck the left edge of the tile and sent a fragment spinning into the grass. A gray patch spread over the broken face. When the remainder toppled from the stump, it fell apart like old bread.

I stared at the empty space above the wood.

Eryth approached cautiously. He tested the stump with the end of a fallen branch. The top had softened beneath the tile, although it had not burned.

“You struck both,” he said.

“I cast it.”

“Yes. You did.”

He smiled then, an unguarded smile, and for a moment the achievement belonged to both of us.

I should have stopped there.

Instead, I looked through the doorway at the forge's cold main hearth. A great iron ring hung beside it, once used to pull a furnace door open. Rust had thickened its surface until it seemed made from reddish bark.

“Something harder.”

“Tomorrow.”

“It barely hurt.”

“Your hand is shaking.”

I closed my fingers so he would not see.

“The vessel has to outlast the flow,” he said. “You copied that yourself.”

“I know what I copied.”

He moved toward me. I turned before he could reach my arm and took aim through the doorway.

I did not intend to endanger him. I intended to be right while he was watching.

The second bolt was larger. It tore from my hand with a sound like wet cloth ripping. I struck the iron ring squarely, and the ring vanished inside a burst of black dust.

So did the bracket holding it.

So did the mortar around the bracket.

A crack raced upward through the hearth wall. For a heartbeat nothing moved. Then the chimney settled sideways.

Eryth shoved me out of the doorway.

I hit the court on one knee. Bricks struck the threshold where I had stood. Inside, the falling chimney dragged a crossbeam from its socket. The beam turned, one end plunging toward Eryth.

He raised both hands.

Gold flared beneath the timber. It stopped a little above his head. Dust poured around him, hiding his shoulders. The support he had made bowed under the weight.

“Move,” I shouted.

“I can't move it with me.”

His voice was very calm. Blood ran from a cut above his eye.

I reached for the pressure in my wrist. Pain answered so sharply that I dropped my arm.

There was no third bolt waiting. I had spent what I could hold.

Beyond Eryth, one end of the beam rested on the damaged hearth. The other hovered above the doorway. If it fell, it would seal the only clear way out.

I grabbed the broken furnace poker lying beside the threshold. Its handle burned my scraped palm with rust. I jammed the tip beneath the lower edge of the beam and leaned my weight against it.

The timber shifted scarcely a finger's breadth.

“Sideways,” Eryth said.

“I am.”

“Toward the court.”

I changed the angle. The poker bent. His light thickened on the far side of the timber, pushing with me.

We moved it enough.

Eryth ducked beneath the beam and fell against my chest. I dragged him backward. His light failed. The timber crashed across the threshold, breaking the poker in two.

We lay in the court until the dust stopped falling.

His palms were striped with angry red lines. I remembered the blister I had given him in the infirmary and could not bear to look at them.

“I was trying to help,” I said.

“After you wouldn't listen.”

The rook returned to the broken roof. It watched us as though we were the part of the ruin that made least sense.

Eryth let me clean the cut above his eye. He would not let me explain again.

On the walk home, he stopped where the path divided.

“I have to tell them the forge is unsafe.”

“It's been unsafe for years.”

“And I have to tell them we were there.”

I felt anger rise before shame could stop it.

“You promised.”

“I promised to come with you.” He held up his burned hands. “That doesn't mean I promised to pretend.”

PART 4 OF 5

The Rift Glimpse

The forge was closed with a red cord across its approach and a notice warning of unstable masonry. Eryth was assigned extra watches for entering it. I was questioned about an unauthorized casting and told to surrender the damaged practice notes I admitted to using.

I gave them a copy with the final sequence missing.

No voice instructed me to do this. No ancient influence moved my pen. I removed the lines because I wanted to keep what I had learned, and because the truth would have made it harder to learn more.

Eryth saw the copy before I took it to the records desk.

“You left something out.”

“Yes.”

He waited.

I folded the page.

After that, he no longer asked to see everything I wrote.

The thaw came slowly. Each morning, the river climbed another step beneath the sluice arch. I knew the lower passage would soon be inaccessible. That knowledge gave urgency to a decision I had already made.

I went back alone.

A skin of moving water covered the chamber floor. I set the lantern high on the trough and stood with wet boots before the Tablet. Eryth had marked the limit of our previous reading with a charcoal line on the frame. Below it lay a diagram we had agreed not to attempt until we understood the warning above it.

The diagram resembled my Flamebind mark, except that its curled point continued inward.

I had taken it for a second figure. Now, in the slanting lantern light, I could see that the first line never ended. It traveled behind the others and returned through its own center.

A route folded inside a restraint.

I exposed my wrist.

The Tablet brightened where my reflection fell. Somewhere behind me, water dripped at an even pace. I used it to count my breaths.

This time I did not press my palm against the crystal. I held it above the surface and followed the inward curve with the pressure beneath my skin.

The mark tightened.

The chamber grew distant without becoming smaller. The dripping lost its echoes. The lantern flame flattened, as if seen through a narrow crack.

Then I looked through the crack.

A shore extended beneath a colorless sky. Its sand was black, but the water beyond it shone with a light that came from nowhere I could see. Stone doorframes stood along the shore. Some had fallen. Others remained upright above their own shadows, though nothing supported them.

I recognized the place from a rough plate in the old book. The caption there had been translated in the margin as the Shadow Realm.

The words did not help me understand what I was seeing.

A figure moved between two distant frames. It had the unsteady outline of someone glimpsed through hot air. I could not tell whether it was approaching or growing larger where it stood.

I tried to withdraw my hand.

My fingers remained above the Tablet. I could see them, dimly, superimposed over the pale water. But I could no longer feel the joint between hand and wrist.

The figure raised an arm.

I remembered the burning hall. The bronze door. The people who had screamed after I opened it. For the first time I wondered whether the vision had been a warning tailored to the very thing I most wanted to believe: that a closed door was always an injustice.

Something brushed my palm from the other side.

Cold ran up my arm. The Flamebind loop opened along its narrowest edge, unwinding into a spiral. A silver thread appeared through the black, fine as a cut in ink.

The shore drew nearer.

I had the terrible impression that I was not looking into another place. I was allowing another place to locate me.

“Enough,” I said.

The figure kept its arm raised.

I tried to summon the Ashrend Bolt. Pain shook my hand, but no force gathered. I was reaching for a weapon when I needed a way to stop reaching at all.

The basin. The shutter. The loose thread on his cuff.

Eryth's patient, irritating lesson returned to me.

I named what was real and close.

“Water.”

My left boot was full of it.

“Stone.”

My hip pressed against the trough.

“Flame.”

The lantern still burned beside my shoulder.

I caught its handle with my unmarked hand and pulled. Hot metal burned my fingers. The pain had a location. It belonged to me.

The shore broke apart.

I fell against the frame, striking my chin. The lantern clattered into the trough and hissed out. Darkness filled the chamber, ordinary and complete.

I stayed there until I could move my wrist.

The altered mark gave no light. By touch, it felt like uninjured skin. Yet when I relit the lantern, the silver line remained within the black spiral.

It was the same mark. I could trace every part of the original loop through what it had become. The change was worse for that continuity. Something had not been replaced. Something had found room to grow.

I copied the new shape beside the earlier drawing before I left. An old caption near its counterpart in the Tablet contained the word riftstone, though no loose stone lay anywhere in the mounting. Whether it named a substance, a threshold, or a method, I could not tell.

By morning, the river had risen over the lowest step.

Eryth found me washing the burn on my left hand.

“You went back.”

I could have lied. I had become good at choosing truths small enough to hide inside.

Instead, I turned over my other wrist.

He looked at the spiral for a long time.

“Does it hurt?”

“Less than before.”

“That wasn't what I hoped you'd say.”

PART 5 OF 5

The Eyes That Watched

After the forge, I began to notice how much the temple saw.

A lamp moved from one corridor to another. A gatekeeper remembered the mud on my boots. An instructor who had never spoken to me asked whether the trembling in my right hand was improving.

Some of it was concern. Some of it was supervision. I preferred not to distinguish between them. Distrust made a simpler map.

The river kept the Tablet beyond my reach through spring. I worked from my copies, testing no more than I could conceal. The spiral remained quiet when covered, but certain old inscriptions made it ache beneath my sleeve. On days when the ache was strongest, I could hold a small clot of black-silver heat above my palm without losing feeling in my fingers.

I called that progress. I did not ask what had become more willing to pass through me.

Eryth's training changed during those months. He rose before the first bell and returned after evening meals. The burns on his hands healed into pale lines. Once I found him in the courtyard holding a bowl of water above the paving stones on a disk of blue light.

“You can lift heavier things than that,” I said.

“Weight isn't the lesson.”

The surface of the water remained perfectly still.

I remembered the crossbeam and said nothing more.

On other evenings I watched his sword exercises from the upper walk. His instructor sent weighted cords flying at him, and Eryth had to cut one without disturbing its neighbor. Later came threads of hostile light, woven around a volunteer's outstretched arm. He failed often. He stopped every time the force he was redirecting threatened the person inside it. I thought this made him slow. His instructor made him repeat it until he was not.

Near the beginning of summer, he told me the Grandmasters had accepted him into formal Dawn instruction.

We were sitting on the steps outside our old quarters. The room behind us still held both beds, although his had stood empty since he moved nearer the Records chamber.

“They offered before,” he said. “I wasn't certain I was ready.”

“And now you are?”

“No. Now I know more clearly what I can't do.”

He laid his hands on his knees. I could see the pale scars.

“The forge?”

“Among other things.”

“So they frightened you into it.”

He took a breath, then let it out slowly.

“Do you remember how long Father made us practice tying the boat?”

“We never owned a boat.”

“He borrowed one. You complained about the knots for the entire morning.”

I remembered then: the little landing below the ferry, the rope stiff with water, my father undoing my knot because it would tighten beyond release under strain.

“He said a thing that holds must also know how to let go,” Eryth said.

“You think this is the same?”

“I think learning isn't surrender just because someone else knows more than I do.”

I looked away first.

His admission would be marked that evening. He wanted me there. He did not say it as a request I could easily mock. He simply told me where the ceremony would be and left space beside the words.

“I have archive work,” I said.

“It won't last long.”

“I'll try.”

We both knew what that meant.

The archive work was real. For weeks I had been helping replace the warped shelving in a lower catalog room. The duty gave me access to inventories nobody guarded, because inventories were supposed to describe knowledge rather than contain it.

I had discovered that omissions could be indexed too.

Bundles removed from ordinary shelves left behind narrow reference slips. Most recorded decay, duplication, or transfer. A few bore an empty circle where the destination should have

been written. I found the same circle in the old book, beside a warning about words deprived of witnesses.

Monk Elen caught me comparing two slips.

He was a cautious man with a permanent gray stain on the side of one finger. When he took the slips from me, he did so gently.

“Those are retained for counting,” he said. “The texts aren't available.”

“They have to be somewhere.”

“Yes.”

“Where?”

He studied me over the slips.

“Some rooms have names that sound like invitations. That is unfortunate.”

He returned them to their drawer and gave me a stack of unremarkable water-damage reports. I worked through them until he left.

The reports named the room.

Vault of Unwritten Scrolls.

A leak above its northern wall had been repaired in Rhydian's tenure. The maintenance diagram showed a narrow inspection passage running behind the catalog shelves. Its entrance was sealed, but the seal was old, a locking pattern designed to recognize the current carried by an authorized keeper's touch.

I was not a keeper.

I had, however, spent years learning how pressure traveled through stone.

That evening, as voices gathered in the Chamber of Light, I went down to the catalog room. I moved the loose-backed shelf and knelt before the little service door.

For a long time I did nothing but feel the seal resist me.

I could have gone upstairs. Eryth would still have been waiting.

Instead, I turned my wrist until the split in the spiral faced the lock. I allowed a thread of black-silver heat to enter the pattern, then withdrew it along the same path.

The seal loosened around the absence.

I opened the door.

The inspection passage brought me out behind a cabinet taller than I was. Beyond it lay a low chamber crowded with scroll racks. Candles burned in iron cups along the walls, with seven more clustered on a table. Their flames did not bend when I passed.

Far above, a bell announced the beginning of my brother's ceremony.

I stood very still. Then I stepped between the racks.

On the nearest table lay a parchment secured by two plain stone weights. Most of its surface appeared blank until my shadow fell across it. A single word emerged, written in a hand so fine the letters seemed cut through the page.

Darklight.

I placed my father's journal beside the parchment and sat down.

CHAPTER 5

The Rift Between

PART 1 OF 5

The Scrolls of Silence

Kael

I knew I had spent too long in the Vault of Unwritten Scrolls when I stopped trusting the candles.

There were seven on the table. I had counted them when I entered, and again when the hunger became difficult to ignore. Their wicks leaned in the same direction. Their flames stood at the same height. The pool of wax beneath the nearest one had not widened by so much as the breadth of a nail.

My water flask was empty. The bread in my pocket had hardened. Somewhere above me, three days had passed.

Down here, the candles refused to admit it.

I laid my palm against the table and waited for the tremor in my fingers to stop. The mark on my wrist, once a single wound of fire, had become a split spiral. Under the candlelight, it seemed almost ordinary. Then I looked away, and felt it move.

The vault had been cut from stone older than the temple built over it. There were no shelves along one wall. Scrolls hung there without hooks, suspended inside narrow recesses, each surrounded by a space dust would not enter. I had learned to leave those alone after one of them spoke a word in my voice.

The parchment before me was safer only because it had not yet spoken.

One word marked its upper edge.

Darklight.

I had found references to it in censored margins, then whole passages beneath scraped surfaces. Here, it occupied the center of the page. Diagrams of celestial alignments crossed records of flame rituals. Some of the ink had dried brown. I did not need to touch it to recognize blood.

When I read a line directly, its meaning seemed clear. When I followed it to the next, the earlier glyphs rearranged themselves.

I set two copper pins beside a sentence to hold my place. Between them, the letters changed anyway.

“You will have to do better than that,” I told the page.

The nearest flame bent toward me.

I should have gone upstairs then. I should have eaten, slept, let the things I had read become things I could examine rather than things I needed to believe. Instead, I dipped my pen and began comparing the changing shapes with the diagrams I had copied from the Tablet.

Near midnight, the words held still.

To create from the void is to bend the void.

To bend the void is to enter the Rift Between.

“What Rift?” I whispered.

The glyph beneath my finger lifted off the page.

It rose like an ember, leaving no hole in the parchment. Another followed. They circled my wrist, touched the split spiral, and sank beneath the skin.

I shoved away from the table. The chair overturned behind me. My muscles locked before I could reach the door.

Stars screamed in a sky I had never seen. A mirror split one horizon from another. Burning feathers drifted through a chamber full of drowned books. Then Eryth stood before me in gold and blue, his eyes bright enough to erase the face around them.

“You were the one who let him die!”

I hit the floor trying to answer.

The vision vanished. My brother's voice remained for a moment, trapped in the stone beneath my cheek.

I pushed myself upright. The scroll was in my fist. I did not remember taking it.

Something spoke through the ringing in my head.

The balance must be rewritten. The Light does not remember. But the Dark never forgets.

It sounded like a thought I had been waiting to have. That frightened me more than a stranger's voice would have. I opened my mouth, and the final words came out with my breath.

Footsteps stopped outside the vault.

“Brother Kael?”

Elen stood in the doorway with a cloth over one arm and a small bucket in his hand. I knew him from the public archives, where he repaired labels and cleaned the ledges nobody else remembered. The sight of the bucket, its worn handle bound with twine, almost brought me back to myself.

Then he looked at the scroll.

“You shouldn't be here. That vault is sealed for a reason. It corrupts those who stare too long.”

“I'm not corrupted.”

He set the bucket down very carefully.

“Then why do your eyes shimmer like ink?”

I turned toward a polished plate on the wall. For a moment, my reflection had no whites in its eyes.

I blinked. They returned.

Elen held out his empty hand. “Come upstairs. Let someone sit with you.”

That was all he asked. I could have accepted without surrendering a single page.

I walked past him instead.

“Because ink writes the truth,” I said.

He did not follow me. Behind me, I heard the bucket handle settle against its rim.

The upper corridors smelled of rain and cooked grain. I had forgotten how much a living temple could smell like bodies. My knees weakened on the final stair, and I caught the rail before a novice saw me stumble.

Chants came from the Chamber of Light.

I stopped at the door.

Eryth hovered above a ring of golden sigils. His bare feet hung a hand's breadth from the floor. The Crest of the Dawn Monks had been sewn into the shoulder of his robe, its threads bright against gold and blue.

I remembered how he had carried our father's robe with both hands beneath it.

Now he wore something that fit.

“So you're one of them.”

The chanting faltered as I pushed the door open. Eryth lowered himself to the floor and dismissed the two novices practicing near the wall. He waited until their footsteps receded.

“You look ill.”

“Since when did you need light to see truth?”

His gaze dropped to my marked wrist.

“And since when did you let shadows write your beliefs?”

“Since the Light let our father die.”

He flinched. I saw it, and continued.

“You replaced him with robes and rituals.”

“You think I don't mourn him?”

Smoke gathered around my fingers. Eryth's sigils brightened in answer. Between us, the air acquired the sharp smell that came before a storm.

“I didn't replace him,” he said. “I'm trying to honor him.”

“Then why does it feel like you abandoned me?”

The question came out before I could make it crueler. Without the anger around it, I hated how young it sounded.

Eryth lowered his hands.

“Because I feared what you'd become.”

I stared at him.

He took a step toward me. “I kept thinking if I found the right thing to say, the right teacher, you would come back. And while I was thinking, I let you disappear beneath the floor.”

“You were afraid of me.”

“I was afraid for you.”

I wanted the difference to mean something. I wanted it so badly that I turned away before he could see.

That night, I lit no candle in my room.

I laid the Darklight scroll in an empty basin and touched my mark to its edge. Black-silver flame climbed the parchment. It consumed the letters last, each one hanging in the air for a moment after the page beneath it was gone.

In the ash, a single word remained.

RIFT.

The wall behind the basin separated along a line that cast no shadow. I could still see the plaster. I could also see through it, into a depth the room had never possessed.

Something pulsed there in time with my wrist.

I reached in.

Cold closed around my arm. My fingertips found crystal, half bright and half dark, and the seam in the wall began to contract. I pulled with both hands. The crystal came free with a sound like a breath released beneath water.

It was no piece of the flat Tablet I had found with Eryth. This thing was thick, irregular, warm at its dark edge and cold where it shone. I held it above the basin. Beneath my feet, ancient glyphs appeared through the floorboards.

“If they won't teach me,” I whispered, “I'll write my own path.”

The relic answered with a single beat.

* * *

Eryth

Eryth woke with his hand against his chest.

Across the passage, a novice began crying in his sleep. The light in the corridor lamps had turned inward, leaving their glass dark while something bright trembled at the center of each flame.

He knew the direction before he stood.

His brother's room.

By the time he reached it, the door was open and the basin cold. Kael was gone. On the floor, a silver line cut across a ward Eryth had watched the temple masons repair that spring.

It had not burned through the ward.

It had changed what the ward meant.

PART 2 OF 5

The Philosopher of Shadows

Kael

Two nights later, I went below the mapped corridors.

The crystal lay wrapped against my ribs. Even through the cloth, I could feel its pulse. It had not settled into an obedient rhythm. Sometimes it followed my heart. Sometimes my heart hurried to follow it.

I carried a torch because the darklight in my palm made the old inscriptions move. Ordinary fire let them remain dead long enough to read.

The catacombs narrowed beneath a collapsed stair. I went sideways through the opening, scraped my shoulder against stone, and emerged into a passage where the dust bore no footprints. Far above, water moved through the temple's channels. Down here, the sound arrived a moment before the drops struck the ground.

I had copied the route from the vault's diagrams onto a thin crystal map, using a point of heated metal and the marks that had survived on the Tablet. The lines were locked to the spiral on my wrist. When I held the map with my other hand, they showed nothing but the grain of the crystal.

At the end of the passage stood a crypt marked Vestige Chamber.

Someone had tried to chisel out the second word. Someone else had cut it back into the scar.

I pressed my wrist against the seal. It resisted. The crystal at my ribs gave a slow, heavy pulse, and one line in the seal changed from gold to silver.

The door opened far enough to admit me.

Cobwebs stretched between the cases. A reading desk stood beneath a stone diagram of three intersecting circles. On its surface, a handprint remained in a layer of dust so old it had hardened around the edges.

I put my torch in the bracket beside it and opened the first book.

The pages described the war of the Shattered Scripts. They disagreed with accounts I had copied as a novice. Where our lessons named a victory, this book named a sealing. Where the temple's histories listed condemned practitioners, a margin recorded the questions they had asked before their names were removed.

I wanted to believe all of it.

That was reason enough to read it twice.

Some dates had been altered. One witness contradicted himself across two pages. The men who had hidden these volumes had wanted vindication as fiercely as the men upstairs wanted obedience. I made notes beside both sets of claims, though the contradictions that accused the Council received more of my attention.

By the middle of the night, my own journal was nearly full.

Rhydian's small book remained wrapped separately in my satchel. I had begun keeping my observations apart from his after catching myself reading one of my conclusions as though it had been his. Even then, I understood the danger. Understanding did not stop me wanting his approval on every page.

Three scripts overlapped in the oldest scroll.

Monk's Script I knew. Nocturne Glyph I had learned painfully, checking each sign against the ways it changed in the mirror. The third crossed between them, borrowing a stroke from one and a silence from the other.

Lumiran.

The name appeared beneath a triangular diagram. Lucen marked one point. Tenebris marked another. At the third, almost rubbed away, stood Luxumbris.

Light. Dark. Darklight.

I traced the connections without touching the page. They did not form a closed balance. One line continued past the triangle, into a margin the writer had left empty.

“Not just shadow,” I said. “Not just flame.”

The crystal warmed beneath its cloth.

I translated the next passage three times. Each version troubled me differently.

Luxumbris is not balance. It is rebellion. It is evolution.

The script did not tell me whether rebellion led anywhere worth going. It offered a means of refusing the boundary and left the reader to choose what came after. I liked that omission. I began mistaking it for permission.

“A bridge between truth and denial,” I wrote.

When I set down the pen, violet light had entered the cracks beneath my chair.

I rose too late.

A circle formed around the desk. Its runes turned toward one another like locks aligning. In the center, an orb rose from the floor: black, perfectly smooth, bound by slowly moving bands of silver.

My torch bent toward it. The flame stretched until its tip touched the surface and disappeared.

I reached for the orb.

Pain struck behind my eyes. The chamber moved sideways without moving at all, and I was standing among suspended stones beneath a sky with no fixed distance.

Mirrors drifted through the air. In one, I wore a soldier's broken armor. In another, white robes rested cleanly against my wrists. A third showed a face so scarred I recognized it only when its mouth formed my name.

“You are the fracture.”

The voice came from each reflection.

“You are the rift.”

I covered my ears. They continued inside my head.

Then a hand settled on my shoulder.

Rhydian stood beside me.

For a moment, I forgot every question that had brought me there. I reached for him with both hands, furious that tears came before words. His sleeve felt like the rough cloth he had worn to the river.

“Where were you?”

His lips did not move.

You can still return to the path, if you define the path yourself.

I gripped his sleeve harder.

“That isn't what I asked.”

He looked toward the mirrors.

“Tell me what was in the basket,” I said. “Tell me what Eryth dropped.”

The hand on my shoulder tightened.

White fire crossed the empty sky. Rhydian's face broke into bands of light, and a figure in gold and blue emerged beyond him, lifting a blade.

Eryth.

I could not tell whether he was coming to save me or to strike.

I fell back into the Vestige Chamber with my hand closed around nothing.

The orb was gone. My torch lay smoking on the floor. Blood had run from my nose onto the desk, spattering the margin beyond the triangle.

My wrist had changed. Black and silver lines spread from the spiral in fine fractal petals, each one painful when I moved my fingers.

I sat until I could breathe without tasting metal.

The thing wearing my father's face had answered none of my questions. I wrote that down first. Below it, I wrote what it had said, and underlined the words define the path yourself.

By dawn, the warning occupied one line. The permission occupied a page.

I took a fresh scroll and titled it The Scrolls of the Rift, Volume I. Beneath that, on a separate leaf, I began the Doctrine of the Rift.

Truth is not one flame. Truth is a storm of flickers.

The next line came slowly.

To wield Darklight is not to command shadows. It is to teach the Light how to bleed.

I stared at it. I knew what the sentence sounded like. I kept it.

“Let the monks chant in their domes,” I said into the abandoned chamber. “I'll carve a path between gods.”

The torch guttered behind me. I did not turn.

* * *

Eryth

The Council's seal was still warm when Eryth broke it.

A sigil breach has been recorded beneath the Temple. A relic has awakened. One of our own has touched the Rift.

He read the message at the foot of the novices' stair. A child hurried past him carrying a bowl in both hands, concentrating on keeping the water inside it. Eryth stepped aside and watched until the child reached the next landing.

Then he folded the message.

He did not need to ask who.

PART 3 OF 5

Between the Scroll and the Sword

Kael

The relics beneath the northern corridor had begun answering one another.

I could feel them through the soles of my boots. A low note traveled ahead of me, woke something behind the wall, and returned higher than it had left. When I stopped, the notes continued without me.

The crystal map lay open in my left hand. Forbidden scrolls filled my satchel. My Doctrine rested between them, protected by two plain boards as though careful binding could make its contents less dangerous.

I had eaten that morning. I had slept for several hours in a disused storeroom. Those small precautions gave me a confidence I did not deserve. I was thinking clearly enough to know the Council would come, and not clearly enough to consider going to them before they did.

Elen had left a flask beside the entrance to the vault.

I had taken it.

I had not left him a message.

* * *

Eryth

The Hall of Ascendants had been built to make a person feel small. Eryth knew the effect was deliberate. Narrow windows let light fall across the Council's white robes while those summoned before them stood in shadow.

He moved half a step out of that shadow before he bowed.

“The sigil's pulse matches Kael's last known aura,” an elder said.

“He is near the Rift. Too near,” said another.

Eryth waited through the recitation of breaches. When the elder reached the missing scroll, he raised his head.

“Have you asked what he believes he found?”

“That will be part of your task.”

“It could have been part of ours before this.”

Silence moved around the circle. Seradin, standing beside the eastern pillar, watched him without speaking.

The eldest councillor laid two fingers on the arm of her chair.

“You must confront him. But not to destroy. To test.”

“Test what?”

“Whether he can still choose to return.”

Eryth looked at the sealed order placed before him. It required the surrender of the forbidden scrolls and the awakened relic. It forbade pursuit into the Unmapped Relics Zone without the Council's authorization.

“And if he refuses?”

“You will contain the breach.”

They had placed a brother's life inside a phrase that could mean almost anything.

Eryth took the order. The Sword of Aetherium rested across his back, its familiar weight suddenly less reassuring. He had learned to use the blade to divide hostile force from the person wielding it. He had never been certain he could do that to someone whose childhood he remembered as well as his own.

At the doors, Seradin spoke quietly.

“Your love for him is why you must go.”

Eryth turned.

“Then let it also be why I decide when to stop.”

* * *

Kael

The Cataclysm Gate had nine rings.

Eight moved when I approached. The ninth remained fixed, its glyphs cut so deeply that frost gathered inside them. Beyond the gate lay the Unmapped Relics Zone. On every diagram I had found, the corridors stopped at its threshold.

My mark brought the first ring into alignment. A tremor passed through the wall. I waited for it to settle before touching the second.

By the seventh, the skin around my wrist had begun to blister.

“You always choose silence over answers.”

I knew the voice before its echo reached the other end of the corridor.

“And you always choose answers someone else gave you.”

Eryth stepped into the lamplight. Gold ran faintly along the shoulder of his robe. The hilt above it shone more brightly.

“The Council wants your scrolls,” he said. “But I want my brother back.”

“You want the boy by the river. The one who didn't question fate. That boy died with our father.”

“He questioned everything. You know he did.”

I almost smiled. It made me angrier.

“You don't understand what you're becoming, Kael.”

“No. You don't understand that I've chosen to become it.”

His eyes moved to my blistered wrist.

“Have you? Or have you only chosen not to let anyone else be right?”

The eighth ring turned beneath my palm.

Eryth reached for my arm.

I struck his hand away with a thread of darklight. It threw him against the opposite wall. The force surprised me. I saw him catch himself, saw the brief failure in his breathing, and had time to step back before he drew his sword.

I stepped toward the gate instead.

The Sword of Aetherium left its sheath with a clear, sustained note. Forged in the Celestial Forge, tempered to hold light without scattering it, it was a weapon I had once asked to touch.

Now its edge came between my wrist and the final ring.

“Move away from the gate.”

I pulled the light around the blade sideways.

The corridor fractured into overlapping images. Eryth's first strike passed through the place my shoulder had occupied. The second found the darklight I had gathered and cut it cleanly, sending pain back through my arm.

I stumbled. He lowered the point a fraction.

“You can stop.”

“So can you.”

I drove both hands forward.

Black-silver force struck his guard. Gold flared through the hall. Dust fell from the ceiling in long straight curtains, and a seam opened above the gate.

Every strike he made left an after-image. I learned to watch his feet rather than the light. Every pulse I released tugged loose another thread of the corridor around us. I could make the world unreliable for him. I could not keep it reliable for myself.

A shelf of stone broke from the wall behind his shoulder.

He turned his blade and split it before it reached us.

“You think this power corrupts?” I shouted. “It reveals!”

“If it isolates you from everyone who loves you, it destroys.”

I caught his next strike between two bands of darklight. For a heartbeat, we stood close enough to see the exhaustion in each other's faces.

“Then why did you bring a sword?”

“Because you stopped opening the door.”

I twisted away, slammed my marked hand against the final ring, and felt the gate take more than I had meant to give.

My vision went white. The ninth ring turned. Stone opened with a groan that ran through my teeth.

The gap was barely wide enough for my body.

Eryth caught the strap of my satchel. It tore across the seam. A loose page spun between us, and he caught that instead.

“Come after me, and you'll lose your place among them,” I said.

He looked past me into the dark.

“Stay here,” I told him, “and you'll lose your brother forever.”

The gate began closing. A warning line burned across the threshold, and the ceiling above Eryth shifted. He could force the opening wider, or hold the fractured arch long enough for the corridor to survive.

I left him that choice.

On the other side, I leaned against cold stone while the gate sealed behind me. My wrist was numb. My satchel hung open. I had escaped with the crystal and most of the scrolls.

I kept telling myself I had given him a chance to follow.

* * *

Eryth

Eryth stood beneath the settling arch until the last stone stopped moving.

The stolen page had caught against his forearm. He peeled it away. Kael's handwriting crowded the margin, familiar and impatient. At its center, one line had been struck through and written again.

What is forbidden may still be chosen.

He folded the page rather than burn it.

From the sealed gate came a whisper that did not sound like his brother.

“When brothers walk separate suns, the stars must choose their allegiance.”

Eryth lifted the sword.

“Who said that?”

The corridor gave him back his own question.

PART 4 OF 5

The Vault of Forgotten Gods

Kael

The floor beyond the gate broke beneath my third step.

I fell through rotten mortar and struck a sloping shelf of stone. The crystal jarred against my ribs. I caught a ledge with my unmarked hand, held for a moment, and lost it when the edge crumbled.

I landed on a glowing symbol far below.

Its light entered my bones without warming them. Around me, the Rift Arcades extended into a depth that made no architectural sense. Columns stood at angles that should have brought them down. Each carried the broken face of a figure someone had once considered worthy of worship.

I lay still until I knew which parts of me hurt.

My left knee would bear weight. My ribs punished every breath. The marked hand had regained feeling, which was worse than numbness.

I wrapped a strip from the torn satchel around my wrist and stood.

The inscription above the nearest arch named the Vault of Forgotten Gods.

“So this is where they buried their mistakes.”

My voice returned from the passage ahead. In one echo, I sounded very old.

I moved slowly. Scenes had been cut into the walls: crowned figures bending over divided flames, monks closing doors on kneeling prisoners, a circle of scribes with their own mouths sealed. In places, the images had been recut until victory and massacre occupied the same piece of stone.

The records of Darklight experiments were worse. Divine magic and shadow matter had been forced together inside vessels that resembled bodies. The labels named successes. The faces beneath them suggested other words.

I had come looking for evidence that the Council had lied.

I found some. I also found evidence that forbidden knowledge could deserve fear. I hurried past those panels more quickly.

An altar shaped like an open eye stood at the end of the arcade.

When I approached, a spectral flame rose from its center. It stretched into a shape almost human, then lost that shape at the shoulders. Several faces occupied its head in succession, each speaking before the last had finished moving.

“You have disturbed the balance. Name yourself.”

I gripped my wrist.

“I am Kael. Son of Rhydian. Bearer of the Rift Sigil. And I seek to know what was denied.”

The faces stopped changing.

“Then prove you are not another flame-drenched zealot.”

“Who are you?”

“Veraxis.”

The name moved through the carvings behind me. Beneath one broken face, an inscription filled with light.

Truth-eater.

I took a step back.

“A god?”

“A word they found useful.”

Its body flickered, exposing columns of script where flesh should have been. For a moment, I saw the thing as a fragment of a record torn loose and taught to remember itself. Then the flame closed around it again.

“You eat truth.”

“What would you have them call the part they could not bear to keep?”

It was an answer designed to make me trust it. I knew that, and wanted the answer anyway.

The walls folded inward.

I was standing inside a hall of broken timelines. Reflections filled each surface. In one, I wore white and stood beside Eryth. In another, armies moved when I lifted my hand. A third showed me dying alone beneath a shattered sky, my mouth open around a name I could not hear.

I turned away. More mirrors waited behind me.

“These are your futures,” Veraxis said. “All possible. All yours. Will you choose one, or forge something new?”

I went to the reflection in white. Eryth was smiling there, older than the boy at the river and younger than the man I had just left behind the gate. My reflection reached for his shoulder.

Before the hand could touch him, the image broke.

“Why show me that?”

“You asked what was denied.”

“You chose where it ended.”

The hall became still.

I looked more closely at the other visions. Each stopped at a moment that demanded a feeling from me. Triumph. Shame. Terror. None showed what came before the image or what might follow it.

I touched my mark to the nearest mirror.

The surface gave beneath my fingers. Silver lines spread from my wrist, drawing a fracture through the version of me commanding the armies.

“I will not be a reflection,” I said. “I will be the Rift itself.”

The hall shattered without falling. I stood before the altar again, breathing hard, with glass dust on my palms that disappeared when I rubbed it.

Veraxis extended a strand of spectral fire.

A quill formed inside it.

“Then take the Riftsteel Quill. Write your truth.”

“And the price?”

“A borrowed truth may be written in borrowed ink.”

I understood before I touched it.

The quill drew blood through the skin of my fingers. It hurt in a distant, almost gentle way. Parchment unrolled across the altar, its lines already glowing.

I could have asked what happened to the others who had written there. I could have turned the page over, examined the marks on the back, demanded an answer without a riddle.

Instead, I began.

Let those who walk between not be bound by stars or void. Let the Rift become the mirror and the flame.

Each word darkened as it left the point. I watched my handwriting steady. The last sentence burned through the parchment and remained standing in the air.

The quill emptied in my hand.

The scroll split along the line I had written. Its edges curved inward, joined, and hardened into a floating crescent of translucent darklight.

The Riftbrand Blade.

My own letters ran along its edge.

I reached toward it. The blade turned to meet my hand and stopped before touching me. When I moved, it followed, tethered to some part of me I had not known could be reached.

“What did I give you?” I asked.

Veraxis smiled with a face I almost recognized.

“You wrote.”

The spectral flame sank into the altar. I stood alone with a weapon behind my shoulder and a coldness in my fingers that would not leave.

* * *

Eryth

On the high cliffs, the ritual bells rang once without being struck.

Seradin looked up from the circle he had been drawing. Eryth felt the same disturbance, a fine pressure across the mark the starborn line had left on his wrist.

“He grows more distant each moon,” Seradin said.

Eryth unfolded the page he had caught at the gate.

“He's rewriting reality. And himself.”

“Then we must prepare.”

“To do what?”

Seradin set the chalk down.

“If your brother refuses to return to the Order, we may have no choice but to sever him from the Akasha.”

The wind lifted the corner of Kael's page. Eryth held it flat.

“You say that as though something can be cut out of a person and the person left behind.”

“I say it because others may die if we do nothing.”

Eryth had no answer that made the danger smaller. He also had no intention of letting danger make every answer acceptable.

“Then tell me everything the rite takes,” he said. “Not only what it promises to leave.”

* * *

Kael

At the vault's far exit, I found a door beneath a single carved line.

Beyond the Rift, no light dares claim dominion.

The blade hovered behind me. My wrist throbbed with each movement of its edge. I could feel it waiting for a direction.

“Then let them come,” I said.

The door opened onto a tunnel that smelled of rain.

PART 5 OF 5

When the Stars Refuse to Speak

Eryth

The stars had gone dim.

Eryth stood beneath the open roof of the Temple of the Winds and watched a familiar constellation lose its final point. The star itself might still be burning. Whatever carried its light into the temple was failing.

Around him, the Council of Venerated Flame gathered in robes thrown over sleeping clothes. One elder had come without sandals. Another kept attempting the same invocation under his breath, correcting the rhythm each time as though the fault lay in his voice.

Elder Myrrh raised her staff.

“The Akasha does not respond to our calls.”

“Impossible,” someone whispered. “The Records have never fallen silent.”

Myrrh turned toward him.

“They are silent now.”

The words stopped the argument before it began. Eryth was grateful for that small mercy.

Dawnfire had been worked into his white outer robe, marking emergency authority. He had accepted it because the monks sent into the field needed someone permitted to give an order before the Council finished debating one.

He had not mistaken it for an honor.

A map of the region lay beneath a suspended flame. The flame leaned toward the Riftstorm Plains. At the center of that territory, the marks on the map had begun folding inward.

“It is centered,” Seradin said.

Eryth already knew where.

Myrrh studied him for a long moment.

“Can you reach him?”

“I can reach the place.”

Nobody asked whether he had meant something else.

* * *

Kael

I had intended to ask the crystal one question.

By the time the first fracture opened above the plains, I had asked it everything.

The tunnel from the vault had brought me beyond the temple's outer paths. I walked until the ground rose into a wide, empty reach of stone and thin grass. There were no houses in sight. I remember taking comfort in that. I had begun to measure responsibility by the harm I could see from where I stood.

I set the crystal on a flat stone and unwrapped it.

The Riftbrand turned behind my shoulder.

“Show me,” I said. “Show me what they erased.”

At first, only the grass moved. It leaned toward the crystal, then away from it. A sound entered the air, too low to hear and strong enough to unsettle my balance.

I raised my marked hand.

The sky cracked.

Fracture-light spread horizontally, opening narrow views into places that vanished before I could name them. My cloak snapped against my legs. The blade spun more quickly, drawing energy from the tears above me, and the cold in my fingers became a deep, sustaining heat.

The crystal lifted from the stone.

Its beat matched mine.

Images burst outward: monks carrying locked chests beneath the temple; practitioners of Darklight made to kneel while their names were scraped from the wall; pages burning blue in a chamber with no windows.

Then Rhydian stood before a council I did not fully recognize.

He was arguing. I could see the strain around his mouth. A rolled prophecy lay on the table. An elder reached for it with a burning hand.

“Wait,” I said.

The image shuddered.

“Let me hear him.”

The prophecy burned before I heard a word.

I drove more power into the crystal. Pain moved from my wrist to my elbow. The image sharpened just long enough to show my father's hand closing over a flat piece of crystal.

The Tablet.

“So this is why he hid it.”

I spoke the conclusion aloud, and the storm seemed to approve. That should have warned me. I had not learned who had made the image, what had been cut from it, or why each answer fed the anger that kept the crystal open.

I had seen enough to accuse.

I called it enough to know.

A golden beam pierced the storm.

Eryth descended through the fracture-light, his fall controlled by rings of brightness turning beneath his feet. Other monks followed in a triangular formation. Their light pushed the storm away from them, opening a passage through which I could see his face.

He looked frightened.

“Stand down, Kael! You're destabilizing the veil!”

“Good.”

“You don't understand what you're pulling through!”

“I understand exactly what I'm pulling through.”

Behind me, something vast moved inside the storm.

I saw its shadow cross Eryth's face. The monks nearest him stepped back. Seradin's hand rose toward a ward at his throat.

“That presence,” he said, “predates the Order.”

The crystal grew heavier without lowering. I felt something on its other side looking for a way to put weight into the world.

Eryth drew Aetherium.

“Brother. This ends now.”

I lifted my hand to open the storm wider.

The sky split from one horizon to the other.

For a moment, the plains vanished.

A throne stood in a chamber of shadow-fire. Beyond it, an obsidian tower climbed into a broken sun. A crown of darklight hovered above the seat, moving slowly, as though its weight could not be borne by anything solid.

I sat beneath it.

Older. Colder. Looking directly at myself across the distance.

I searched the chamber for Eryth.

There were figures along the walls, too indistinct to recognize. None stood beside the throne.

The older version of me lifted one hand.

My own hand moved with it.

I closed my fist before I understood whether I was obeying or commanding.

The vision snapped shut. The Riftstorm collapsed inward, dragging its noise after it. I fell to one knee in grass that had turned gray beneath my boots.

The crystal dropped into my waiting hand.

For a long time, nobody moved.

Eryth approached first. Aetherium remained in his grip, its point angled toward the ground.

“What did you see?”

I looked at the place where the throne had been.

“The future.”

“A future.”

I did not answer the correction.

“And?” he asked.

“You won't stand beside me in it.”

His grip tightened on the sword. For a moment, I thought he might finally strike without warning. Instead, he looked at the ruined grass around us.

“If you continue this path, I will be forced to stop you.”

Something in his voice reached the boy I had been. It lasted only a moment.

“Then train harder.”

I let the Riftbrand dissolve into smoke. The blade returned to the cold place behind my wrist, still present, still waiting. Then I walked past him.

He did not reach for me.

I followed the edge of the scar until the monks' light diminished behind the trees. The crystal pulsed in my hand, pulling toward the earth. At the storm's broken center, a fissure opened between two stones.

I crouched and held the crystal above it.

For the first time that night, I did not ask what it would show me.

I wanted to know what it would make.

The crystal slipped from my fingers. It entered the stone without breaking it and sank until only a narrow edge remained visible. Blacklight roots spread beneath the surface, tracing the cracks faster than I could follow.

The ground answered with a slow pressure against my palm.

I stayed there until the eastern sky began to pale.

Under the scar left by the storm, something had begun to take root.

CHAPTER 6

Foundations of the Darklight

PART 1 OF 5

The First Stone

“If the Light builds temples to remember the past, then I will build a tower to command the future.”
—Kael, Doctrine of the Rift, Entry 19

Kael

The land where the Riftstorm collapsed did not heal. It scarred.

At dawn I left the place where I had kept watch beside the crystal and walked the edge of the scar. A streambed curved through it, its damp margins drying as I watched. Trees leaned away from the clearing, their highest branches twisted upward like hands appealing to an indifferent judge. Wind worried the perimeter in a continuous spiral. Inside it, my torn cloak hung still.

At the center, the crystal had become a jagged spire no taller than my knee.

Half light, half shadow. I could still distinguish the division, though both halves were clouded by the stone through which they had grown. Fine black veins ran into the earth around it. When I crouched, their silver edges brightened beneath the soil, revealing the spread of roots I had not planted.

The vision of the throne remained behind my eyes. I had called it the future because uncertainty would have given Eryth something to argue with. Alone, facing this small, ugly beginning, I found certainty harder to maintain.

My ribs still ached from the fall beneath the temple. The skin around my wrist was blistered, tender even beneath the lightest touch. I set my palm against the crystal anyway.

The sigil flared from wrist to elbow. Pain struck through the long bones of my arm and lodged beneath my breastbone. I almost withdrew. Then I imagined returning to the temple with an empty hand, and kept it where it was.

“Grow,” I whispered.

A crack traveled through the clearing. There was no sound with it. Far beyond the twisted trees, a flock of birds dropped abruptly below the ridge, wings tumbling out of rhythm. One recovered. Then another. I could not see the rest.

For a moment, I was by the river.

Rhydian was laughing at something Eryth had said. Sun warmed the wet shoulders of my tunic. The Sky Falcon belonged to stories, and our father had not yet become an absence around which we arranged our lives.

“Magic doesn’t belong to the obedient, my sons. It belongs to the one willing to endure it.”

He had followed it with a warning about understanding what we asked to bear. I remembered that too. But warnings had filled my life without returning anything they had taken from it. I chose the part of his lesson that let me keep my hand where it was.

“I am enduring.”

The spire rose another inch.

My knees trembled as I stood. I watched a beetle struggle across the newly opened crack. Before it reached the other side, something black glimmered beneath it, and it vanished.

Footsteps approached through the dead brush.

“I know you’re there.”

“You opened something that night.”

The voice was rough and cautious. A woman stopped between two stunted trees, holding her empty hands where I could see them. A scar crossed one cheek. Her robes had been repaired with darker cloth at the knees and torn again at the hem; the place where a temple emblem had been removed was clean against the weathering.

“They said you were unstable,” she said. “But I felt what you did. The Rift answered you.”

“Who are you?”

“Vaelin.”

“You were cast out.”

“For asking why we fear shadow.”

“That was enough?”

“The first time, they gave me copying work. The second, silence. The third time I asked in a room where visitors could hear.” She glanced at my hand. “You seem to have skipped the first two.”

I studied the worn sandals, the water flask, the careful way she kept clear of the roots. She had come alone. There were no disciples waiting in the brush, no hidden company eager to kneel. Only one woman with a question the temple had refused to bear.

“Then stop asking,” I said quietly. “Start building.”

The crystal pulsed brighter.

Vaelin took an involuntary step toward it, then checked herself.

“What is this place?”

I turned to face the forming structure.

“A beginning.”

* * *

Eryth

Golden light filled the chamber so completely that the seams between its stones were invisible.

Eryth knelt before Seradin. Behind the master stood five monks in radiant armor, each breastplate etched with the same unbroken halo. The newly formed Halo Guard had been assembled from different temple companies. They were practiced fighters, but they had never held this formation together outside the training court.

Eryth had asked for that court before he asked for their names. Now he knew which guard favored an injured ankle, which recovered fastest after a broken ward, and which was young enough to mistake speed for courage.

“The Council believes your brother is gathering outcasts,” Seradin said. “He is laying foundations.”

“Then he intends permanence.”

“If he builds something rooted in Rift energy, it will not merely stand. It will anchor.”

Eryth lifted his head. “Anchor what?”

“That uncertainty is the reason you must act.”

He disliked the answer. He disliked more that it was partly true. He had seen something enormous take shape behind Kael in the storm. Naming it a vision had not made its shadow easier to remember.

“Then we intercept before the structure stabilizes.”

“The core is your first objective,” Seradin said. “Separate him from it. Bring him back if that remains possible.”

Eryth rose and faced the five waiting guards.

“No one strikes at my brother through another member of this company. No one pursues beyond my signal. If the ground changes, you look to your feet before your enemy.”

Their captain touched two fingers to the halo on her breastplate.

“And if he will not surrender?”

Eryth settled the Sword of Aetherium across his back.

“Then we make room for him to change his mind.”

Kael had never built anything small. As a boy he had dammed a ditch with stolen roof tiles and spent the afternoon furious with the water for finding a way around him. Eryth remembered Rhydian helping them dismantle it before the orchard flooded.

There would be no father to take the first tile out this time.

* * *

Kael

Vaelin helped me clear loose stones from around the core.

She had maintained ground wards during her temple service. She recognized where force was collecting, although she would not pretend to understand what I was calling through it. Twice she stopped me from putting my foot on earth that looked firm. Twice it sank before I could object.

When I placed both hands above the crystal, stone began rising around it: jagged black material, silver-threaded, turning as it grew. The roots tightened beneath my boots. I felt the strain in my teeth.

Vaelin stumbled backward.

“This isn’t construction.”

“No.”

The first pillar erupted twenty feet into the morning air. Its spiraled face dragged a shower of soil upward, then released it. Fractured shapes resembling halo fragments lifted from its

crown and remained suspended there, turning slowly, broken constellations beneath the paling stars.

“This is manifestation.”

Lightning cracked across a cloudless sky.

I had pictured a straight column. This one twisted. I had imagined a smooth crown. The fragments circled above it like pieces of an ornament I had once known and forgotten.

A terrifying thought rose through my triumph: perhaps I was not inventing the Tower. Perhaps I was uncovering something that had been waiting for hands.

A golden beam pierced the treeline.

Eryth stepped from the brightness. Five armored monks spread behind him, two to either side and their captain close at his shoulder. Their boots disturbed the circling wind.

Vaelin moved in front of the core.

Eryth raised a hand.

“Stand down, Kael.”

“You came early.”

“You’re destabilizing the region.”

“I’m stabilizing truth.”

The pillar pulsed. Eryth looked past me. I saw his fingers tighten, not at a wild surge but at the regularity of the next one. Even he could hear the measured rhythm.

“Brother,” he said, “this path doesn’t end in balance.”

“It ends in understanding.”

Behind Vaelin, the ground cracked. A second ridge of black stone shouldered through the soil.

The Halo Guard ignited their blades.

“If they force my hand,” I whispered, “the Tower will rise faster.”

Above the pillar, the floating fragments turned together. For an instant their shadows joined into the outline of an enormous bent finger. I looked up, and the resemblance was gone.

PART 2 OF 5

The Halo Guard Advances

Kael

The captain struck the earth with her blade.

Light ran along the ground toward the first pillar, then divided into three narrow lines. Two guards followed the outer lines while the other three held behind Eryth. They were not charging blindly. They meant to divide the clearing into pieces too small for me to use.

“Stay behind the core,” I told Vaelin.

“Those are binding lines.”

“I can see them.”

“Then see where they meet.”

The outer guards drove their blades down. A sheet of gold snapped upright between the first pillar and the exposed roots of the second. The pressure on my wrist vanished so suddenly that I staggered.

For one breath I felt no pain.

For the next I could not feel my fingers at all.

Eryth crossed the gold sheet as though stepping through sunlight at a doorway. The Sword of Aetherium cleared his shoulder, its edge blue at the heart of the radiance.

“Move away from it.”

I summoned the Riftbrand.

The crescent took shape over my left shoulder, translucent black and silver, my own handwriting moving along its curve. Eryth's first strike met it before it had fully hardened. The impact knocked me backward against the crystal. Light burned across my forearm.

He had been practicing.

I sent the crescent low. He turned it aside and closed the distance, refusing the room I needed to gather another surge. His next blow was with the guard of his sword, aimed at my temple. I ducked. The metal caught my ear, filling half the world with a high, thin note.

Behind him, the youngest guard advanced toward the crystal.

“Not the core,” I said.

Eryth heard the warning. The guard heard a threat.

His blade descended.

Vaelin struck his elbow with the butt of a fallen branch. The cut went wide, shearing a silver root instead. White fire sprang along the exposed vein. She caught his wrist with both hands and forced the weapon down into the soil.

Her scream reached me through the ringing in my ear.

I tore the Riftbrand away from Eryth and swept it between them. The guard flung himself backward. Vaelin fell beside the core, her right palm smoking.

The broken root lashed like a severed muscle.

All five guards recoiled as the binding lines brightened. What they had cut did not bleed darkness. It dragged light into itself, drinking along the blade's passage, along the ward, toward the hands that fed it.

“Release!” Eryth shouted.

The captain lifted her sword. Her two outer guards did the same. The golden sheet flickered but remained; they had planted its pattern too well to dismiss it with a gesture.

I felt their light enter me through the stone.

The numbness left my fingers. Strength followed, sharp and clean. For a moment every fracture in the clearing lay open to my understanding. I could turn the whole binding net inside out. I could put their beautiful discipline around their throats.

Eryth saw something change in my face.

“Kael. Don't.”

“They brought it.”

“They didn't know.”

“Neither did I, when the Order started choosing for us.”

I closed my hand.

The sheet became black at its edges. The captain dropped to one knee, both hands on her hilt. One of her guards reached her and seized the back of her armor. Another ran toward Vaelin, then halted when the earth opened between them.

The second foundation rose.

It came crooked, dragging plates of buried stone upward. The youngest guard lost his footing. A root looped around his ankle and pulled him toward the widening fissure.

I could have let go.

That is the simplest truth of that morning, and the one I have found hardest to leave alone. I could have let go before Eryth turned, before Vaelin crawled to the fissure, before the boy's fingers began sliding through loose soil.

But the second pillar was rising, and I wanted to see how far.

Vaelin caught the guard by his collar with her unburned hand.

“Help me!”

“He would have killed you.”

“Help me now.”

I loosened my grip on the stolen current. The root stopped tightening, but the binding net collapsed unevenly. Its eastern side snapped back through me.

I fell.

The fissure opened beneath my heel. My shoulder struck its edge. For an instant I hung over a blackness silver-veined and impossibly deep, with the core's rhythm beating below me.

Eryth stood close enough to strike the slender connection between my wrist and the crystal. I saw him recognize it: one exposed thread, a single blow, the objective Seradin had sent him to accomplish.

He sheathed his sword and caught my arm.

The edge crumbled beneath his knees.

“Take my other hand.”

I tried. The hand would not close.

“Kael!”

His palm opened around mine. Gold and blue burned where our sigils touched. He dragged me upward by the shoulder of my cloak while the Tower pulled on the power passing between us.

His sleeve caught fire.

I struck the earth with my free elbow and rolled clear. Eryth tore the burning cloth from his shoulder. Beside the core, Vaelin and the captain hauled the youngest guard away from the crack. The captain had crossed the broken ward to reach them. Loyalty had made enemies perform the same ugly work.

The second pillar stopped rising at a little more than my height. Beneath it, a broad circular base locked into place with a sound like a door being barred.

The Tower had claimed its second foundation.

Eryth rose with his left arm held close to his side. All five guards gathered around him. One limped. The youngest could scarcely put weight on his ankle. Their captain's blade

flickered in her shaking hand, but she put herself between us before she checked her own injury.

“Withdraw to the northern ridge,” Eryth said.

“We still have an opening,” the captain answered.

“Not one we understand.”

He looked at me.

“You felt it feed.”

“You fed it.”

“And you kept hold.”

I said nothing.

Vaelin stood beside me, her burned hand against her ribs. She had come to the clearing seeking an answer. She had stayed when an answer began hurting her. I mistook that, briefly, for permission to feel proud.

Eryth took one step backward.

“Keep it inside this clearing.”

“Or what?”

“Or the next decision won't be only about you.”

The six of them withdrew together. I watched until the last halo disappeared between the trees.

Then my legs gave way, and Vaelin let me fall before she helped me up.

PART 3 OF 5

What the Stone Takes

Kael

She had one flask of water. She poured half over her hand and gave the rest to me.

I drank before remembering to offer it back.

“That was foolish,” I said.

“Saving you?”

“Putting your hands on his blade.”

“The crystal was behind me.”

“You could have moved.”

“So could you.”

The reply left me with nothing useful to say.

We sat in the first pillar's shadow. Up close, its stone smelled of struck metal and wet earth. The cut on my forearm had begun bleeding again. I wound a strip of cloak around it, clumsily, and Vaelin tightened the knot with her left hand and her teeth.

“What were you going to do to them?” she asked.

“Stop them.”

“You had stopped them.”

I looked toward the northern ridge. A brief flash of gold appeared between its rocks. Eryth had not gone far enough to make his absence a comfort.

“They won't leave us alone.”

“Then we should learn which things we can stop without becoming worse at everything else.”

“You came because the Rift answered me.”

“I came to hear the answer.” She held up her burned palm. “I haven't finished listening.”

I had imagined a follower as another pair of hands obeying my will. Vaelin was inconveniently more substantial than that.

A scraping came from the ground behind us.

One of the loose stones we had cleared was moving. Slowly, no faster than a snail, it slid toward the second foundation. A thread of silver shone beneath it. Farther away another stone shifted, then a third.

I pressed my hand against the core.

“Enough.”

The dragging continued.

I tried to picture stillness: no rising stone, no searching roots. Pressure built behind my eyes. The first pillar answered with a low vibration, and a new line appeared down its face. I had not stopped its appetite. I had directed it inward.

“Kael.”

Vaelin pointed toward the streambed.

A thin runnel of water had appeared between the dry stones. It traveled uphill.

We followed it to the edge of the clearing. Beneath a shelf of roots, a seep had broken through the bank. Water should have run south, where the land fell toward tributaries of the Eldra. Instead, it crawled north in trembling beads and vanished into a silver seam.

The ground beyond the scar was still alive. Grass bent beneath our feet. Small white flowers clustered at the seep, their stems already drawing tight against the pull.

“Ground wards move force,” Vaelin said. “They have to take it from somewhere.”

“This isn't a ground ward.”

“Then give it another name while it empties the spring.”

I crouched and drove two fingers into the wet earth. The root recognized me. Cold climbed my arm, followed by a thirst so intense I bit my tongue.

For a moment I wanted to widen the channel.

There was strength here, simple and waiting. Water, living roots, all the small persistent workings the world performed without asking the Council's leave. Why should my Tower starve while the hillside wasted itself on flowers?

Vaelin put her good hand on my shoulder.

I pulled free.

“We cut it off.”

“With what?”

I called the Riftbrand. Its crescent formed slowly, its edge uneven. I guided it into the seam.

Pain opened along my bound forearm. Beneath the bandage, the original cut widened as though the blade were passing through my own flesh.

The root recoiled. The water fell downhill, carrying black sediment. Vaelin caught my hand before I could cup a drink. We watched the dark grains collect against a stone. Neither of us knew what they would do inside a body.

I swayed, and Vaelin caught my elbow. Across the clearing, the second pillar shed a slab from its unfinished crown. It struck the ground hard enough to jar the soles of my boots.

“That's the price,” she said.

“One of them.”

We worked around the scar through the afternoon. Vaelin marked the farthest living growth with ordinary stones. I severed the roots that had reached beyond it. Each cut weakened the blade. Each left the Tower less steady. By the time we returned to the core, blood had soaked my sleeve and I could no longer lift my marked arm without help.

The first pillar still stood twenty feet high. The second stood lower and damaged. Between them the ground had become a rough platform with a fissure down its middle. No roof. No wall fit to turn a storm. No throne.

Vaelin surveyed it, breathing hard.

“A beginning,” she said.

I could not tell whether she meant it as mockery.

From beneath the platform came three deliberate knocks.

She looked at me.

I took my hand off the core.

The fourth knock sounded anyway.

PART 4 OF 5

The Measure of a Boundary

Eryth

Seradin reached the northern ridge at dusk with a lamp and the Council's authority. He had brought no additional fighters.

The five guards were sheltering behind an outcrop. Their captain had bound the youngest monk's ankle. The guard with the injured wrist sat beside him, watching the light in her own fingertips return by degrees. The others kept their eyes on the clearing.

Eryth had cut away his burned sleeve. The wound on his shoulder looked ordinary until the lamp came near it. Then silver appeared at its edges.

Seradin stopped moving the flame.

“Does it answer when he calls?”

“I haven't heard him call.”

“That is not what I asked.”

Eryth did not pretend otherwise.

The master set the lamp on a flat stone and drew a circle of light around it. At first the flame stood straight. Then it leaned toward the clearing. A hairline break opened in the circle.

Seradin extinguished both.

“The wound is a trace,” he said. “Not possession. We will watch it.”

The qualification brought little relief.

“We cannot send a larger company into that field,” Eryth said. “It turns a joined ward into a channel. More power gives it more to take.”

“You had the core within reach.”

“I had my brother within reach.”

“And chose him.”

“Yes.”

The captain had come close enough to hear. Eryth expected her to remain silent.

“He also ordered the withdrawal that kept us alive,” she said. “The first binding was mine. I would not lay it twice.”

Seradin regarded her, then the five who had returned with Eryth. His mouth tightened. He could be merciless in an argument without being careless of the people who bled for it.

“Then we deny the structure what it takes,” he said. “A severing boundary outside its reach. No joined blades. No direct offering of light.”

“Outside the spring line?” Eryth asked.

“If we must.”

There were farms below that line, channels that watered winter fields, roads people would take before sunrise. Eryth looked south, where the evening softened everything into a landscape that still appeared safe.

“Warn them before you close anything.”

“That will spread fear.”

“Something here deserves fear.”

Seradin's gaze sharpened.

For the first time since the storm, Eryth had spoken without knowing whether Kael would have agreed. The thought steadied him.

The master drew a narrow strip of parchment from his sleeve. Elder Myrrh's seal lay unbroken on it.

“The Council will prepare the outer boundary through the night. At dawn, you will make one further attempt to separate him from the anchor.”

“And if I cannot?”

“Then you come back across the boundary before it closes.”

Eryth looked toward the two dark columns in the clearing. The smaller one was visibly damaged. Between them, someone moved slowly with a stone in her arms.

“He has only one person with him.”

“One is enough to begin.”

Eryth knew that. It was not what he had meant.

* * *

Kael

We waited for another knock until the light left the clearing.

None came.

Vaelin wanted to uncover the platform while we could still see. I refused. The Tower was unstable, my hand almost useless, and something beneath us had learned an effective way to command our attention. I would not reward it immediately.

Instead, we made a boundary.

She brought stones from within the scar, lifting them against her hip with her uninjured hand. I scratched a line between them with the Riftbrand's tip. The blade could no longer remain fully formed. It came and went in shivers, leaving pieces of my handwriting suspended in the air.

“Words won't hold by themselves,” Vaelin said.

“They have held me often enough.”

“Because someone enforced them.”

I knelt at the last stone. The sigil on my wrist throbbed against its binding. Using a sharp flake, I cut a sentence into the soft black surface that had spread over the ground.

Nothing beyond this boundary shall feed these foundations.

The words remained inert.

I pressed my bleeding sleeve against them.

Silver filled the cuts. For a moment I felt every stone Vaelin had placed, each ordinary weight made part of a shape. The circle was incomplete in my understanding. At the southeast edge I had tried to carry the line across a fissure without following its depth.

The Tower found the omission at once.

Cold shot through the gap. Grass beyond it whitened.

Vaelin drove her heel into the shallow groove, breaking my line before the surge could settle into it.

I cried out. She pulled me away.

“You can't command what you haven't measured.”

I almost struck her hand aside. It would have been easy to call her interference betrayal, to make the failed sentence someone else's fault.

Instead I crawled to the fissure.

We lowered a pebble on a length of unraveled hem. The crack was shallow there. I followed its actual shape with my finger, cut the sentence again, and fed it the blood I had already lost.

This time the boundary held.

The strain did not disappear. It gathered around my ribs, a tightening belt. I could keep the roots from reaching farther, but I could not give the Tower freedom inside that circle and call myself uninvolved in what it took.

“We test it,” Vaelin said.

She poured the last drops from the flask beyond the line.

The water sank naturally into the earth.

I laughed once, without amusement, and lay on my back beneath the unfinished pillar.

For a while that small success was enough.

Then the platform began to open.

PART 5 OF 5

Beneath the First Stone

Kael

It opened inward.

The fissure widened between the two foundations, its rough sides withdrawing beneath the stone. No new material rose. Nothing reached beyond the boundary. The Tower was using what we had already allowed it.

A narrow stair appeared in the ground.

Seven steps descended into darkness. Below them, a landing lay beyond sight.

Vaelin stood over me. “Was that your intention?”

“No.”

“Then we cover it.”

“With what?”

She looked at the slab fallen from the second pillar.

Together, inch by inch, we dragged it across the platform. I used my good hand. She used her shoulder. Neither of us suggested magic. When the stone reached the opening, the stair moved a little farther down, leaving the slab balanced across two shallow ledges.

Something tapped its underside.

Vaelin and I stepped back together.

The slab lifted, no more than the width of a fingernail, and settled again.

I could not summon the Riftbrand.

I felt it waiting, the familiar shape beyond the reach of my exhausted will. The words that had made it remained mine. The strength required to bring them into the world did not come merely because I wanted it.

“Leave the clearing with me,” Vaelin said.

“The boundary is tied to my sigil.”

“You don't know that leaving will break it.”

“I don't know it won't.”

“That isn't the only reason you're staying.”

“No.”

I got to my knees beside the slab.

She watched me for a long moment, then went to collect three fist-sized stones. She set one at the northern edge of the opening, one beside the core, and kept the third.

“What are those for?”

“So I can tell whether the floor is moving while you stare at whatever it wants to show you.”

We levered the slab aside.

The stair remained. The air coming up from it was cold and smelled of rain trapped under stone. I took the first step. The pressure around my ribs eased slightly, then returned when I stopped.

It wanted me lower.

I nearly turned back for that reason alone. Then I thought of the Council preparing whatever answer it considered sufficient to my existence. Ignorance would not protect me from either side.

Vaelin descended behind me, keeping the loose stone in her hand.

“Seven steps,” she said. “If there are eight when we return, we stop.”

“There were nine rings on the gate beneath the temple.”

“Then be glad this isn't that gate.”

I could not be sure of that, but I was grateful she had said it.

The landing lay beneath the first foundation. Silver threads passed through the low ceiling like roots seen from inside the earth. One carried a faint blue flicker. Eryth's light, perhaps, caught in the wound the Tower had made of his kindness. Perhaps only another likeness arranged for me to recognize.

I did not touch it.

At the far end of the landing stood a plain black surface, broad as a doorway. No handle. No nine rings. At its base lay a curl of pale material.

Vaelin caught my sleeve before I crouched.

“Look first.”

The curl was parchment.

It should have been crushed under the rising foundations or burned by the forces that made them. Instead it lay dry and clean, with one edge tucked beneath the black door.

There was writing on it.

My writing.

Not merely the shapes of the letters. The impatient join between two words, the deeper mark where my pen hesitated, the long downward stroke Rhydian used to tell me would tear thin paper. I recognized the habits before I read the sentence.

Do not give it the third.

I remained crouched without picking it up.

“The third what?” Vaelin asked.

“Foundation.”

“You're certain?”

“No.”

Saying it cost less than I had expected. It did not make the room safer.

On the other side of the door, something dragged slowly across stone.

Vaelin set her pebble on the floor. It rolled toward the stair and stopped. She moved it back to its original position. Again it rolled away from the door.

“The landing is tilting.”

Above us, the second pillar groaned.

I backed toward the steps. The pressure around my ribs tightened. A silver vein thickened across the ceiling, pulling downward until flakes of stone fell between us.

Vaelin seized my coat.

We climbed. I counted the steps aloud because I needed something that had not changed. One, two, three. On the fourth, my knee buckled. She pushed me upward with her shoulder. Five, six, seven.

We reached the surface as the second pillar cracked from crown to base.

The sound continued underground.

I pressed my marked wrist against the core. Pain brightened the clearing. For a breath I saw all the roots within the boundary, every hungry tip bent inward toward the door below us. They were not breaking my sentence. They were obeying it with terrible economy.

“No third,” I said.

The crystal trembled.

I pictured the two foundations exactly as they stood: the first tall and spiraled, the second short, wounded, sufficient. I gave the picture no future. I held it while Vaelin dragged the slab back across the stair.

At last the rising pressure slowed.

The second pillar remained standing. Its crack did not close.

I released the core and vomited into the dust.

Vaelin knelt beside me without touching my arm. We listened to the partial structure settle. Beyond our boundary the wind began crossing the clearing again, weakly, carrying the smell of unburned grass.

On the northern ridge, a gold light appeared. Another answered it farther east. The Order was arranging something in the dark.

We had two foundations, one flask with no water, and a warning neither of us could explain.

“The parchment,” Vaelin said. “Did you take it?”

I shook my head.

A pale corner slid from beneath the slab covering the stair.

We watched it emerge, slowly, until the entire strip lay upon the ground between us. Nothing followed it. The black door was still below, beyond seven steps and a landing neither of us wished to see again.

There was a second line beneath the first.

This time, I watched the letters form.

Before dawn, your brother will ask you to come outside.

From the northern trees, Eryth called my name.

CHAPTER 7

The Unclosed Circle

PART 1 OF 5

Before Dawn

Kael

“Come outside,” Eryth called.

The words on the parchment were still wet.

I looked from them to the northern trees. A single lamp moved between the trunks, held low enough to show the ground. Eryth emerged behind it without his sword in his hand. His left arm rested against his body beneath a freshly bound shoulder.

Before dawn, your brother will ask you to come outside.

Vaelin read the line over my shoulder.

“Did it tell him to say that?” she asked.

“I don't know.”

“Then don't let it tell you what to do.”

She took her hand away from my coat. The movement cost her. The skin across her right palm had tightened around the burn, and she could no longer straighten two of her fingers completely.

I folded the parchment without touching the letters and put it inside my torn satchel. Rhydian's journal was still there, wrapped in the cloth I had used beneath the temple. The sight of it steadied me more than the weapon I could no longer summon.

Eryth stopped beyond the line we had cut into the earth.

“Alone?” I asked.

“Here, yes.”

“That isn't the same answer.”

“It's the one I can give you.”

Gold lights stood along the northern ridge. The five guards remained there. Farther east, smaller points of light marked the Council's work around the clearing. They did not join into a visible net. Whatever Seradin was preparing, he had remembered what the Tower did to joined wards.

I walked toward my brother with Vaelin beside me. Twice I had to stop. The bandage on my forearm had dried hard against the cut, and each beat from the core seemed to pull it open beneath the cloth.

Eryth watched me cross the rough ground.

“You need to sit down.”

“You need another opening.”

“Kael.”

I reached the boundary and remained on its inner side.

He set his lamp down. Beside it he placed a water flask and a bundle of clean linen.

“No blessing,” he told Vaelin before she could ask. “No oil. Just water and cloth.”

She looked at him, then at the silver showing beneath the edge of his shoulder binding.

“What did it leave in you?”

“We don't know yet.”

I hated the we. I hated that he had gone back to people who could examine his wounds while I sat learning which of mine belonged to the building.

Vaelin picked up the flask and drank a little before passing it to me. The water tasted of leather. I nearly wept with relief and turned away before either of them could see.

Eryth waited until I could speak.

“At dawn, the outer boundary closes.”

“I thought you had come to ask.”

“I have come to tell you while you can still choose where to stand.”

“And if I stand here?”

“They will isolate the anchor from the surrounding channels. You won't be able to draw through the Akasha in the way you do now.”

I held up my bound arm.

“Do I look as though I'm drawing anything?”

His gaze moved to the pillars.

“You aren't the only thing here that matters.”

Vaelin lowered herself onto a stone. “It was draining the spring. We cut those roots. This line has held since.”

Eryth knelt to examine the sentence. He kept his injured shoulder turned away from the silver in its grooves.

“Nothing beyond this boundary shall feed these foundations,” he read.

“A simple enough condition.”

He looked up at me. “For a thing that knows what you mean by feed.”

“We tested it.”

“Then help me show them the test.”

There it was: an offer small enough to accept. Come outside, let the master inspect the mark, permit the Council to examine what I had done. I could hear the reasonable steps arranging themselves into a path that ended with my hand held open beneath somebody else's blade.

“Will they let me come back?”

Eryth did not answer immediately.

I gave a short laugh.

“Will they let her?” I asked.

Vaelin's face changed. Until then, she had watched him like a craftsman watching another examine her work. Now she watched a representative of the place that had expelled her.

“I can bring you before them,” he said. “I can't promise what they haven't promised.”

“Then you have brought me a door that locks from the other side.”

“I've brought you the truth.”

The first pillar creaked behind us.

I pressed my palm against the pain in my ribs. It had tightened when Eryth said outside. Perhaps the core sensed my movement toward the line. Perhaps fear was teaching my body to answer ordinary words. I could no longer distinguish the two reliably.

“If I leave, I may lose the boundary.”

“You may not.”

“And if I do?”

“Then we deal with it together.”

“You couldn't even promise her she could return.”

He stood too quickly and caught his breath as the shoulder wound pulled. For an instant we were two exhausted people arguing beside a cup of water.

Vaelin reached into my satchel.

I caught her wrist.

“He needs to see it,” she said.

I released her.

She unfolded the parchment on the stone between us. Eryth read the warning first, then the prediction. His eyes returned to the shape of the letters.

“Where did you write this?”

“I didn't.”

He looked toward the covered stair.

“It came from beneath the foundation,” Vaelin said. “The second line formed before you called.”

Eryth crouched. The lower edge of his robe brushed the ground beside the page.

A new sentence appeared.

He will kneel within the line.

He stopped moving.

“Don't,” I said.

“I can read it.”

Slowly, he straightened. He stepped backward and remained standing outside the boundary.

We watched the sentence darken.

Then a stroke dragged through the word will. Another appeared beside it.

He would have knelt within the line.

The grammar had changed. Nothing else had.

Eryth looked at me.

“That isn't certainty.”

For the first time since the parchment had emerged, I felt something other than dread toward it.

Anger.

Whatever had written the warning could imagine us obeying. It had not yet made us do so.

I folded the page and returned it to my satchel. For now, I wanted it where I could feel it, even if I could not trust it.

PART 2 OF 5

Severance

Eryth

Seradin stood at the eastern marker with his sleeves rolled above his wrists. The lamp before him gave no flame. Light lay inside its glass as a pale thread, bent toward the next marker without reaching it.

Eryth approached carrying the flask Kael had emptied.

“He has stopped the roots at an inner line.”

“For how long?”

“Since last night.”

“Then we are discussing hours.”

“We should examine it before severing the channel that lets him hold it.”

Seradin looked toward the clearing. Between the twisted trees, the tall pillar leaned by a degree too slight for an untrained eye to notice. The shorter one had split down its face.

“His control is not the only danger.”

“I know.”

“You keep telling me that. Then you speak as though keeping him attached to this thing must be safer than removing him.”

Eryth set down the empty flask.

“I'm telling you that we don't know what is attached to what.”

The captain of the Halo Guard waited a few paces away. Two of her monks watched the northern approach. Another sat beside the youngest, whose swollen ankle had been supported between rolled pieces of cloth. They had bound their wounds without replacing the strength they had lost.

The captain had heard enough of both arguments to dislike their repetition.

“The southern road is clear,” she said. “The farmers have been warned away from the channels. Our runner has reached the next crossing.”

Seradin nodded.

Eryth looked at the unlit lamp. “Can you stop the closure once it begins?”

“At each interval. Not between them.”

“How long is an interval?”

“It follows the channel's response.”

There was no clean answer because the work itself was not clean. Seradin did not pretend otherwise. That made Eryth trust the danger more, not the plan.

He described the parchment. He repeated its alteration exactly.

The master's expression did not change until Eryth mentioned his brother's handwriting.

“A lure,” Seradin said.

“Possibly.”

“It knows what you will recognize.”

“Or something in it knows what hasn't happened.”

“A thing need not know the future to arrange one.”

Eryth looked back toward the trees. He could still picture Kael standing on the other side of the line, barely able to keep his weight off the injured knee, furious that his weakness was visible.

“He won't come out.”

Seradin lowered his eyes for a moment.

“Then be ready when he changes his mind.”

The first rim of sunlight touched the ridge.

The thread inside the lamp snapped straight.

* * *

Kael

The world lost its distance.

I could see the trees beyond the clearing. I could hear the guards calling to one another. But the familiar reach I had learned to feel through stone, water, and the spaces between things ended abruptly beyond my skin.

It was as if someone had closed a door against the rest of my body.

My sigil went gray.

The band around my ribs loosened. For one astonished breath, I thought Seradin had been right.

Then the foundations began taking from the part of me that remained inside.

I fell against Vaelin. She caught my coat with her left hand and lowered me badly, both of us striking the stone. The cold behind my wrist traveled toward my heart.

Across the platform, the slab covering the stair lifted and settled.

“The line,” I said.

Vaelin looked. Silver still filled the words. Beyond them, grass moved in the morning wind. Nothing was crossing inward from the spring.

The boundary had held.

That was why the thing beneath it was turning to us.

I pressed my marked hand against the earth. The connection to the core remained, close and brutal. I could feel the Tower more clearly than ever. I could no longer feel enough of the world to tell it where to stop.

The short pillar bent toward the stair.

Vaelin dragged me behind the core as a strip of black stone broke from its crown. It struck where we had been sitting, scattering fragments across the platform.

“Get outside,” I told her.

She stared at me. “Can you move?”

“You can.”

She went to the boundary, knelt beyond it, and scraped a straight mark into the ordinary soil with a fragment of stone. She returned before I understood what she was doing.

“It isn't the ground moving,” she said. “It's your sense of where it is.”

She pointed to the mark outside. A fixed point. Something the Tower had not made.

I held it in my sight while the platform seemed to tilt beneath me. The nausea eased enough for me to sit.

From the northern edge, Eryth shouted my name.

“Stop them!”

He looked toward the ridge. Someone there raised an arm. The light at the eastern marker trembled, then held.

The next interval waited.

Eryth crossed the outer clearing. At our inner line, he stopped. His shoulder binding had darkened. Silver moved beneath the cloth.

I could feel him through the core.

The light the Tower had stolen when he saved me was still inside it. The wound on his shoulder answered the portion that remained trapped below.

“Don't come in,” Vaelin said.

“I wasn't asking the floor.”

“I'm asking you.”

He looked at her burned hand, then at mine. He stayed outside.

Under the slab, something began dragging a heavy object up the hidden steps.

One scrape. A pause.

Another.

The sound did not grow louder. It grew nearer without growing louder, and I understood with sudden horror that we were listening to something learning the distance.

I called for the Riftbrand.

Nothing came.

In the clean dark behind my wrist, I felt its crescent waiting. The words were there. I did not have the strength to make them matter.

“Rope,” Vaelin told Eryth. “A long one. And wedges, if your monks came to dismantle anything honestly.”

He turned toward the ridge.

The slab shifted again.

A thin black line appeared between it and the platform.

I had spent years believing the terrible thing about a closed door was being kept outside it.

I put both hands against this one and tried to keep it shut.

PART 3 OF 5

The Third Line

Kael

The rope reached us before Eryth did.

The captain cast its weighted end from beyond the clearing. Vaelin caught it against her hip, keeping her burned hand clear. Wooden wedges followed in a cloth bag. A small iron bar struck the ground beside them.

They were ordinary tools. I had never been so relieved to see things with no light inside them.

Vaelin showed Eryth where to brace the rope beyond the inner line. She looped our end around the fallen slab and pushed a wedge beneath one corner with her foot.

“When I say pull, only enough to take its weight. Don't drag it across the mouth.”

Eryth set his good shoulder against the line. The captain and one guard took the farther length near the trees. The other three remained on the ridge; even from where I knelt, I could see the youngest being helped away from loose ground.

The rope tightened.

We shifted the slab sideways by a hand's breadth.

Cold air struck my face. Beneath it, I heard my father's voice.

“Kael.”

I stopped breathing.

Vaelin looked at me. From beyond the boundary, Eryth made a small sound that told me he had heard it too.

“Hold your brother.”

The words were exact. The pause before brother. The failing breath behind the order. Even the river seemed to run beneath them, quiet and impossible under the stone.

I leaned toward the gap.

Vaelin laid the iron bar across it.

“What did he say next?” she asked.

“He spoke to Eryth.”

“Then wait.”

We waited.

“Hold your brother,” the voice repeated.

Same breath. Same pause.

I had heard the mirror repeat the reach of his hand in just that way, returning me to the part of the memory that kept me helpless.

I looked up at Eryth.

“Don't answer it.”

He shook his head once. His face was wet.

Vaelin set another wedge. With the rope bearing part of the weight, we slid the slab far enough to expose the top of the stair.

Seven steps remained.

Below them, the landing had risen. I could see the black door without descending. Its surface was still plain, but three lines had appeared on the floor before it. One ran back to the core. Another glowed faintly blue.

The third reached toward the stairs and ended unfinished.

“Don't assume,” Vaelin said.

I had not realized I had spoken the number aloud.

There were still two foundations above us. Whatever waited behind the door had found another way to offer me a third.

The blue line pulsed.

Eryth bent at the waist, one hand clamped over his shoulder.

“That's yours,” I said.

“Part of it.”

“Can you take it back?”

He looked at the boundary between us.

“Not from here without giving it something to follow.”

The pressure behind my ribs increased. The Tower wanted the same thing: another current, another connection, a choice we could call necessary.

A word formed along the unfinished line.

Witness.

I remembered the warning on the frame of the Tablet. Rhydian's small, patient letters scratched into stone.

Keep the witness outside the flame.

I told Eryth what I saw. He went very still.

“We both read it,” he said.

“Yes.”

“That doesn't prove this is the same thing.”

“No.”

The voice beneath us changed.

“I can tell you why he took you to the river.”

It still sounded like our father. The sentence did not belong to any memory I knew.

Vaelin watched my face rather than the door.

I wanted the answer with a hunger stronger than thirst. I wanted it enough to begin arranging excuses: we would only listen; we would make no promise; Eryth would stay outside; the danger was already here.

“Tell me from there,” I said.

The door remained closed.

The line moved one finger's width toward the stair.

It wanted an act before it gave a word.

That made it familiar.

I backed away until the core pressed against my shoulder. From here I could see both foundations and the fissure joining them. Silver ran beneath the first pillar, entered the second, and passed into the ground behind the door. A circuit I had mistaken for a beginning.

Vaelin followed my gaze.

“The short one is bracing that channel.”

“If it falls, the platform may go with it.”

“If it stands, you may.”

The thought of dismantling it felt more like losing a limb than breaking stone. I had defended those foundations with everything left in me. The Council had come to tear them out. If I broke one now, they could claim they had been right from the beginning.

Below us, our father's voice used Eryth's name.

Eryth closed his eyes. When he opened them, he looked directly at me.

“You don't have to save the thing to prove they were wrong.”

I hated him for finding the words.

Then I asked Vaelin where to put the wedges.

PART 4 OF 5

What Must Be Broken

Eryth

The interval was ending.

Across the eastern ridge, the pale thread inside Seradin's lamp had begun shortening. When it reached the base, the next marker would take the strain. The severing boundary would advance another measure, withdrawing the channels from the anchor.

Eryth could not see the hidden door. He could hear it speaking.

His father's voice reached him from beneath the clearing. Then his own voice answered it, although his mouth had not moved.

The captain stepped beside him.

“Is it calling for help?”

“It's using things that would make me help.”

She nodded without pretending to understand the distinction fully. “The master needs a signal.”

Eryth raised his good arm, fist closed.

Hold.

On the ridge, Seradin shook his head.

The captain stared at him. “He may not be able to.”

“Then tell him what we're breaking.”

She took the news herself, leaving the guard to brace the rope against a tree. Eryth could have sent the guard. He wanted the person who had watched the first binding fail to stand beside Seradin when he decided whether to complete the second.

Beyond the line, Vaelin drove an ordinary wedge beneath the base of the damaged pillar. Kael held the iron bar while she struck it with a stone. His marked hand hung uselessly against his chest.

They looked too small for what they were doing.

Eryth set his feet and kept the rope steady.

* * *

Kael

The first wedge split before it moved anything.

Vaelin swore and threw the broken pieces aside. She chose another with a wider grain and turned it so the point followed the existing crack.

“Hold it there.”

“I am.”

“You're leaning toward me.”

I changed the angle. My ribs caught, and the world went briefly white at its edges.

She struck again.

The crack opened.

Below the platform, something stopped using words.

A pressure rolled up the stair. The air thickened around my head. I saw the throne again, clear enough to count the steps before it. The Tower rose whole beyond it. Every wound I carried was gone. Every argument had become the memory of something I had outlasted.

It offered the finished thing while I knelt breaking the beginning.

For one breath, I loosened my hold on the bar.

Vaelin's left hand closed over mine.

“Where are you?”

I could not answer.

“Tell me where your feet are.”

The same small discipline Eryth had used when the Flamebind made the infirmary vanish around me. The questions I had resented because they offered no grandeur.

“Stone.”

“Which stone?”

I looked down.

“The one we're breaking.”

“Then help me.”

I leaned into the bar.

The wedge held. The pillar shifted a fraction, enough for the silver vein beneath it to stretch taut. A dark line formed across my bandaged forearm. Blood followed it.

I understood the connection now. The root was not merely feeding the structure. My mark had written itself through the material. To split the channel, I would have to accept the split traveling back.

“Again,” I said.

Vaelin watched me long enough to make sure I meant it.

Then she struck.

The vein broke.

I fell beside the bar, unable to hear anything except a thin ringing. Vaelin hooked her arm beneath my uninjured shoulder and dragged me clear as the short pillar leaned toward the open stair.

The rope tied to the cover slab snapped tight.

Eryth and the guard outside the line took the slab’s weight. The fallen slab shifted on its wedges, covering half the opening. A shower of black grit spilled down the seven steps.

For a heartbeat, the doorway below became visible.

The blue line withdrew from it.

Eryth screamed.

Light tore backward through the stone, following its own old path. It crossed the inner boundary outward, returning what the foundations had stolen. A blade of gold flashed from Eryth's shoulder binding and struck the ground beside him.

He dropped the rope.

The guard held alone. The trunk behind him creaked.

Vaelin planted her boot against the slab and pushed with her unburned shoulder. I crawled to the iron bar. My good hand found its end. I drove it into the gap beneath the leaning pillar.

It was too heavy.

I knew it before I tried. The angle was wrong. The ground beneath me was giving way. There was no strength left to invent.

I looked toward Eryth. He was on his knees, struggling to reach the rope with his right hand.

Beyond him, the eastern lamp went dark.

I thought the next interval had closed.

My sigil vanished from my sight. I could still feel it, but its shape no longer had a place in the air.

The thing behind the door pushed.

The pillar came toward us.

I let go of the bar.

Vaelin turned, expecting me to crawl away. Instead I pressed my good palm against the base of the core and gave up the shape I had been holding since nightfall.

Two foundations, I had insisted. Tall and wounded, sufficient. No future beyond them.

I stopped demanding that the second remain a pillar.

It folded along its own crack.

The upper half broke away, fell across the mouth of the stair, and crushed the slab beneath it. The impact drove the breath out of us. Stone swallowed stone. Silver flashed once through the wreckage and went dark.

I had not summoned more power. I had released the demand keeping what remained upright.

The pressure behind the door lost its channel.

The unfinished third line disappeared beneath the fall.

Silence struck so abruptly that I thought I had gone deaf.

Then Vaelin coughed.

Eryth lay beyond the boundary with his face turned toward us. The guard had one knee against his back, helping him breathe. Both were moving.

I tried to sit up. Nothing in me agreed.

Vaelin crawled across the grit and put her forehead against mine for a moment, breathing hard. She was checking that I was alive, not offering forgiveness.

“Don't call that a victory,” she said.

I looked past her.

The first pillar still stood twenty feet high. The second had become a broken shoulder of stone above its foundation. Below it lay seven steps we could no longer reach.

“I wasn't going to.”

It was almost true.

* * *

Eryth

Seradin reached the edge of the clearing while the dust was still falling.

He came without a drawn weapon. The captain followed, carrying the darkened lamp with both hands. One thin line of light remained inside the glass, pressed against its bottom.

“The eastern interval failed,” she said.

“It answered a return current,” Seradin corrected. He looked at Eryth's shoulder. “Yours.”

The silver at the wound's edge had faded. The burn remained.

“Then stop the rest,” Eryth said.

Seradin looked into the clearing. He took in the ruined second pillar, the blood on the stones, Vaelin kneeling beside Kael. He examined the outer edge of the inner sentence without crossing it.

“They broke the channel,” the captain said.

“They broke one channel.”

“And we don't know where the next cut sends it,” Eryth said.

The master closed his eyes briefly. When he opened them, he gestured to the captain.

“Hold the remaining intervals. Leave the outer markers standing.”

She bowed once and went to relay the order.

Eryth's body loosened with relief. Seradin saw it.

“This is a pause. Not an acquittal.”

“I heard you.”

“Then hear the rest. If the roots move past his line, I will close what remains.”

The threat was plain. So was the fear beneath it.

Eryth looked at his brother, who had finally managed to raise his head.

“So did he.”

PART 5 OF 5

The Page That Remained

Kael

Seradin would not step inside the boundary.

I would not step outside it.

We spoke across a sentence I had written in blood while the morning grew bright enough to show everything we had done to the ground.

“No new foundation,” he said. “No gathering of a company. No working beyond this scar.”

“You are very free with orders in a place you won't enter.”

“And you are very free with other people's lives in a place you cannot yet leave.”

My face burned. I wanted to answer with the names of the dead the Order had hidden. I wanted to tell him what I had seen beneath the temple.

I could hear Vaelin breathing beside me. I looked at her injured hand instead.

“You nearly opened it.”

“You brought it here.”

Eryth stood between our lines of sight.

“We can finish that argument after no one is standing on a wound.”

Seradin's eyes moved to him. Whatever passed between them was not permission. At last the master turned toward the ridge.

“The markers stay,” he said. “The Council will send for you.”

“It knows where I am.”

He stopped, almost smiled, and continued walking.

The five guards gathered at the northern path. The captain counted her company, including herself. All five were there. The youngest could not walk without help. One guard supported his weight while another carried the rolled litter they had not trusted near the shifting ground.

They had come to stop me. I watched them leave with injuries I had helped give them and felt relief before I felt anything more difficult.

Eryth remained long enough to pass fresh water and linen to Vaelin.

“They'll return,” he said.

“You mean you'll return.”

“Yes.”

He gave me no softening word to mistake for a promise that the conflict had ended.

Vaelin moved to inspect the marked spring line. She stayed within sight of us, placing her stones again where the ground had shifted. She had not left me alone with my brother by accident. I did not know whether to thank her for it.

Eryth took a folded page from inside his robe.

“You lost this at the Cataclysm Gate.”

I recognized the upper margin of my Doctrine. The page I had watched him catch when my satchel tore.

“You kept it.”

“I was trying to understand what you thought you were doing.”

“Did you?”

“Parts.”

He laid it on the stone at the boundary.

Across its center, in my handwriting, stood the line he had taken away.

What is forbidden may still be chosen.

Below it, the paper ended in an irregular tear.

I reached into my satchel for the warning. It had survived the fall of the second pillar, folded against Rhydian's journal. The prediction about kneeling remained crossed into its altered form. The first sentence was unchanged.

Do not give it the third.

I opened it beside the page Eryth had returned.

The edges fitted.

Not approximately. A long split below one word accepted a narrow tongue of paper from the other piece. A rust-colored speck at the torn margin completed itself when I brought them together.

Eryth bent closer.

“Was it torn when you caught it?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“You didn't take the lower half?”

“I never had it.”

I remembered the satchel strap breaking. Loose sheets lifting between us. I had not counted what remained after I passed through the gate. The lower half might have fallen into the Unmapped Relics Zone. It might have stayed among my papers until the Tower learned to take it. It might have traveled by a path I had not yet walked.

The fitted tear gave us a fact.

It did not give us its journey.

Vaelin returned and watched us hold the pieces together.

“Same page?”

“Yes.”

“Same writer?”

I looked at my own long downward strokes.

“I don't know.”

The final empty strip beneath the warning darkened.

Eryth moved his hand away. Vaelin caught my sleeve before I could cover the letters.

This time the sentence formed slowly enough for us to watch each stroke join the next.

Ask Elen which account of the river he was ordered to remove.

For a while, none of us spoke.

I saw the scribe's bucket beside the forbidden vault. His empty hand held toward me. I heard myself telling him that ink wrote the truth as I walked past the one person who might have been willing to tell me some of it.

Eryth read the line again.

“An account isn't proof that the account is true.”

“No.”

“And whoever wrote that may want you to leave this place.”

I looked toward the broken stair, then the markers on the ridge. Two different powers had spent the morning trying to decide where I would stand.

“Then we ask without giving it what it wants.”

“We?”

I had used the word before considering how long it had been since I meant it.

Vaelin drew the clean cloth around her burned hand.

“Someone has to remain with this,” she said, looking at the fractured foundations. “And someone has to find out whether the scribe is still there.”

Eryth folded the restored page along its old crease, keeping the two torn edges together. He did not take it back into his robe. He held it out to me.

I accepted it with my good hand.

Behind us, beneath the rubble that covered the seven steps, something knocked once.

None of us answered.

CHAPTER 8

The Scribe Who Vanished

PART 1 OF 5

The One They Would Not See

Kael

By midday, the Tower cast two shadows and possessed only one standing pillar.

The second shadow lay across the rubble as though the stone that had made it remained upright. When a cloud passed over the sun, it faded with the other. When the light returned, both appeared again.

Vaelin marked its edge with a pebble.

“We can watch that,” she said. “We don't have to understand it before we eat.”

Eryth had brought bread with the water. We divided it on the flat stone beside the core, using the heel of an old knife because none of us wanted to call anything brighter into the clearing. My brother sat beyond the blood-written line. Vaelin sat on it, one foot inside and one outside, giving the distinction less reverence than either of us.

She could hold the bread only in her left hand. The clean cloth around her right had already begun to spot.

“You aren't going anywhere like that,” I said.

“Then you've misunderstood how I'm staying.”

She finished chewing before she looked at Eryth.

“If you ask about Elen, how long before the question reaches the Council?”

“Depends who hears it.”

“You wear their dawnfire. Everyone will hear it.”

Eryth set down his bread. The light in his robe had dimmed, but the marks remained visible.

“I can ask for him as an archive witness.”

“And someone can decide which witness arrives.”

My brother looked toward the northern ridge. The outer markers stood where Seradin had left them. Their glass was dark. That did not make them dead.

“The account may not exist,” he said.

I unfolded the joined page on my knee. Its torn halves lay together without attaching themselves. No new writing had appeared since the name Elen.

“Then she finds that out.”

“She?” Vaelin asked.

I looked up.

“If you're sending me,” she said, “begin by asking.”

For a moment, I nearly told her that she had been the one to suggest it. The words came easily. Holding them back required more effort.

“Will you find him?”

“I'll look. I won't promise to bring you the answer you want.”

Eryth rubbed the unburned side of his shoulder. “They know your face.”

“Some of them. Most will remember a robe with an emblem. That robe no longer exists.”

She touched the unmarked patch at her chest, then took her hand away as though she had forgotten how much the absence still hurt.

“I maintained the lower ground wards before they dismissed me. I know where the workers enter when the processional gate is closed. I know which walls collect damp and which passages the scribes refuse to use because they smell of the drains.”

“They may have changed them,” Eryth said.

“Then I'll have to notice.”

He considered that for a long time.

We would keep her departure from the Council and from the guards watching the approaches. She would carry no message in my hand, no piece of the crystal, nothing the Tower might use to follow her. Eryth would remain at the northern marker until his appointed relief, where anyone looking for him could find him. He would not send a request for Elen.

It was the first favor I had asked of him that required him to do less rather than more.

“No false report,” he said. “If Seradin asks me directly, I won't tell him you stayed here.”

Vaelin nodded. “Then let's hope he remains interested in the man building the dangerous thing.”

I felt the old pleasure of being the center of something return for an instant. It soured when I looked at the rubble.

We waited until the workers sent to inspect the southern watercourses passed below the ridge. They were ordinary people in stained aprons, carrying rods and buckets, worried about what the storm had done to the spring. Vaelin knew the cut of their work cloaks. She borrowed my spare outer wrap, turned its darker face inward, and bound the loose cloth above her injured hand.

“You don't have to climb anything,” I told her.

“Good. I'll inform the walls.”

She checked the little packet Eryth had made for her: clean linen, water, bread, and no sacred seal. A thin wooden scraper and a short length of plain cord completed what she took.

“If the page writes again,” she said, “don't obey it because I'm late.”

“And if you are late?”

“Remember that I can be delayed without being dead.”

I thought of the river. She had not meant the words for that memory, but they found it.

Vaelin walked south through the damaged brush. She kept below the line of the ridge, using the slope rather than bending herself double. At the streambed, she stopped to let the inspection workers go ahead. Then she followed their return path at a distance.

Eryth watched until the folds of her cloak disappeared among the ordinary trees.

“Why her?” he asked.

“You heard her. She knows the passages.”

“That isn't all of it.”

I looked down at the page bearing my own handwriting.

“If the account says Father chose something terrible, she won't need it to mean he didn't love us.”

My brother said nothing.

Behind us, the second shadow held its shape across the fallen stone.

PART 2 OF 5

Elen's Empty Chair

Vaelin

The walk hurt before she reached the first bend in the river.

Every time Vaelin's right hand swung, the cloth dragged over the burn. Holding it against her chest eased the movement and made her look as injured as she was. She settled for resting it inside the fold of the borrowed wrap, accepting that she would have only one useful hand for anything unexpected.

The temple rose beyond the willows.

She had imagined seeing it again often enough to be ashamed of how little those imaginings helped. In some, she returned with an answer the masters could not dismiss. In others, they called her name before she reached the gate and admitted that the error had been theirs.

Now she wanted to pass unnoticed beside a cart of wet laundry.

The service entrance had changed.

The old wooden lintel was gone. New stone surrounded the opening, and a bright ward ran beneath the threshold. Vaelin stopped beside a trough and tightened her sandal with her left hand while a porter pushed his cart through.

The line of light touched each wheel. It rose briefly toward the porter's chest and settled.

It was reading the mark of his service office.

Vaelin no longer had one.

She straightened slowly. A guard in the doorway glanced toward her, then toward the laundry cart. She turned away before the glance became a question.

The old entrance would not admit her. The people who had removed her name from its register had at least learned to secure the door.

She followed the outer wall to the wash-water channel.

There she found something more useful than an unguarded opening: a problem that had not been repaired. Water backed up behind a grate, carrying lint and gray foam against the wall. A worker knelt beside it with a hooked rod, trying to draw out the blockage.

“The obstruction is above your hook,” Vaelin said.

He looked up. “Then you're welcome to explain that to it.”

She crouched on his other side. From here she could see the line where an old grounding channel joined the drain. It had been narrowed when the new gate ward was laid, leaving the lower grate to catch what the water no longer had room to carry.

“Lift that corner. Don't pull it toward you.”

He tried. The grate shifted and stuck.

Vaelin braced it with her forearm. Pain spread through her burned palm even though she kept the skin away from the iron.

“Now.”

The worker lifted. A knot of cloth came free, and water struck the channel with enough force to wet them both.

He swore. Vaelin laughed once because it was easier than crying out.

“You need the upper cleanout opened,” she said. “Or you'll be here again before supper.”

“You worked the channels?”

“I did.”

He handed her the rod. “Tell the laundry keeper. She won't listen when I say it.”

He pushed open a narrow work gate beside the drain. Its fastening was an ordinary latch. The new ward had been laid beneath the public service entrance, where important deliveries entered. Nobody had paid to include the place where foul water left.

Vaelin went through carrying the rod like a task.

She did not pretend the ease of that made her safe.

Inside the washing court, steam drifted between lines of cloth. The laundry keeper stood beside a tub with her sleeves rolled up. She looked first at Vaelin's borrowed wrap, then at the scar on her cheek.

Her hands stopped moving.

“You're a long way from the lower cisterns.”

“The cleanout needs opening.”

“Does it?”

Vaelin laid the rod across the tub. “It does.”

The woman glanced toward the work gate. “And what else?”

“I'm looking for Elen.”

Something closed in the keeper's expression.

“Then you should have come yesterday.”

Vaelin kept her good hand flat against the tub's rim.

“Where did he go?”

“His bucket's still beside the binding room. He doesn't leave it there overnight. Someone trips, someone curses him, he apologizes before they finish. This morning it was still there.”

“He may be ill.”

“His supper wasn't taken from the kitchen. His bed wasn't slept in.”

The keeper lifted a sheet from the tub and began wringing it.

“I asked the duty clerk. He said Elen had been reassigned. I asked where. He told me the water was cooling.”

Vaelin looked at the sheet twisting between the woman's hands.

“Did anyone see him leave?”

“A boy saw two watchmen bring him through the east court before dawn. No pack. No walking staff. They carried his lamp.”

The keeper lowered her voice.

“The boy has been told he saw a different man.”

For a moment, the washing court seemed very quiet despite the water.

“May I see the binding room?” Vaelin asked.

“If anyone asks, you came about the drain.”

“You don't have to help me.”

The keeper looked at her bandaged hand.

“I haven't decided whether I am.”

She took the borrowed wrap from Vaelin's shoulders and hung it behind a wet sheet. Then she handed her a plain apron from a peg.

“That cloth has half a dead hillside on it. Even the archive clerks would notice.”

* * *

Elen's bucket stood exactly where she had been told.

The handle was bound with old twine. A cleaning cloth hung over its rim, stiff at the edge. Beside it, a chair had been pushed beneath a low worktable. Someone had arranged the surface neatly enough to imply that a working day had ended.

Vaelin looked underneath.

A scrap of linen lay caught beneath one chair leg. When she pulled it free, she found a needle still threaded through it. A repair left midway. On the table, the small book it belonged to had been closed with the loose thread trapped between its pages.

She opened it carefully.

No hidden message. Only a torn binding Elen had not finished mending.

That ordinary interruption convinced her more than the untaken supper.

On the duty slate, his name had been rubbed out. A pale shape remained where the E had been pressed hard into the chalk.

Below it, a fresh line read: Relieved by order of the archive office.

No receiving clerk had signed the space beside it.

Vaelin touched neither the slate nor the empty space. She committed the wording to memory and went to find the office that had made an absence look like completed work.

PART 3 OF 5

Two Accounts of the River

Vaelin

The lower records office smelled of paste and warm dust.

A copying clerk sat beneath a high window, sorting service slips by the color of the thread stitched through them. He glanced at Vaelin's apron, then at the rod she had brought from the washing court.

“Water reports go in the tray.”

“The old cleanout beneath the northern shelves is backing up.”

He looked toward a dark patch on the plaster.

“Again?”

She let him supply the history she did not know.

“I need the last repair entry,” she said. “So we don't open the wrong wall.”

He pushed a bound register toward the edge of his table. “Blue cords. Give it back before the afternoon count.”

The weight pulled at her injured arm. She caught it against her hip rather than let him see her fail to grip it.

At a side desk, she turned the pages with her wooden scraper.

The register listed leaks, drains, damaged cupboards, the cost of replacement plaster. It was exactly as dull as a useful record should be. Beneath the repair entries, each task carried the mark of the worker who had received it.

Elen's appeared twice on the previous evening's page.

Both concerned the same room: the closed accession store behind the river histories.

One entry authorized the removal of water-damaged packing material. The other required old binding waste to be delivered for supervised burning.

The receipt space was blank.

Vaelin checked the facing leaf. A third entry, added in darker ink, stated that the material had been destroyed. It bore Elen's mark.

The copying clerk returned from the next room carrying a stack of blanks.

“Was Elen here this morning?” she asked.

“Reassigned.”

“He signed the disposal.”

The clerk stopped.

“It was entered on his behalf.”

“Then whose hand received it?”

He took one step toward the register. Vaelin closed it gently, as though she had merely reached the entry she needed.

“I ask because the drain is full of cloth. If packing was burned, it shouldn't be there.”

He stared at her. She waited. The explanation was ordinary enough that rejecting it would require him to make it important.

At last he pointed toward the corridor.

“The waste hasn't gone down yet. Don't mix it with the current accounts.”

She nodded and lifted the register back to his table.

The lie sat coldly in her mouth. She had used his concern about a flooded room to get nearer a person he had been taught not to discuss. She would have to decide what that cost later. For now, the waste still existed.

* * *

The closed accession store had been opened recently.

Dust marked the former position of a cabinet against its north wall. Bundles of old covers, split boards, and torn packing cloth lay inside a basket by the door. On the nearest board, gray paste had been scraped into ridges by someone working too quickly.

Vaelin recognized that haste. She had seen it when a broken ward had to be covered before inspection rather than repaired.

She lifted a warped ledger cover from the basket. Paper had been pasted across its inner face to reinforce a split in the wood. Most of the printed side faced inward. A few words showed through a tear.

Eldra. Two surviving minors. Statement retained.

Her pulse changed.

Waste paper had been used in old bindings for as long as there had been old bindings. Records that no longer belonged on a shelf could still keep a cover from falling apart.

She laid the board flat and studied its edges.

Someone had loosened one corner of the lining, then pressed it back into place without fresh paste. Elen's unfinished work, perhaps. Perhaps another binder's earlier repair. Vaelin refused the comfort of certainty before she had earned it.

Using the wooden scraper, she lifted the loose corner.

The paper resisted in three places. She worked around them slowly. Her right hand could not hold the board steady; she trapped it against her knees and used the heel of her forearm, sweating despite the cold room.

A strip came free.

Field account. Sacred River of Eldra. Keeper Rhydian. Two children recovered.

There was no date in the piece she had exposed, only a docket number. She copied the number on the back of a water-damage slip with a stub of charcoal found beside the basket.

The rest of the lining lifted when she flexed the board rather than the paper.

Voices passed in the corridor. She bent lower over the basket, making herself a worker who wanted to finish an unpleasant task.

When they had gone, she read.

The first account was brief and cautious. Rhydian had disappeared inside a vertical discharge of white flame associated with the descending Sky Falcon. No remains had been recovered. The witnesses were distressed. Neither boy described hearing a voluntary vow or a declared intention to offer a life.

A sentence near the bottom had been struck through once, thinly enough to remain legible.

Older child reports that the Keeper appeared to recognize the arrival. Questioning suspended pending instruction.

Vaelin read it twice.

The hand that had written the report did not tell her why Rhydian had recognized the creature, whether he truly had, or what recognition would mean. It recorded a frightened child's claim and the decision to stop asking about it.

Across the lower margin stood a later instruction in a different hand.

For the public register: voluntary sacrifice in protection of the succession. Remove unsettled witness language. Do not circulate the preliminary account.

Below it was the counterseal of the Council of Venerated Flame.

She could have left with that page and an accusation.

Instead she looked for the other half of the procedure: where the replacement had been received.

The river histories stood in a cabinet outside the accession store. Public copies, frequently handled, their edges darkened by fingers. Vaelin found the year by counting backward through repaired spines. The commemorative entry named Rhydian's sacrifice, praised his willing acceptance of the price, and recorded Eryth's designation for instruction under the Keeper's mantle.

The docket number matched.

At the foot of the entry, two officials had certified the replacement as the authorized account. The accession date was the evening of the disappearance.

They had not waited for the missing man to be found. They had not waited for the boys to sleep before deciding which version of their loss could be preserved.

Vaelin copied the entry's exact wording, the docket number, and the two marks. Then she returned the public volume to its place.

She still needed something that could not be dismissed as a discarded draft or a forged seal.

At the end of the cabinet stood the thin receipt book for incoming Council instructions. Its spine had been repaired with a strip of blue cloth. Nobody had hidden it. It concerned the movement of paper, not the stories written upon it.

She found the docket.

One preliminary field account received. One public replacement issued. Preliminary leaf ordered withdrawn from circulation. Clerk's acknowledgment attached.

The acknowledgment had been cut away.

The receipt remained, numbered between two unrelated orders whose stitching crossed the same fold.

Vaelin copied the receipt’s wording, its docket, and the adjoining entry numbers onto a scrap. Beside the copy, she rubbed charcoal over a second thin scrap laid against the raised office seal. The impression was imperfect, but it preserved the distinctive break she had seen on the withdrawal order.

Three records agreed about the act of replacement.

None explained the man who had vanished beneath the light.

She wrapped the original lining paper around the cover board to protect it and slid her copies beneath the apron.

On the next page of the receipt book, an older entry caught her eye.

Keeper of the Records. Request for closed audience concerning Eldra access. Received prior to departure. No response entered.

Rhydian's office mark stood beside it.

There was no attached request. No description of what he intended to tell them. The notation proved only that he had tried to reach the Council before the river, and that the record did not show an answer.

That was dangerous enough without making it say more.

Vaelin copied the line.

Behind her, someone said, “Put the book down.”

PART 4 OF 5

What the Fire Leaves

Vaelin

The man in the doorway wore the plain sash of the archive office. His hands were empty. A watcher stood behind him with a short staff held against one shoulder.

Vaelin closed the receipt book.

“The waste was being counted,” the official said.

“Then your drain is full of counted waste.”

His eyes moved to the gray cloth around her right hand.

“Show me your service mark.”

She did not move.

Recognition reached him by degrees: the absent emblem, the cheek scar, the way she had placed her body between him and the board against her hip.

“You were dismissed.”

“I remember.”

He nodded to the watcher.

Vaelin lifted the cover board and pushed it against the nearest open cabinet door. The door swung into the narrow passage. She moved through the space it screened before the watcher could reach her wrist.

The motion drove the edge of the board against her burned palm.

She dropped it.

The official bent for the fallen cover. Vaelin stamped on its corner with her heel and dragged it toward herself. Dry wood cracked. The page lining it flexed but held.

“Those records belong to the Council,” he said.

“Then why are they being burned?”

The watcher forced the cabinet door back. Vaelin snatched up the board with her left hand and ran.

She made it six paces before the loose edge of her robe caught on a projecting shelf.

For a moment she was trapped by a thing too ordinary to have appeared in any brave imagining. She twisted, felt cloth tear at her collar, and left a strip of the robe caught on the shelf.

The watcher struck the wall beside her head with his staff.

She ducked into the binding room.

A novice stood there holding a tray of paste jars. Vaelin shoved him toward the worktable as the staff swept through the doorway. The tray hit the floor. Glass broke beneath both their feet.

“Stay down,” she told him.

The watcher saw the boy and checked his second blow. Vaelin used the instant to push a wheeled rack into his path.

It moved too easily.

The rack struck a floor seam and tilted toward the novice.

Vaelin caught its upper rail with her left hand. The cover board slid under the worktable. Pain pulled through her shoulder. She could not hold the rack and retrieve the evidence at once.

The boy crawled clear. The watcher caught the other side of the rail, and for two breaths he and Vaelin kept the same weight from falling.

She let go first.

The rack settled against the table. She went to her knees, pushed the board ahead of her through the lower gap, and followed it into the next aisle.

Behind her, the official shouted for the outer doors to be closed.

The bells that answered were small. Three quick notes from a handbell, repeated farther down the archive. No grand alarm. Only a building beginning to pass a description from one room to another.

Vaelin reached the maintenance door and found a new locking ward across it.

She knew its type. A simple line holding two iron contacts apart, designed to sound when the circuit was broken without the proper touch.

Knowing it did not make it open.

She wedged the board beneath one arm and put her left palm against the stone beside the lower contact. The old grounding channel ran there. She could feel its faint pressure through the wall, familiar from years of work, diminished by the new gate ward drawing through the same route.

She tried to ease a little of that pressure into the lock.

Heat ran across her wrist.

The contact shifted. The bell above the door gave half a note.

Footsteps changed direction in the corridor.

Vaelin stopped trying to be silent.

She drove the wooden scraper beneath the latch, breaking its point. The grounding line had weakened the hold enough for the iron to move. She pulled with her whole weight and fell through the opening as the alarm completed its note.

The door slammed against her hip. She rolled, kept hold of the board, and found herself in the disposal court.

At its center, a shallow furnace burned beneath a hood of blackened stone. Two porters were feeding broken covers into it. An attendant held a list and checked off the bundles as they fell.

One bundle carried Elen's service mark.

Vaelin stopped.

She had the river account. She had proof of replacement. She should have gone straight through the court to the work gate and trusted the knowledge she already held.

Then she saw the travel receipt pinned to the marked bundle.

One passenger. Archive custody. East road. Quiet House.

The porter lifted it toward the fire.

“That one hasn't been cleared,” she said.

He hesitated. The attendant looked down at his list.

Behind her, the maintenance door opened.

“Stop her.”

Vaelin pulled the receipt free as the porter turned. The bundle dropped against the furnace rim. Loose paper scattered across the coals, and an edge of the slip in her hand caught fire.

She slapped it against the wet apron at her chest.

The flame died. Ink spread beneath the damp cloth. She lifted the slip quickly, watching part of the writing dissolve into a gray stain.

The destination remained. So did the custody number.

The archive official came through the door, breathing hard.

“She is carrying withdrawn material.”

The porters stepped away from her. The attendant lowered his list.

Vaelin looked at the work gate. The watcher stood in front of it now.

She could not run past him. She could barely grip the cover board. Her right hand throbbed in time with her pulse, and the left had begun to shake from the locking ward.

Above the furnace, a chain supported the hood that drew smoke toward the high vent.

Beside it, the drain keeper's stair climbed to the wash-water tank.

She chose the stair.

The first steps were easy. The turn was not. She had to pull herself around the rail with her elbow, holding the board between her forearm and her ribs. The watcher followed close enough for the staff to strike the step behind her heel.

At the top, steam wrapped around them.

Vaelin opened the inspection flap in the side of the tank. Warm water pressed against it. Not enough to sweep anyone from the stairs. Enough to run down the steps and make the watcher stop watching her feet.

He seized the rail.

She crossed the narrow platform to the waste chute used for spoiled cloth. It dropped into the laundry yard on the other side of the wall.

Too narrow for the board.

She tried once, felt it jam, and heard the watcher reach the platform behind her.

The paper lining was what mattered. She bent the split cover across her knee. Wood broke along the old repair. She pulled the two halves apart without tearing the page, wrapped them together with the cord from her pocket, and pushed the shortened bundle into the chute.

Then she climbed after it.

The drop tore the skin above her ankle. She landed in wet cloth with the board beneath her ribs and cried out before she could stop herself.

In the yard, a pair of hands caught her shoulders.

The laundry keeper pulled her behind a line of heavy sheets.

“Can you walk?”

Vaelin nodded, though she did not yet know.

The woman gave her a dripping bundle of washed cloth, wrapping it around the cracked boards.

“Then carry something.”

Three other workers were passing through the lower work gate with their arms full. Vaelin joined them. She kept her face turned toward the burden and made herself take each step at their pace.

Behind the wall, the handbells continued.

She did not look back until the river trees hid the temple.

PART 5 OF 5

The Quiet House

Kael

Vaelin returned after the evening wind changed.

I saw the pale bundle before I recognized the way she walked. She was favoring one ankle. The borrowed wrap was gone. A plain laundry apron hung over her torn robes, and both her hands looked worse than when she had left.

I got to my feet too quickly.

The core pulled against my ribs. I sat down again and hated it.

Eryth went to meet her beyond the inner line. He took the bundle without asking what was inside and let her keep her weight on his good side as they crossed the rough ground.

“Did you find him?” I asked.

“No.”

She lowered herself onto the stone beside me.

“He was gone before I reached the temple. Watchmen took someone matching him through the east court before dawn. His work was left unfinished. The office calls it reassignment.”

“Where?”

“Let me drink.”

Eryth handed her the flask.

She drank slowly, stopping to breathe between swallows. Only then did she begin unwrapping the cloth.

The cover board had broken into two pieces. Between them lay a stained leaf, a copied passage, an impression of an office seal, and a burned travel receipt.

I looked at the bundle with a disappointment so sharp that I was ashamed of it. I had expected something that shone. A relic, a sealed confession, a truth powerful enough to make the whole temple tremble when it was spoken.

Vaelin had brought me damaged paper.

“Read,” she said.

I did.

The river returned in the indifferent language of a field report. Rhydian disappeared. Two children recovered. No remains. No voluntary vow heard. No established account of intent.

Then my own words, made smaller by another person's hand.

Older child reports that the Keeper appeared to recognize the arrival. Questioning suspended pending instruction.

I remembered the monk looking sharply at his companion. I remembered the silence on the path afterward. For years, I had treated that glance as proof of whatever accusation I needed at the time.

Here was the thing it had certainly meant.

They had stopped asking.

Eryth knelt beside the board and read the later instruction.

For the public register: voluntary sacrifice in protection of the succession. Remove unsettled witness language. Do not circulate the preliminary account.

He touched the edge of the seal without touching the ink.

“That's an archive counterseal,” he said. “The broken point belongs to the office, not a particular councillor.”

“Is it real?”

“It matches the receipt impression.”

“Is it real?” I asked again.

He looked at me.

“The order was entered. The replacement was received under the same docket. Someone with the Council's authority required the uncertainty to be removed.”

The words steadied something in me that rage had never managed to hold still.

“They lied.”

Eryth read the public version Vaelin had copied.

“They wrote intention where their own field account said it had not been established.”

“Say it without protecting them.”

His head lifted.

“They lied about what they knew.”

For a moment, that was enough.

I wanted to take the paper up the temple steps and press it into every hand that had ever told me grief made my questions unworthy. I wanted to watch the Council try to turn it into another warning about my character.

“Then the vision was true,” I said. “Father stood against them. They let him die.”

Vaelin put her good hand over the copied dispatch line before I could snatch it up.

“That is more than the paper says.”

“He asked to see them.”

“Yes. About Eldra access. We don't have the request. We don't know what he intended to ask, what he had already done, or whether anyone answered outside that register.”

I pulled my hand away.

She had returned injured because I wanted a truth. Now I resented her for refusing to enlarge it.

Eryth sat back on his heels.

“Whatever Father meant to do, it doesn't excuse this.”

He tapped the replacement order.

The distinction was harder to dismiss coming from him.

We arranged the three records side by side. Original report. Replacement wording. Receipt of the withdrawal order. A small procedure had converted an unanswered loss into an approved story before we had finished washing river ash from our faces.

I could not make that procedure tell me whether my father had been frightened for himself or for something he had set in motion.

I could make it stop pretending the answer had always been known.

“The travel slip,” Vaelin said.

Its lower edge was black. Water had carried part of the writing into a blurred cloud. The destination and custody number remained.

Quiet House.

Eryth's expression changed.

“You know it.”

“A retreat on the eastern road. Monks are sent there after dangerous workings. Sometimes witnesses.”

“Do they come back?”

“Some do.”

Vaelin watched him.

“And the others?”

He looked down at the slip. “I don't know.”

The word passenger had survived near the burn. It did not give us a name. Elen's service mark had been on the discarded bundle to which the receipt was pinned, Vaelin explained.

That connected the journey to his office. It did not prove he had reached the destination alive, or even that he had occupied the vehicle.

It gave us somewhere to look.

“They'll know you took this,” Eryth said.

“They know I took withdrawn material,” Vaelin answered. “The official saw my face.”

“Then they'll look for you here.”

“They already knew where to find the dangerous man.”

I heard the cost beneath her attempt at lightness. She had gone to the temple with one door still open in her memory. She had returned knowing that even the people who had helped her might be questioned for it.

“Who helped you?” I asked.

“People whose names I'm not putting on your next page.”

I accepted that more quietly than she expected.

Eryth began copying the three records onto clean leaves. He used plain ink. He recorded which words were missing and which parts had been damaged, and he made me read the numbers back to him before he wrote them.

When he finished, we had an original and two ordinary copies. No one person would carry all of them. Vaelin kept the impression of the receipt seal. Eryth folded one set beneath his robe. I put the original field account between the boards of my Doctrine.

The living page lay nearby, closed.

I did not open it to ask whether we had done the right thing.

Across the ridge, one of the Council's outer lamps brightened.

Eryth looked toward it, then at the receipt bearing the Quiet House's name.

“Before we send another question into their hands,” he said, “we need to decide who is going to be there when they answer.”

Vaelin leaned back against the low foundation and closed her eyes. Her good hand still rested on the evidence.

Above her, the shadow of the missing pillar reached across the stone.

CHAPTER 9

The House of Borrowed Silence

PART 1 OF 5

What We Do Not Send

Kael

The lamp on the ridge burned long enough for me to imagine every order it might contain.

Then the captain stepped out beneath it and called my brother's name.

Eryth rose. Vaelin caught his sleeve with two fingers of her left hand.

“The papers.”

He looked down at the fold beneath his robe. For a moment, he seemed surprised that something so thin could change the meaning of walking toward his own people.

He gave the copied set to her.

“If they search you?” I asked.

“They won't find it.”

“That isn't what I meant.”

“I know.”

He crossed the inner line. I watched the captain meet him halfway down the slope, keeping her hands where I could see them. Their conversation was too quiet to reach us. Behind her, the lamp shone steadily. Nothing moved in the roots beneath my feet.

Vaelin folded Eryth's papers inside a length of dry linen.

“We could send one,” I said.

“Where?”

“The temple kitchens. The training court. Any place people have learned to repeat the story.”

“And what happens at the Quiet House when those people start asking questions?”

I looked at the burned travel slip.

She waited without helping me answer.

“They move him,” I said.

“Perhaps.”

“Or decide there's no reason to keep him.”

Vaelin tucked the packet into a dry recess beneath the stone on which she sat, well clear of the crystal veins and sheltered from the gathering rain. “Then decide what you want first.”

That should have been easy. Elen had stood between me and the forbidden vault with an empty hand, asking me to think. I had mistaken his lack of a weapon for the absence of anything he could do to stop me. Now even the hope of finding him depended on a scrap I had almost dismissed as worthless.

Yet I could already hear the temple voices changing. I could see the men who had praised my father's willing sacrifice reading the instruction that had manufactured his willingness.

The desire was ugly in its pleasure. I let myself feel it before I put the slip down.

“We keep the evidence here until he's safe.”

“Both copies?”

“Both. Nothing goes into a public register. Nothing gets nailed to a gate.”

“And nothing gets written in a kind of ink that can decide to send itself.”

I looked at the closed living page.

“Nothing.”

My brother returned carrying a small pot and a fresh roll of linen. He handed them to Vaelin, who inspected the salve before removing the ruined cloth from her hand.

“The captain wants a report before dawn,” he said. “The lamp was her signal. The outer work remains paused.”

“Does she know about the archive?”

“She knows someone entered it and escaped with withdrawn material. A description is circulating.”

Vaelin's mouth tightened. “Then they worked quickly.”

“She didn't ask me whether you'd left the scar.”

“Convenient,” I said.

“For this conversation. It won't remain so.”

He knelt to help Vaelin wind the fresh linen. Her right hand had swollen. When he tried to straighten one finger, she made a small involuntary sound and he stopped.

“I'll go to the Quiet House,” he said.

“How?”

“Through the front door.”

I laughed once, without humor. “Wearing their light.”

“Yes.”

“And when they tell you there is no Elen?”

“I'll ask them to enter that answer beside the custody number.”

Vaelin looked up.

“You mean to make yourself difficult to remove quietly.”

“I mean to arrive as someone they have to account for.”

“You think a written line protects you,” I said, “after what we just read?”

“I think the gatekeeper, the night attendant, and whoever signs my departure will all know I came. That may buy more than climbing a wall with one useful arm.”

His left shoulder pulled beneath the robe when he shifted. The burn was still there. Whatever had returned from the Tower had not mended his skin.

I wanted to tell him the plan was foolish. I wanted to tell him he should take me. Both would have spared me the harder thing of remaining still while he did something I could not.

“Don't threaten them with the river account,” I said.

“I won't.”

“Don't offer it in exchange.”

“Kael.”

“Until he's safe.”

Eryth finished tying the bandage and met my eyes.

“Until he's safe.”

He copied only the custody number onto an ordinary scrap. The destination he already knew. Vaelin described the travel receipt exactly, separating what she had read before the fire from what still survived afterward. My brother listened, then made her repeat the distinction.

There was no hidden signal to arrange. He would send word by an ordinary messenger if he could. If he could not, we were to learn that before deciding what his silence meant.

“And you?” he asked me.

“I have a great many places to go.”

He waited.

“I'll stay inside the line.”

“Keep the stair covered.”

“It seems committed to remaining that way.”

This time he almost smiled.

Vaelin gave him back the empty flask. He filled it from the water the guards had brought, set aside bread, and settled Aetherium's baldric against his good shoulder. No secret passage, no forbidden weapon hidden under common cloth. He left wearing the marks that had once made me certain he belonged to people who could never understand us.

At the boundary, I called after him.

“Eryth.”

He turned.

For an instant, I saw the boy on the half-submerged log, looking back to see whether I had noticed how far he had gone.

“Come back with your own answer.”

My brother nodded and went up the slope. He stopped beside the captain before taking the eastern path. I saw him point toward the road, then wait while she called another guard to the lamp.

By the time the captain's lamp disappeared behind the trees, rain had begun to fall.

PART 2 OF 5

A Door Opened by Name

Eryth

The Quiet House stood above a narrow branch of the Eldra, far enough from the road that a traveler might mistake its lamps for stars caught among the cypresses.

Eryth reached the gate in the last hours of darkness. Rain ran from his hood. His shoulder had stiffened during the walk, and the cold made his fingers clumsy when he pulled the bell rope.

The bell moved inside its iron frame.

He heard nothing.

A shutter opened in the gate. An old man looked through it, holding a lamp below his own face.

“Name and purpose.”

“Eryth. Dawn Monk of the Temple of the Eye. I need to establish the condition of a witness transferred from the archives.”

“At this hour?”

“Yes.”

The man lifted the lamp toward the marks on his robe. “Your authority to remove him?”

“I haven't claimed it.”

That answer seemed to delay the gatekeeper more effectively than a demand would have. He shut the shutter. Eryth waited beneath a stone overhang while water collected inside his collar.

When the gate opened, a woman in a plain wool robe stood beyond it. Her hair had been cut short enough to reveal an old scar behind one ear.

“I'm Ilyra,” she said. “I keep this house at night.”

She looked at his shoulder before she looked at his face.

“You're injured.”

“It can wait.”

“That is rarely a useful diagnosis.”

She led him into a vestibule with a desk, a basin, and a rack for wet cloaks. Eryth gave his name again. The gatekeeper entered it in a bound book, wrote the hour, and turned the page so he could sign.

“Purpose,” Eryth said.

The old man tapped the words he had written: official visit.

“Add the custody number.”

Ilyra read the scrap in his hand. Something changed in her expression, quickly controlled.

“He's resting.”

It was the first useful answer anyone had given him.

“Elen?”

“The archive scribe. Yes.”

“I need to see him.”

“You may ask. He may refuse. You may not question another resident on your way to his room, and you will summon no flame beneath this roof.”

“Why?”

“Because some of the people sleeping here cannot tell a lamp from the thing that hurt them.”

Eryth let his hand fall away from the luminous edge of his sleeve.

“Understood.”

The gatekeeper added the number. Ilyra waited for Eryth to sign before leading him inside.

The house smelled of boiled linen and cedar. A man slept upright beside a cold hearth, his hands wrapped around an empty cup. Farther along the corridor, a woman counted the fingers of one hand over and over while an attendant sat patiently with her. There were locks on some doors. Other doors stood open.

Eryth had prepared himself for cruelty. The sight of ordinary care made the locked rooms harder to understand.

They passed a narrow arch crossed by copper strips. His ears tightened as he walked beneath them. Rain disappeared from hearing, though he could still see it striking the courtyard beyond the glass.

“Quieting wards,” Ilyra said. “Old ones. They keep disturbances from passing between rooms.”

“Do they keep voices in?”

She glanced at him. “Among other things.”

Elen's door had a lock.

Ilyra knocked, opened it a little, and spoke through the gap. After a pause, she stood aside.

The scribe sat on a bed beneath an unglazed window covered by a slatted shutter. His robe had been exchanged for a gray house tunic. His fingers were stained as deeply as ever, but there was no inkpot, paper, or pen in the room.

He looked at Eryth's face, then past him toward the corridor.

“Alone?”

“Yes.”

“That isn't always the same as unwatched.”

Ilyra rested her hand on the door. “A short visit. He hasn't slept.”

“May we close it?” Eryth asked.

She hesitated, then nodded. “It will not be locked while you're inside.”

When she left, Eryth pulled the single chair away from the wall and sat where Elen could see both him and the door.

“Are you hurt?”

“Not in a way that excuses my answers.”

“That isn't what I asked.”

Elen held out his hands. A dark bruise circled one wrist. His nails had been cut almost to the quick.

“They didn't like what I could hide beneath them.”

Eryth controlled the movement of his face. “I came to find out why you were brought here.”

“What did the temple tell you?”

“Nothing.”

“Good. Then you have one honest answer already.”

The scribe lowered his hands.

“How is your brother?”

“Alive.”

“Still certain?”

“Of fewer things.”

“I doubt he enjoys that.”

Despite himself, Eryth smiled. It lasted only a moment.

“Did you alter the river account?” he asked.

Elen's eyes moved toward the copper strip beneath the window.

“I copied the version I was ordered to copy.”

“Did you believe it?”

“At first, I believed someone above me knew more than I did. It is a useful belief for a scribe. It lets him finish his work.”

“And afterward?”

“Afterward, I kept finding places where knowledge should have been entered.”

He looked down at his empty hands.

“Some remained empty. Some acquired answers years later, written as though they had always been there.”

Eryth thought of the order Vaelin had carried through the fire. He did not mention it.

“Is that why you're here?”

“Partly.”

“What is the rest?”

Elen turned his wrist so the bruise faced upward.

“They want a list.”

“Of records?”

“Of the people the records have misplaced.”

The rain continued against the shutter without a sound.

Eryth leaned forward. Elen caught his sleeve before he could speak again. The grip was surprisingly strong.

“Don't ask for their names in this room.”

“Why?”

The scribe's gaze returned to the copper.

Beyond the door, someone turned a key in a different lock. Then footsteps stopped outside Elen's room.

“Your visit is being reviewed,” Ilyra said from the corridor.

PART 3 OF 5

The Shape That Remained

Kael

The rain found a channel through the rubble above the broken stair.

A broad fragment of the crushed cover slab jutted from the upper edge of the fall. Water slipped beneath it and vanished among the stones still packed across the lower steps. The fragment had begun to settle toward a hollow. Vaelin watched it for a while, then marked the gap with a piece of pale grit.

“If that corner drops,” she said, “the other side lifts.”

“Then we put something under it.”

“From here. Nobody reaches beneath.”

We had a fallen length of wood, two pieces of ordinary stone, and less strength between us than either cared to admit. Vaelin could brace the wood with her boot, but her injured ankle would not bear a sudden shift. I could pull without twisting only if I stood where the core's pulse hurt least.

The indignity of the arrangement made me angry before anything went wrong.

We set the first stone. I used the wood as a lever, lifting only enough for Vaelin to push the second with a shorter stick.

The stone moved.

Under it, a silver seam opened its eye.

Darklight climbed the lever into my hand.

I had been thinking lift. Nothing more elaborate. A command as old as my back and as simple as the work in front of me.

The stone rose a finger's width.

Vaelin shoved the support home. “Enough.”

I let go of the working.

The stone rose again.

“Kael.”

“I stopped.”

Cold rushed up my arm. Beneath the stone, a thread of black and silver drew tight against the wood. A corner of the top step became visible. The main weight of the fallen pillar still sealed everything below it. Water ran into the shallow darkness between the stones.

Vaelin tried to pull the lever away. Her left wrist failed her. The wood twisted, driving her shoulder against the stone, and she caught herself with a cry.

I commanded the stone down.

It jerked. The corner nearest us dropped hard enough to crack one support. The far edge rose higher.

“Don't push against it,” she said.

“I'm trying to close it.”

“You're feeding it.”

A shape moved in the gap. Perhaps water reflecting the seam. Perhaps a hand withdrawing from a place where no hand should fit. I looked directly at it, and the pain in my forearm deepened.

The stone lifted again by the same small distance.

I had already stopped asking it to.

Vaelin dragged the shorter stick across the thread beneath the lever. Nothing happened. She struck it harder, and a splinter flew into the dark.

“Where is it drawing from?”

“Me.”

“Through what?”

I wanted her to stop asking questions and help. Then I understood that she was helping in the only way I had left her.

My fingers were locked around the wood. A thin line of blood had seeped through the cloth at my forearm and run along its grain. The Darklight followed it, crossing into the silver seam at the point where the lever touched the stone.

I pulled at my hand. The skin of my palm seemed glued to the wet wood.

“Cut it,” I said.

Vaelin reached for the old knife with her left hand.

“The wood,” I told her quickly.

“I had understood that much.”

She sawed at the narrow end, keeping the blade beyond my fingers. It was a poor knife. The wood was soaked. Every backward stroke cost her a breath she tried not to let me hear.

The stone lifted once more.

I reached through the bond toward the core and nearly asked it for strength.

Then I saw what strength was doing.

I let the reach fail.

“Lean on this side,” Vaelin said.

“It'll fall.”

“Onto the support. If you give me a clean break.”

I put my weight where she pointed. The wood bent at the cut. For an instant, the Darklight held both pieces together in a black vein thinner than a hair.

Then the grain split.

The stone dropped onto the remaining support with a sound I felt in my teeth. Water burst across our feet. The far edge settled back over the stair, leaving only the original narrow gap.

My hand came free.

I fell against the low foundation, shaking so hard that I could not pull the bloodied cloth away from my skin.

Vaelin sat beside me. She held the knife across her knees until she could trust her fingers enough to put it down.

For several breaths, the stone did nothing at all.

“You thought I was still lifting it,” I said.

“At first.”

“I wasn't.”

“I saw.”

The relief of being believed left me less able to hide how frightened I was.

A chip had broken from the edge of the stone. It rested beside the severed lever, still joined to it by a dim line. As my blood soaked farther into the grain, the chip tilted once. It rose the same finger's width, fell, and tried again.

Vaelin put the end of her stick against it without entering the line.

“You're doing that?”

“No.”

“Can you feel it taking anything now?”

I closed my eyes. The core hurt. My arm hurt. Beneath those familiar pains, there was no fresh pull.

“No.”

The chip rose a third time, less than before. The last dark bead in the broken wood faded. The stone settled and remained still.

We watched it until rain washed the blood into an ordinary red stain.

“A little left in the wood,” Vaelin said. “Enough to keep trying.”

“It remembered the lift.”

“It repeated it. We know that much.”

I looked toward the place the second pillar had occupied.

In the dark, its impossible shadow could not be seen. I knew where its outline lay. I had spent the day looking at an absent thing insisting upon the shape it had been given.

“When I tell the Tower to stop, the first command may still be there.”

“You stopped holding the second pillar up.”

“And something kept its shape.”

Vaelin studied the fallen stone. “Perhaps. Don't turn one broken lever into an answer for the whole ruin.”

I almost snapped at her. Instead, I drew the two separate paths in the wet grit: the command I had made and the line that had continued to feed it.

“More force made it worse.”

“Yes.”

“Cutting what fed it worked.”

“Here.”

I added the word beneath the drawing.

The smallness of it annoyed me. It also kept me from lying.

We had learned something about the power I wanted to master. It could carry an order beyond the moment I meant it. My change of heart did not erase the working. While I struggled to make it obey a second instruction, I had been giving the first one strength.

I looked down at the blood soaking my sleeve.

“Next time,” I said, “we choose where the break can be made before we begin.”

Vaelin's gaze lifted sharply.

“Next time?”

I should have heard the fear in those words before I heard their challenge.

PART 4 OF 5

The Living Register

Eryth

The man who entered Elen's room wore an archive sash under his traveling cloak. His boots were muddy. Two house watchmen waited behind him, and Ilyra stood farther down the corridor with her arms folded tightly across her chest.

“Brother Eryth,” the man said. “You were expected on the northern boundary.”

“The captain knows I've come here.”

“Does she know why?”

“To establish the condition of an archive witness.”

The examiner glanced at Elen's wrist.

“His condition is being attended to.”

Eryth stood. “By whom?”

“People who do not need to explain every treatment to a visitor.”

“Then ask one of them to explain it to him.”

The examiner held out a folded order. It authorized the continued retention of the scribe and the examination of records withheld from the archive. The archive office's seal had been pressed deeply into the wax. Eryth recognized the broken point without letting his gaze linger on it.

There was no sentence authorizing the damage he had seen around Elen's wrist.

“He remains under protection,” the examiner said. “Your visit is concluded.”

“I request an independent review of his treatment.”

“From whom?”

“Myrrh. Or a healer outside this house.”

“You may submit that request at the temple.”

“I'll submit it here. Enter the time.”

The examiner's expression hardened.

“Your standing permits you to raise a concern. It does not make you master of these rooms.”

“Then you have no reason to refuse the entry.”

Ilyra moved closer. “I'll enter it.”

The examiner turned toward her. “You will prepare the lower room.”

Elen gripped the edge of the bed.

Eryth saw the movement. “What happens in the lower room?”

“A quiet examination,” the man replied.

“I won't go back,” Elen said.

The words came without drama. He sounded like a man refusing another cup of something that had already made him ill.

“You will answer the questions required of you.”

“I answered them.”

“You supplied omissions.”

“You taught me the distinction.”

One watchman stepped into the room. Eryth moved between him and the bed without reaching for his sword.

“He has refused.”

“He is retained,” the examiner said. “Those are different conditions.”

For a moment, Eryth heard Kael's voice in the space where his own answer should have been. Not a remembered sentence. The bitter certainty that every word of restraint concealed a place where restraint would no longer apply.

He held his position.

“Let Ilyra examine him first.”

The night keeper looked from the watchman to the bruise. “That is reasonable.”

The examiner stepped back. “Then do it below. The room is prepared.”

The first watchman caught Elen's arm.

Eryth took the man's wrist and turned it just enough to make him release his grip. The second watchman lifted a short iron baton.

“Don't,” Ilyra said.

The blow came toward Eryth's burned shoulder.

He turned late. Iron struck the doorframe instead, tearing a strip from the wood. He drove the first man backward into the second and used the space to pull Elen off the bed.

The movement opened the burn beneath his robe.

Pain whitened his sight. Elen staggered against him. They were two injured men trying to occupy a doorway that had suddenly become much too small.

“The courtyard,” Ilyra said.

The examiner shouted something Eryth did not hear. Elen dragged him left, away from the main entrance. A watchman seized the back of his robe and hauled him against the wall.

Eryth drew Aetherium with his right hand and twisted sideways against the watchman's grip. Blue light flared along the steel. He laid its edge against the gathered cloth, cut himself

free, and extinguished the flame as he thrust the sword back into its sheath. The copper strips above the corridor flared white.

Every open door shuddered.

From the room beside them came a woman's terrified cry.

Ilyra slapped a brass plate set into the wall. The white light dimmed, but the corridor seemed to draw inward around Eryth's chest. His next breath would not come.

Elen pushed him through the courtyard arch.

Rain struck his face. He coughed, found air, and bent over with one hand braced against the wet stone.

“No flame,” Ilyra said behind him, breathless. “I meant it.”

“I know.”

“They were using the house wards to hold him,” Elen said. “They always say it's for the other residents.”

“Sometimes it is,” she snapped.

The examiner appeared beneath the arch with both watchmen. One carried a narrow black case. He opened it against the wall, revealing a coil of copper joined to a pair of iron wrist clasps.

Elen backed away until his heels struck a bench.

Eryth recognized the spacing of the contacts. A binding instrument, designed to carry a ward close to the body. He had seen harmless versions used to steady a shaking hand during training.

The inner surfaces of these clasps had been discolored by heat.

“Put that away,” Ilyra said.

“He disturbed the house,” the examiner replied.

“You brought it before the disturbance.”

Rain filled the silence between them.

Eryth looked at the copper line running along the courtyard wall. It entered a stone housing beneath the arch. Beside it hung a wooden board marked with instructions for opening the quieting circuit in case of fire.

He could cut it. The whole courtyard might answer as the corridor had. He could draw Aetherium again and try to hold the reaction back.

His left hand would barely close.

He looked instead at Ilyra.

“Can you stop that instrument without hurting the people inside?”

She stared at the black case.

“I can separate the visiting court from the resident rooms.”

“Do it.”

“You have no authority to order that,” the examiner said.

Ilyra took a key from her belt. “He didn't build this house's wards. Neither did you.”

She opened the stone housing.

The nearer watchman lunged for her hand. Eryth caught his forearm with his right and drove him against the arch. No light. No elegance. The man's elbow struck his injured shoulder, and both of them went to one knee.

“Now,” Eryth said through his teeth.

Ilyra pulled an iron handle down.

Sound returned all at once. Rain hammered the paving. Somewhere inside, someone called for water. The coil in the case snapped against its lining and went dull.

Elen caught the second watchman's cloak and hauled it over the open case. When the man turned, the scribe struck him with the wooden lid. The blow was awkward and short. It was enough to make him let go of the instrument.

Eryth shoved his opponent clear and stood. The man backed against the arch, protecting his wrist. His companion pressed a hand to a split lip and looked at Ilyra, waiting for an order she would not give.

“No one else touches him.”

The examiner looked at the gate beyond the courtyard. “If you remove a retained witness, your position will not protect you.”

“Then enter my name beside his departure.”

“I will enter it beside an offense.”

“Enter what you saw.”

Ilyra kept one hand on the open housing.

“You have an order to retain him,” she told the examiner. “You do not have an order to use my wards to burn him until he speaks. I will answer for opening the circuit.”

“You will answer for more than that.”

She flinched. Eryth saw it. Courage had not made her less afraid of the man.

He could not promise she would be safe if he left. He could not keep Elen safe by remaining under an order whose limits changed with every objection.

“Come with us,” he said.

She looked toward the passage where the woman had cried out.

“I have other people here.”

“Ilyra.”

“Go before he sends for the road watch.”

The gatekeeper stood at the far door. He had heard enough to keep his key in his hand. Eryth crossed the courtyard with Elen's arm over his good shoulder, expecting a baton between his shoulders at every step.

At the gate, he stopped long enough to speak his name again.

“Write it,” he told the old man.

Behind them, the examiner was already calling for a messenger.

PART 5 OF 5

The Unrecorded Road

Eryth

They left the lamps behind but not the sound of pursuit.

A horse struck sparks from the stones above the gate. Eryth could not see its rider through the rain. He could hear the short commands, the gatekeeper answering, the change in hoofbeats as the animal turned toward the road.

“Not that way,” Elen whispered.

“You know another?”

“The washing path. Along the water.”

“Can you walk it?”

“Ask me at the end.”

They went down between the cypresses. Roots crossed the slope, slick underfoot. Twice Elen stumbled. The second time, Eryth could not hold him. They slid together into a shallow runnel, filling their sleeves with mud.

Neither had enough breath to curse.

Below them, the washing path followed the narrow watercourse toward an old footbridge. The bridge had no parapet, only a rope stretched between posts. Rain had lifted the stream close to its underside.

Eryth tested the first board with his foot.

“One at a time,” he said.

Elen shook his head. “If I fall, you won't reach me from this bank.”

“If the boards go, I won't reach you from the water.”

The scribe studied him for a moment, then caught the rope with both hands and stepped onto the bridge.

He moved slowly. Halfway across, his left leg failed to take his weight. He sagged against the rope. Eryth started forward and made himself stop.

“Stay low,” he said. “Put your knee on the next board.”

“I know how a bridge works.”

“Then stop arguing with it.”

Elen made a sound that might have become a laugh on another night. He lowered himself, crawled the last few lengths, and rolled onto the far bank.

A lantern appeared among the trees behind Eryth.

“Dawn Monk. Stay where you are.”

He crossed without answering. The third board bent beneath him. He spread his weight across two more, grasped the rope, and felt the burn at his shoulder open again.

Light could have carried him faster. The memory of doors shuddering in the Quiet House kept his hand closed on ordinary rope.

He reached the far side as the lantern descended to the stream.

One of the house watchmen stood there, breathing hard. Without the examiner beside him, he looked younger.

“You've made this worse,” the man called.

Eryth helped Elen stand.

“For whom?”

The watchman did not answer. He put one foot on the bridge.

Water struck a crosspiece beneath it. The whole frame shivered. He took his foot back.

“We'll know where you go.”

Elen pulled Eryth toward a gap between the willows. “Then we should go there slowly enough to survive it.”

They kept beside the stream until it bent away from the eastern road. Only when the lamp disappeared did Eryth stop beneath the broken roof of an old wayside shelter.

The shelter held a stone bench, a shallow niche for a lamp, and a swallow's nest emptied for the season. He checked behind the low wall before lowering Elen onto the bench.

The sky had begun to pale.

Eryth tore a clean strip from the inside of his ruined robe and bound it around his shoulder as well as he could. Elen watched him struggle, then reached up to tie the last knot.

“You'll call that nothing,” the scribe said.

“No.”

“Good. I am tired of useful lies.”

They shared the remaining water. Elen's hands shook so badly that Eryth held the flask while he drank.

“The list,” Eryth said when the man could breathe again.

Elen looked toward the open end of the shelter.

“Two people,” he said. “That's all I know I saved. There may be others. I won't make them out of hope.”

“Saved from this place?”

“From people who had decided their examinations weren't finished. Both were entered as dead. Neither was dead when I put them on the carts.”

Eryth waited.

“I copied transfer slips for the house. Linen. Binding waste. Supplies. A cart leaves with what its papers say it carries, unless someone is given a reason to look.”

“And you changed the papers.”

“I changed them.”

“How did the archive find out?”

“A review of old custody numbers. One dead woman's mark appeared on a receipt written after her death. My error. I thought I had removed every trace that led to her.”

He pressed his stained fingertips together.

“They asked for the name she uses now. Then for everyone else. They think I kept a register.”

“Did you?”

“No. Two people can be remembered without a book.”

The answer should have been comforting. Eryth looked at the marks around Elen's wrist and understood why it was not.

“Why tell me?”

“Because you had a door open in front of you and chose to stand in the wrong place.”

The scribe leaned his head against the wall. His eyes remained open.

“One of them served this house before she became a patient. An attendant named Maren. She knew your father.”

Eryth felt his hands go still.

“Knew him how?”

“She admitted him here. Three nights before the river.”

Rain dripped through a crack in the roof, striking the stone between them.

“Why would he come here?”

“She didn't hear his private conversation.”

“With whom?”

“She wasn't told the visitor's name. He had arrived before Rhydian. A room was cleared. The night register was taken away afterward.”

“You saw this?”

“No. She told me. I saw the meal account for that night before it was withdrawn. Two extra covers in the closed court, entered under the Keeper's office. That supports a visit. It doesn't tell us what was said.”

Eryth looked out at the brightening trees.

There had been an unanswered request for an audience. Perhaps it had been answered elsewhere. Perhaps his father had come here for a different reason. He could feel how eagerly grief would arrange the pieces if he let it.

“Why was she confined?”

“She asked for the night register back. Later she was said to be hearing things. I can't tell you whether that was false. When I met her, she could go days without speaking, and sometimes she answered someone who wasn't in the room.”

“But you believed her about Father.”

“I believed she deserved to leave with her own mind, however troubled it was.”

Eryth bowed his head. The distinction hurt.

“Where is she?”

Elen studied his face for a long time.

“When I last heard, near the western ferry. I'll give you the way to ask for her. Not here, while men on horses are deciding which road we chose.”

This time Eryth did not mistake caution for a refusal.

“Does she know you're missing?”

“Not yet.”

“Then they'll look for anyone who goes to warn her.”

“Yes.”

The scribe closed his eyes, and Eryth saw how much it had cost him to say even that.

He thought of Kael waiting among the broken foundations, holding an original account between the boards of a book he had written against the world. He had to trust that the papers remained hidden. His brother had promised him time to bring out the man who could explain them.

Eryth had brought Elen out.

He had not yet brought him to safety.

On the higher road, a horn sounded once. Another answered farther west.

Elen opened his eyes.

“They'll have my name at every gate by sunrise.”

Eryth looked at the dawn marks on his torn robe. Rain had darkened the cloth. The marks remained unmistakable.

“Mine too,” he said.

Then he helped the scribe off the bench, and together they stepped away from the road.

CHAPTER 10

A Wall That Feeds

PART 1 OF 5

Beneath Their Seal

Eryth

By sunrise, the road above the stream carried more horses than carts.

Eryth heard them through the willows. He could distinguish the pairs that passed without slowing from the single riders who stopped at each turning. The search was spreading. Once the markets opened, a torn dawn-marked robe would be easier to find than a face.

Elen stopped beside a fallen tree and bent over his knees.

“We can't reach your brother like this.”

“We're not going to my brother.”

The scribe raised his head.

“They know where he is,” Eryth said. “They'll expect me to take you there.”

“Where, then?”

He had no answer worth giving. Every sanctuary he knew belonged to an order that kept a visitor book. Every healer whose name he could offer was someone the Council could question before midday.

Elen watched him discover the limits of his own world.

“There's an old weighhouse,” he said. “Downstream. Before the cart road divided.”

“Abandoned?”

“Condemned. The roof fell in. Its owner stopped paying anyone to mend it.”

“Who owns it?”

“The Council.”

Eryth stared at him.

“I copied the closure account,” Elen said. “And the complaints from the man who kept asking to recover the weighing stones. The roof is gone. The raised store beneath the loading floor isn't.”

“How do you know it hasn't flooded?”

“We'll look before we trust it.”

They followed the stream until the bank widened into an overgrown yard. A broken weighing beam leaned between two stone pillars. Behind it stood the shell of a building, nettles growing through the empty windows. Above the boarded entrance, the Council's weathered seal had lost most of its flame.

A rider passed on the higher road as they approached.

Eryth pulled Elen behind the beam. The movement sent pain through his shoulder. He held still with his face against cold wood while the horse slowed.

The rider called to someone farther up the road.

“Nothing here. Keep to the ferry turns.”

Hoofbeats moved on.

Elen waited until they faded before he pointed to the loading platform.

The side hatch had swollen in its frame. Eryth worked it loose with a fallen iron hook, stopping twice to listen. Beneath the floor lay a shallow room on a stone shelf above the watercourse. Its back wall was dry. The air smelled of dust and old hemp rather than standing water.

He checked the corners, the drain channel, the small ventilation opening beneath the outer stair. Nothing suggested a recent visitor. He lowered Elen through the hatch, climbed in after him, and pulled the warped wood back into place.

Light entered through the vent in a narrow gray strip.

For the first time since the Quiet House, they could not be seen from a road.

Elen sat against the wall. His relief frightened Eryth more than his shaking had. It was the relief of a body that had begun to accept the possibility of stopping forever.

“Stay awake while I look at your leg.”

“I was hoping you'd say something less industrious.”

There was swelling above the left knee, and a dark band where a restraint had pressed. Eryth loosened the cloth, used the last clean water to wash the broken skin, and found that he could do very little else.

“No fire,” Elen said when he glanced toward the vent.

“I know.”

“No healer wearing a temple seal.”

“I know that too.”

Elen leaned back. “I'm going to become very troublesome now that I have choices again.”

Eryth divided the bread he had brought. He ate less than half, but made sure the scribe saw him eat. Then he gathered his robe's wet hem and wrung it out. The dawn marks glimmered faintly even in the gloom.

There were old grain covers in a dry bin. He shook one out and wrapped it over his shoulders, securing it beneath the strap of Aetherium's sheath. It would not fool anyone who looked closely. It would give a passerby something else to see first.

“You're leaving,” Elen said.

“You need water and clean cloth. Someone has to find Maren before the search reaches her.”

“Those are two different journeys.”

“Can they be made into one?”

The scribe rubbed his bruised wrist.

“At the western ferry, ask the sack mender whether she still uses blue thread for flour cloth. If she says flour cloth is never blue, tell her the mistake was mine.”

“Her name?”

“She uses Linn there. Don't use the other one where people can hear.”

Eryth repeated the words. Elen corrected one of them, then made him repeat them again.

“What should I tell her about you?”

“That I'm alive. Tell her yourself. Don't put it on a slip for someone else to carry.”

The same instruction would keep Kael waiting.

Eryth looked toward the light beneath the stair. He could send a message to the captain, but any messenger leaving this part of the river might become a trail back to the weighhouse. The report he owed before dawn was already late. An hour more could cost him his standing. A careless report could cost Elen his life.

“I'll return before the light reaches that crack,” he said, pointing to the westward vent.

“If you're delayed?”

“I won't ask you to take silence as a promise.”

Elen nodded toward the hatch. “Leave it loose. I'd rather have a way out than a good hiding place that needs you to open it.”

Eryth climbed into the nettles. Before he left, he set a fallen piece of tile beside the hatch, close enough for Elen to reach and push outward if someone approached.

An ordinary warning. A poor shelter. A man who needed more than either could offer.

He left the Council's ruined seal over the only refuge he had found beyond its immediate notice.

PART 2 OF 5

The Work That Continues

Kael

I slept for less than an hour with my back against the first foundation.

When I woke, Vaelin had put a cloth beneath my injured arm to keep the blood off the papers. She was sitting beyond the edge of the fallen pillar, watching the ridge.

“Any word?”

“No.”

“Then he'll be taking the long way.”

“Perhaps.”

I disliked how many things that word could contain.

The northern lamp was still burning in the morning light. Our new support held beneath the loose fragment of the crushed cover slab. The lower stair remained buried. In the damp grit beside my foot, the drawing I had made during the night was beginning to blur.

I copied it before the rain could finish the work.

Vaelin watched me draw the feed line twice.

“You should be resting.”

“So should you.”

“That doesn't make either of us wrong.”

I turned the page toward her. “We don't have to hold every working ourselves. It can keep the command.”

“Until it runs out of what keeps it moving.”

“Yes.”

“Or until it keeps moving in a way you didn't intend.”

I touched the second line. “Which is why the break matters.”

We had three flat pieces of stone with silver veins running through them. None was larger than a dinner plate. I placed them on the northern approach, well inside the blood-written

boundary and far from the rubble above the stair. Each plate had its own short feed from the core. A loose stone sliver bridged a gap in each feed, propped from below by a wooden wedge. Pull the prop away and the sliver would fall, opening the contact. I set only the first bridge in place.

Vaelin made me show her where the feed would enter.

“Three separate branches from the core,” I said. “We open one at a time. A little at a time.”

“Which means a little from you.”

“For now.”

She looked at me until I added, “No reaching beyond the line.”

I meant it. The trees outside were still trees. The water still belonged to the spring. I wanted a defense I could keep, rather than a wilderness emptied for one magnificent hour.

I laid my hand against the first stone and gave it a simple instruction: hold what crossed the narrow space between the plates.

Cold entered my wrist. A dim thread formed across the passage.

Vaelin pushed a stick through it.

The thread caught the stick, tightened, and snapped it in two.

She dropped both pieces.

“You said hold.”

“I know what I said.”

“Then learn what it did.”

We tried again with a wider space and less force. This time, a loop closed around the end of a cord. Vaelin pulled. It held. When I looked away, it continued holding.

She kicked the wooden wedge clear of the first plate. The silver contact parted, and the loop went dark.

My knees softened with relief I refused to call triumph.

“Again,” I said.

“After you sit down.”

The third trial caught the loose edge of her sleeve before the cord reached the center. I broke the feed at once. No harm done, except that she had seen me build something unable to distinguish a friend from an obstruction.

“It doesn't know an enemy,” she said.

“It knows a crossing.”

“Then say that when you warn people.”

I scored a line before the plates. Someone coming from the north would have room to stop after entering the outer blood boundary. A plain strip of cloth marked the dangerous gap. Vaelin insisted that I leave each wooden break exposed where either of us could reach it.

The captain arrived before we could make a fourth trial.

She stopped beyond the inner line. Her four companions remained on the ridge; the youngest sat beneath a tree while another helped him change a dressing. I remembered each of them from the morning the pillar fell. They had been counting one another then. I had noticed because it was a thing I no longer did without trying.

“Eryth hasn't reported,” she said.

“He said he'd send word if he could.”

“Did he say what you should do if he couldn't?”

“Avoid answering questions as though we knew why.”

She accepted the rebuke without pretending it pleased her.

Then her gaze moved to Vaelin.

“An archive officer is coming. He has a warrant to recover withdrawn material and bring you for questioning.”

Vaelin's left hand closed around her knee.

“Where?” she asked.

“The temple.”

“Which room?”

The captain said nothing.

“Then no.”

“I can request that the examination be witnessed.”

“By someone whose name they approve?”

“By me.”

For a moment, I wanted to accept. She had brought rope when the stair opened. She had sent salve after Vaelin returned. Her help existed, however inconvenient it was to my anger.

Then I imagined placing the original report in her hand and waiting outside a door while the Council decided what it could mean.

“No one goes,” I said.

Vaelin turned. “She asked me.”

I felt the correction like a hand laid on my throat.

“And you refused.”

“Yes. For myself.”

The captain looked from her to the plates.

“What have you built?”

“Something that holds a crossing,” Vaelin answered before I could improve the description.

“Is it fed beyond your boundary?”

“No,” I said.

“Keep it that way. I will stop anyone who tries to resume the outer work without an order. I cannot promise to stop an officer carrying a different lawful order.”

“Then tell him where to stop walking.”

She looked at me for a long time.

“Make sure you know where to stop too.”

When she had gone, I sat beside the first plate and waited for the trembling in my hand to ease. The little defense had cost too much already. Each test left me colder, while the Tower continued taking its share.

Beyond the line, healthy men could arrive with new seals, fresh linen, whole hands.

I began to consider what else could feed the stones.

PART 3 OF 5

The Woman at the Ferry

Eryth

The sack mender was older than Eryth had expected, with a broad pale streak through dark hair and a small knife tied to her apron by a cord.

She worked beneath the ferry awning, repairing a split seam while two carters argued about whose load should cross first. Her hands moved quickly until the ferry bell rang. Then they stopped.

Eryth waited beside a pile of folded cloth. He had filled the flask at a public well and bought a small roll of clean linen with the coins left in his belt. Neither errand had required his name.

The woman glanced at the rough cover over his shoulders.

“If that's what you're bringing me, it's cheaper to burn it.”

“Do you still use blue thread for flour cloth?”

The knife went still against her palm.

“Flour cloth is never blue.”

“The mistake was his.”

Her eyes lifted to his face.

“Whose?”

“The man who asked me to tell you he is alive.”

She set the sack aside.

“Walk toward the broken cart. Don't look back at me.”

He did as she asked. She joined him after a while, carrying a bundle of work as though she had been called to mend something beneath the cart's raised body.

“Where's Elen?”

“Hidden. Injured. He needs someone who knows how to help him without entering his name in a temple book.”

“And he sent you.”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because I brought him out of the Quiet House.”

For the first time, she looked at the cloth concealing his robe rather than the face above it.

“Show me.”

He lifted the edge just enough for her to see the dawn marks.

She stepped away.

“He wouldn't.”

“My name is Eryth.”

The woman's eyes returned to his face. Something older than the fear of the robe moved through them.

“Rhydian's boy.”

Eryth kept his voice steady. “You knew him.”

“Not well enough to answer what you're hoping to ask.”

“But you saw him at the house.”

“Where is Elen?”

He told her about the weighhouse without raising his voice. She knew the building. More importantly, she knew the raised store beneath it.

“The west vent opens above the old loading steps?”

“Yes.”

“And you left the hatch loose?”

“He asked me to.”

She drew a breath that seemed to hurt.

“Then he still has sense.”

A pair of road-watch officers entered the ferry yard. One carried a folded description. The other began looking beneath the awnings.

The woman thrust a sack into Eryth's hands.

“Hold the seam.”

He crouched beside her. She knelt, shielding his face with her body while she worked the needle through a line of old holes. Her fingers had begun to shake.

“Don't make light,” she whispered.

“I wasn't going to.”

“They always think it helps.”

An officer's boots stopped beside the cart.

“Linn.”

The needle continued moving.

“Have you seen a temple man? Dawn marks. Hurt shoulder. Traveling with an older scribe.”

“I've been looking at flour sacks since the ferry opened.”

“Who's this?”

Eryth kept his face turned toward the seam. The officer touched the covered shape of the sword across his back.

The woman's needle slipped.

Before either could move again, a shout rose from the landing.

One of the carters had begun pushing his load before the ferry plank was secured. The near wheel dropped between the landing and the boat. The cart tilted. A ferryman went down beneath the hanging shaft, his boot trapped against a mooring post.

Eryth was on his feet before he decided to stand.

He caught the cart's side rail with his right hand. The weight dragged him toward the water. Someone shouted at him to let go. He planted his heel against the post instead and held long enough for the woman to put a folded sack under the ferryman's knee.

“Pull your foot back,” she told him. “Straight back. Not up.”

The road-watch officer seized the other rail. Together, he and Eryth lifted the cart a few inches. The ferryman dragged himself free.

Eryth's grain cover caught on a nail and tore from his shoulder.

The dawn marks showed.

For a moment, the officer held the same weight as the man he had come to arrest.

“Don't move,” he said.

“Then keep holding.”

The woman drove a wedge beneath the wheel with her boot. The ferry settled against its rope. Eryth released the rail and stepped back into a crowd that had turned to watch the accident.

She took his wrist and pulled him between two stacked bales.

The second officer shouted.

“Under,” she said.

They dropped through a gap beneath the raised loading deck. Cold mud closed around Eryth's boots. Overhead, feet hammered the planks.

“This way.”

They crawled beside the posts until they reached the drainage cut behind the sack shed. She went first, dragging her work bundle. Eryth followed with Aetherium held flat against his back to keep the sheath from catching.

Behind them, the first officer was still calling for someone to secure the damaged cart before he could release it.

They came out among reeds beyond the ferry yard. The woman led Eryth along a footpath beneath the embankment, turning twice before she stopped.

“You could have stayed down,” she said.

“He was trapped.”

“Now they'll remember my hands on your sleeve.”

Eryth had no defense against that.

“I'm sorry.”

She looked toward the yard. “Be useful instead.”

Her bundle contained strips of linen, a small pot of ointment, bread, and the tools of her work. She divided the supplies, gave half to Eryth, and kept her knife.

“I'll go to Elen. You won't lead anyone there by following me.”

“Wait. The other person he brought out.”

The woman went very still.

“Did he tell you a name?”

“No.”

“Good.”

“Maren.”

She caught his forearm hard enough to hurt.

“That name is dead here.”

He lowered his voice. “I need to know what happened before my father went to the river.”

“And I need someone alive tomorrow who was alive this morning.”

She released him.

“His name was Tavin. He works at the old drying kilns north of the ferry, using another name. He mended record plates in the Quiet House. He knows how they were altered and which marks were added afterward.”

“They'll be looking for him.”

“They were asking after kiln workers yesterday. He thought it was a tally for grain duty. Elen would have warned us if he could.”

She looked again at Eryth's exposed robe.

“You want my memories. Bring Tavin somewhere he can keep his. Then I'll tell you everything I actually saw.”

“If I can't get him out?”

“Then help him survive where he is. I am asking for a man, not a performance.”

Eryth thought of Elen waiting beneath the weighhouse floor. He thought of his brother waiting beneath the first pillar. Every person he had promised to return to now required him to leave someone else.

“How will I know him?”

“He can't close his right hand. He works with a strap around his wrist. Ask whether a broken plate can still hold its first impression.”

“What will he say?”

“That depends how much he thinks you deserve to know.”

She pointed toward the low ground beyond the reeds.

“Go north. I'll take the long way to Elen.”

Eryth gave her the filled flask. She took it without thanking him, then loosened the sack cord so she could carry it beside the ointment.

“And my father?”

Her expression changed, but she did not give him an answer merely because he had asked with grief in his voice.

“Keep the living man first.”

Then she walked away, carrying what remained of her old profession beneath a sack mender's cloth.

PART 4 OF 5

The Man Inside the Line

Kael

The officer arrived before midday with three armed escorts and a seal that gleamed as though it had never been held in a frightened hand.

None of the four wore the Halo Guard's marks. The captain came down from the ridge to meet them and spoke sharply to the officer before he approached the clearing.

He listened without agreeing to anything I could see.

“Vaelin,” he called. “You are required to surrender withdrawn archive material and present yourself for examination.”

She stood beside me. Getting upright took longer than she wanted him to notice.

“I request an open examination,” she said. “With witnesses from outside the archive.”

“You may enter that request when you arrive.”

“Then enter it now.”

His eyes moved to me.

“You are sheltering a person sought under Council authority.”

“She can leave if she chooses.”

“Can she?”

“Ask her.”

Vaelin looked at me once before she answered him.

“I'm not going into a closed room with your people.”

The officer unfolded the warrant. He read the charge and the name of the archive office that had issued it. It accused Vaelin of removing records under lawful withdrawal, damaging archive property, and striking an attendant. It did not mention the furnace.

I could have answered him with the original river report.

I left it between the boards of my Doctrine.

“Stay behind the marked gap,” I said. “The stones will hold anything that crosses.”

One escort glanced at the plates. He was a broad-faced man with a poorly repaired cuff. His sword remained in its sheath. The man beside him carried a forked warding staff.

The officer looked at the captain.

“You permit a hostile working to remain?”

“The outer severing is paused by Seradin's terms,” she said. “Your warrant does not authorize you to disturb the foundations.”

“It authorizes me to recover what is being concealed.”

“Then hear her request and return for instructions.”

“You have already allowed one Dawn Monk to remove a retained witness. I suggest you consider what further hesitation will look like.”

The words struck harder than the warrant.

Eryth had found him.

That was all I knew. I did not know whether Elen was free, hurt, dying, or already taken again. Hope arrived with so many conditions that I almost mistook it for anger.

“Where is my brother?”

“He will be required to answer for his conduct.”

“Where?”

The officer nodded to the man with the staff.

“Clear the working.”

“Don't,” the captain said.

The staff struck across the inner blood boundary and landed between the first two plates. Its fork pried one edge upward. The silver thread stretched, held for a moment, and went dark.

The officer moved forward. His broad-faced escort followed, then stepped around him, one hand extended toward Vaelin.

I fed the two remaining branches.

Black loops rose from the other two plates. The officer stopped in time. The escort did not.

The first loop caught his ankle. The second closed above his knee, drawing him sideways into the scar. He fell with both hands spread, and the little warmth stored in the plates rushed out through the binding.

The man cried out.

Vaelin moved toward the exposed wooden break.

“Wait,” I said.

“He's held.”

“I can see that.”

The staff bearer thrust again. A black thread caught the fork and pulled it down. I felt the impact behind my ribs. The world narrowed to the stones, the trapped man, and the next breath I could not afford to spend.

The captain seized the staff bearer by the back of his collar and dragged him away from the line.

“Enough.”

He tried to turn on her. She put her blade against his wrist without breaking the skin.

“Drop it.”

The staff fell.

For several heartbeats, no one moved.

The trapped man's breathing was loud. He had not drawn his sword. I saw him look down at it as though discovering that it might explain what was happening to him.

“I'll put it away,” he said.

“It's already away,” Vaelin told him. “Keep your hands where they are.”

She looked at me.

“Open the break.”

The officer began to speak. The captain cut him off.

“You will withdraw to the ridge. All of you. I'll recover your man.”

“You have no authority to dismiss this warrant.”

“I have authority over an unstable magical perimeter you were warned not to breach. You can argue about it after he is out.”

The escort outside the line called to the man on the ground.

“Berrin. Don't pull against it.”

Berrin nodded. Rainwater ran from his hair across one cheek. He looked at me with an effort at composure that made him seem much younger than he had while approaching.

“I'm not fighting you,” he said.

The captain waited until the officer and his remaining escorts had begun moving back. Then she laid her own blade on the ground.

“Kael. Release him. I will take him out. No one else crosses.”

She had given me what I would have called victory an hour earlier.

Vaelin reached for the wedge.

I caught her wrist.

Her injured hand opened with a gasp. I could have released her then. I could have apologized, opened the contact, and watched the captain lead Berrin away. The defense had worked. The men were retreating. No attack required another answer.

I knew all of that.

I also knew the plates would be empty when they returned.

The Tower would keep taking from me. Tomorrow there would be another order, another staff, another man whose strength had not been spent holding a ruin together. I could survive each encounter by spending myself until nothing remained for the work I wanted to do.

Or I could stop making myself the only available cost.

Berrin shifted on the stones. Beneath him, a fine root touched the warmth of his leg.

I felt the possibility before I gave it permission.

Vaelin saw my face.

“No.”

I let go of her wrist and put my palm against the second plate.

“Whatever you're thinking,” she said, “he has surrendered.”

“I heard him.”

The root waited. It had not yet begun to feed. My boundary forbade anything beyond the scar from nourishing these foundations. Berrin was inside it. The law I had written left his body available.

It was my law.

I gave the binding a new instruction. Take strength from what it held. Keep that strength within the plates.

The silver thread darkened.

Berrin's breath caught. His hands clawed once against the wet stone, then flattened again as he tried to show me he was obeying.

“Please,” he said. “My hands are empty.”

Warmth entered the defense. The first broken branch lit from the far side. I felt no healing in my own arm, no sudden relief from the bond at my ribs. The strength was going where I had directed it. Into the work.

Vaelin kicked the exposed wedge clear.

One loop failed. Berrin's knee came free.

I lifted the loose stone bridge back against its contact and held it there.

She struck at it with the short stick. I caught the blow on my forearm and kept the bridge raised. Pain flashed white. I did not let it fall.

The captain crossed the blood boundary.

She came without her sword, reaching for Berrin's outstretched hand. A loop caught the edge of her cloak. She tore free of it and fell to one knee beside him. She pulled at his shoulders, trying to drag him clear. The binding tightened. He cried out, and she stopped pulling before the force could break his leg.

“Let him go.”

I could still do it.

I could feel that too: the remaining warmth, the thin labor of his heart, the narrowing interval in which my choice could become something less than what it was becoming.

He had ceased to look at the captain. He was watching me.

The captain left his shoulders and lunged toward my hand. A recharged loop snapped across her path. She caught its edge on her torn cloak, wrenched free, and turned to come around the plates. On the ridge, the men began to run.

I kept the contact closed.

The pulse against my palm slowed.

Vaelin said my name once, very quietly.

Then the borrowed warmth settled into the stones, and Berrin stopped trying to breathe.

PART 5 OF 5

What I Chose to Keep

Kael

The captain pressed her fingers beneath his jaw.

She waited longer than I needed her to.

When she looked up, there was no confusion in her face. She had watched the same thing I had done.

“Open it.”

The binding still held his ankle. I removed my hand from the contact, and the last loop fell away.

She dragged him clear of the marked passage. The escort who had called his name came down from the ridge and helped her carry him outside the blood boundary. They laid him on the wet grass that my Tower was forbidden to consume.

Vaelin stood beside the disconnected plate. She held her injured wrist against her chest.

“Did it make you?” she asked.

“No.”

“Did you lose the way to stop it?”

“No.”

She looked at the blood beneath my palm.

“Then don't ever tell me this was the price of saving us.”

I had been preparing those words. She had heard them before I spoke.

The officer returned to the edge of the clearing, pale with the effort of recovering his authority.

“The outer intervals will be closed.”

The captain rose beside the body.

“You will report what happened. You will not touch those markers without the people who know what closing them will do.”

“You saw him.”

“I saw you order men across a warned boundary. I saw them withdraw. I saw Berrin surrender. I saw Kael kill him after there was no immediate threat.”

Each sentence stood without sheltering the next.

The officer looked away first.

I wanted to hate her for the accuracy. It would have been easier if she had called me a beast and reached for a seal.

Instead she knelt to help the surviving escorts wrap Berrin in the cloak he had worn into the clearing.

The plates shone dimly beside me.

A life had not filled them without limit. One stone was cracked. Another leaked a thin silver vapor where the staff had struck it. Already, the held warmth was beginning to diminish.

That did not horrify me as it should have.

It made me see the repairs that were needed.

Vaelin followed my gaze.

“You're looking at the wall.”

“Yes.”

“Look at him.”

I did.

Berrin's repaired cuff had come loose. The escort trying to wrap him stopped to pull the cloth back over his hand, a useless tenderness I could not dismiss as obedience.

I knew then that I would remember it. There would be no convenient blank where the man had been, no foreign voice to which I could assign the movement of my hand. I had understood his surrender. I had watched a safe way out remain open and chosen what his death could give me.

The old fear had told me that darkness might turn me into someone I did not recognize.

I recognized myself.

“You can leave,” I told Vaelin.

Her face tightened. “Can I cross?”

I pulled the second contact apart and showed her the dead gap between the stones.

“Yes.”

“And when you close it again?”

“Wait until I open it.”

“Listen to yourself.”

I had begun to. That was what frightened her.

The captain called from beyond the boundary.

“Vaelin. If you want to come out, I will witness your surrender. The examination can wait until your injuries are treated.”

Vaelin did not answer at once. The offer was imperfect. It was also real.

She limped to the marked gap, testing the unbound ground with her good foot. I kept my hands away from both contacts. She crossed far enough to stand outside the little defense, but remained within the wider blood line.

Then she turned toward the core.

“There is something under those stairs,” she told the captain. “I don't know what it is. You have people on the ridge who can watch him. You have no one who has watched that door from this side.”

“That isn't a reason to remain alone with him.”

“It is a reason not to walk away without telling you.”

The captain looked at the buried stair and then at me.

“I will send for someone who can hear you without making a bargain of it.”

Vaelin nodded once. She did not return to my side. She sat on an ordinary stone near the line, facing the rubble, close enough to the outside that her next step could take her there.

I had wanted a follower. I had acquired a witness I could no longer mistake for one.

The men carried Berrin up the slope. The captain went with them, leaving the northern lamp burning and the remaining guards in sight. She would have to report to Seradin. My brother would hear, if he had not already become unreachable. There would be accounts of this day that I could not control.

I brought out my Doctrine.

The original river report remained between its boards. I checked the dry fold without opening the living page beneath it. Elen had been removed from the Quiet House; nothing the officer said proved he was safe. The evidence would remain concealed.

Keeping that promise did not make the other thing smaller.

On a clean leaf, in ordinary ink, I wrote Berrin's name as I had heard it. I recorded his surrender. I recorded the captain's offer to take him out, and the instruction I had given after it.

Vaelin watched from the line.

“What are you doing?”

“Keeping the account.”

“That won't return anything.”

“I know.”

There was no courage in refusing to hide the act once I had decided to keep its profit. Honesty did nothing for the man on the ridge. It merely denied me a softer story about myself.

I wrote the final sentence without ornament.

I killed him after he surrendered because I wanted the strength his death would leave here.

The ink dried slowly in the damp air.

For years, I had demanded the truth about my father as though learning it would tell me what kind of man I was allowed to become. If he had been betrayed, I could avenge him. If he had chosen the river, I could condemn him. Every possible answer placed the beginning of my life in someone else's hands.

Whatever Rhydian had done, this decision was mine.

I did not decide that darkness was good. I decided that what it let me do mattered more than the lives that might stand between me and the work. I would learn its hungers, set limits where limits served me, and cross them when they did not. I would not spend the rest of my life calling each chosen cruelty an accident on the way back to the light.

There would be no return.

The thought did not heal me. My forearm throbbed. I was cold, exhausted, and sick when I looked too long at the darkened place where Berrin had lain. I accepted those things without mistaking them for a command to stop.

Vaelin heard me move and looked up.

I dragged the cracked plate away from the contact. The working failed where it should fail. The other stones retained enough of the stolen warmth for another binding, perhaps two if I narrowed the passage. I would have to test the loss before I trusted it.

“Leave the break where I can reach it,” she said.

I considered that.

Then I began laying its new feed toward my side of the core.

The first pillar stood against the clearing sky. Its shadow lay beside the shape of the pillar I had lost. The stair beneath them remained buried, and whatever waited beyond it had offered me no counsel, no command, no excuse.

I closed the book and began strengthening the gate.

CHAPTER 11

The First Seal

PART 1 OF 5

The Plate That Would Not Forget

Eryth

At the drying kilns, the workers had stopped pretending the riders were interested in grain.

Two horses stood beneath the weighing arch. An officer waited beside the account table while the kiln master called names from a list. Each worker answered, showed both hands, and moved into the yard. Nobody was permitted to leave.

Eryth watched from behind the empty fuel shed.

The man he wanted stood at the end of the drying gallery, fastening a hammer to a leather strap around his right wrist. His fingers remained curved when he tightened it. The motion was practiced and impatient.

There was no reason for a grain worker to be preparing a hammer beside a flat black plate.

Eryth entered through the shed's missing back wall.

The man heard him and turned, lifting the hammer.

“Can a broken plate still hold its first impression?” Eryth asked.

“Who sent you?”

“The sack mender.”

“Then you know the wrong name for me.”

“I haven't used one.”

The man looked at the dawn marks on Eryth's torn robe.

“She sent a monk.”

“She sent someone who could walk here. Elen is out of the Quiet House.”

The hammer lowered an inch.

“Alive?”

“Yes.”

“Then why are they here?”

“Because he wouldn't tell them where you were. A mistake in an old receipt gave them somewhere to begin.”

Tavin looked toward the yard. The kiln master called another name. A woman answered too quickly.

“They'll close this place if I run,” he said. “Most of those people are paid at the end of the week. They don't have another week to give away.”

“What does the plate contain?”

“Enough to tell them I was somewhere I'm supposed to have died.”

“Breaking it won't make you safer if the pieces still answer.”

Tavin gave him a hard, astonished look.

“Who taught you that?”

“Someone whose mistakes have become difficult to stop.”

The man unfastened the hammer and set it down. The plate beneath it was old, its surface crossed by two different arrangements of pale grooves. One had been cut over the other. Along its edge, small sealed compartments held grains of luminous dust.

“It isn't a list,” Tavin said. “I never kept their names. It's a maintenance record. Routes between the house's old listening rooms and the places their workings came from. They told me to grind out one route and enter a different one.”

“Did you?”

“I made it look as though I had.”

Footsteps crossed the gallery.

Tavin covered the plate with a sack. A young worker appeared between the racks, saw Eryth, and stopped.

“They're calling for you,” she told Tavin.

“Tell them I'm coming.”

Her gaze moved to the hammer and the hidden plate. “What have you done?”

Before he could answer, the officer entered behind her.

He recognized Eryth at once.

“Away from the table.”

“The plate is charged,” Tavin said. “Don't touch the edge.”

The officer pulled the sack free.

The plate slid across the table. One sealed compartment struck the hammer and cracked.

A grain of green light fell into the drying floor.

The rack nearest them lifted.

For a breath it hung above its supports, heavy with wet grain. Then every iron fitting along one side tore toward the grain in the floor. The rack twisted. Its upper frame struck a beam and brought a shower of plaster down over the young worker.

Eryth caught her sleeve and pulled her beneath the table.

The officer fell backward into the next aisle. Tavin seized the plate with his good hand, holding the broken compartment upward to keep the remaining dust from spilling.

“What is it?” Eryth shouted.

“A field sample. From the Crystal Caves.”

“Stop it.”

“I don't have the seal that kept it quiet.”

The floor buckled around the luminous grain. It had not grown larger. Its pull had.

Eryth reached for Aetherium. The sword dragged sideways against its sheath, wrenching his injured shoulder. He let the hilt go before the force could pull him into the rack.

“No iron,” Tavin said. “Get everyone away from the fittings.”

The young worker crawled toward the stairs. Eryth followed far enough to push the fallen officer clear of a sliding bracket. The man tried to stand and was dragged back by the buckle at his belt.

“Unfasten it.”

“My leg.”

“Your belt first.”

Eryth used his right hand to free the buckle. The belt snapped across the floor. The officer scrambled away without it.

Below the gallery, people were shouting. One of the supports had begun to bend. If the upper racks fell, they would go through the lower room where the workers were gathering.

Tavin knelt beside the broken compartment, trying to press its cover back into place.

“Leave the plate,” Eryth said.

“It has the pattern for the seal.”

“Can you use it?”

“Not before the beam goes.”

“Then tell me where to stand.”

Tavin looked at him, then at the two nearest supports.

“Between those. If your light can bear weight.”

“For a little while.”

Eryth planted his feet and brought his right palm upward.

Dawnfire spread beneath the sagging beam, thin and blue at its edges. The wood settled against it. Pain drove through his shoulder, down his spine, into the heels braced against the floor. The light would not make the beam weightless. It only gave the weight somewhere else to go.

“Now,” he said.

Tavin shouted down the stair for everyone to clear the lower room. The officer helped the young worker guide them toward the yard. For once, the order being passed from mouth to mouth did not require anyone's name.

The plate slipped from Tavin's hand.

He caught it against his chest with the damaged wrist and made a sound Eryth wished he had not heard. Then he crawled beneath the beam and carried the remaining field samples down the stairs.

“Last one,” someone called from below.

Eryth lowered his hand.

The beam dropped. He threw himself toward the stair as the drying rack folded into the empty room beneath it. A sheet of green sparks rose through the broken floor, then dwindled as the spilled grain spent its charge pulling iron into a useless knot.

Hands caught him at the bottom of the stairs.

The Halo captain lowered him onto the yard stones.

He tried to explain before he could breathe.

“The people inside.”

“They're out.”

“Tavin.”

“The man with the plate is sitting over there. Your friend at the ferry made you easier to follow than you intended.”

She looked at the blood spreading beneath his shoulder binding.

“You are very late with your report.”

PART 2 OF 5

Borrowed Dawn

Kael

They sent light into the scar because they no longer trusted a man to walk there.

The working floated above the northern approach, a little cage of gold held around a white center. The warders on the ridge guided it with two rods. It paused beyond my blood-written boundary, turning slowly as though considering the best place to look.

Vaelin rose from her stone.

“An inspection lattice,” she said. “It maps the movement of a charged foundation.”

“Does it carry a voice?”

“Some do.”

“Then let them listen.”

I had repaired one plate and abandoned another. The strength taken from Berrin remained finite. Every brightening in the stone reminded me that a man had been reduced to something I could measure by its loss.

I moved the usable plate beneath the lattice's likely path.

Vaelin watched me do it.

“If you interfere with that, they'll call it an attack.”

“They already watched me commit one.”

“Yes.”

She gave me no quarrel to hide inside.

The lattice crossed the boundary. Its golden lines tightened around the white center. A thread still connected it to the rods beyond the ridge, but nothing reached from the light into the foundations. My prohibition held. The outside could send a working into the scar; the Tower could not feed from its distant source.

I let it come closer.

A pale image formed within the cage. It showed the core, the fallen pillar, a simplified pattern of the roots. The lattice was reading what I had made.

“Kael,” a voice said from inside the light. I did not recognize it. “Remain clear of the instrument.”

I placed a folded scrap from my Doctrine beneath the first contact.

The lattice bent toward the writing.

Vaelin took a step back. She had understood what I was offering it: something apparently loose enough to examine without touching the core.

I closed the plate's feed.

Black loops rose through the golden cage. They caught its lower corners and held. The thread running to the ridge snapped straight.

“Release the instrument.”

I felt my blood-written boundary reject the first attempt to draw through it. Pain struck the sigil at my wrist. The lattice flared, and the plate beneath my palm began to split.

I could have widened the law. I could have let the Tower reach for the men holding the rods.

Instead I used the light's own tension.

“Take it back,” I called to the ridge.

The warders pulled.

The cage strained against the black loops. Its upper joint whitened. I pressed the trapped lower corners farther apart, spending the last useful reserve in the repaired plate.

The joint broke.

A flash ran outward along the guiding thread. The rods went dark. Inside the boundary, a broken cage of gold remained in my binding, bright for an instant with energy that no longer had a path home.

I opened the feed before the splitting plate could burst.

The black loop failed. I caught the falling cage against the half-light, half-shadow relic set within the core.

The impact threw me to my knees.

For a moment, I saw the clearing through two arrangements of distance. The ridge stood very far away. Then it was close enough that I could count the knuckles on a warder's hand. The relic steadied, holding the captured light in one of its shallow fractures.

It was not much. Most of the inspection working had fled back to its makers. What remained was a wounded knot of dawnfire, losing brightness with each breath.

Vaelin stayed beyond the little defense.

“You have a piece,” she said. “You haven't taken the skill of the person who made it.”

“Then I'll learn from the piece.”

“And if it fails before you understand it?”

I looked at the men lowering their useless rods.

“They know how to make another.”

Her expression changed. She had heard the intention in that answer.

I wrapped the fracture with a thin path of Darklight. Too tightly, and the captured gold dimmed. Too loosely, and it bled into the air. I eased the pressure until the two currents turned together without merging.

A broken ring of light and shadow formed above the relic.

It lasted no longer than a held breath.

Then one end collapsed, cutting a fresh line across my palm.

I stared at the blood, then at the open circle that remained in my sight after the light had gone.

A crown did not need to make every force it ruled. It could hold them in relation. Give each working a place, require them to answer through the same center.

I took up my ordinary pen and drew the broken circle before I forgot its proportions.

At the top of the page, I wrote the name of the thing I meant to make.

Darklight Halo.

Vaelin read it from where she stood.

“You haven't made that.”

“No.”

The surviving gold glimmered in the relic's fracture.

“I've found what I need to steal.”

PART 3 OF 5

What the Living Remembered

Eryth

The captain waited until the kiln workers had begun counting one another before she spoke of Berrin.

She gave Eryth the man's name first.

Then she told him what had happened at the Tower, in the same plain order in which she had seen it. The warrant. The warned crossing. The failed attempt to clear Kael's binding. The withdrawal and surrender.

Eryth looked at her hands while she spoke. There was dried blood beside one nail. It might have been his own. He could not ask.

“Was the working out of control?”

“Vaelin opened its break. Your brother closed it again.”

“He may have thought you were still attacking.”

The captain held his gaze.

“I laid down my sword. I offered to take Berrin out. He heard me.”

The yard sounds seemed to move farther away.

“And then?”

“Then he chose to keep taking from him.”

Eryth bent forward. His good hand closed around a small stone on the ground, not because he wanted to throw it, but because the pressure gave him somewhere to put the first impossible moment.

The captain did not tell him that his brother had always been this man. She did not need to. He remembered the boy who had held his wrist at the river. The same memory that had once explained every cruelty now refused to explain this one.

“Vaelin is alive?”

“Yes. She opposed him. She's still near the boundary, watching the buried stair.”

“You left her there?”

“I offered her a way out. She remains able to take it. I left my company watching while I followed the report from the ferry.”

Eryth looked toward the road that led back to the scar.

He wanted to go at once. To demand an account from Kael, to hear something the captain had missed, to find the smallest possible difference between the act she described and the brother he remembered.

Tavin sat a few paces away, cradling his damaged hand. The young kiln worker was wrapping it while he tried to tell her he could do it himself.

Eryth released the stone.

“This man needs protection.”

“So do you.”

“I'm asking for him first.”

The captain drew a folded message from beneath her breastplate.

“Myrrh has required a review of the Quiet House examination. Until it is heard, the archive office is not to question the relevant witnesses alone.”

“That could mean another locked room.”

“It could, if no one insists on the rest of the order.”

She showed him the lower lines. Testimony could be taken away from the temple, with independent witnesses present. The place was to be agreed, not imposed. It did not clear Eryth of removing Elen. It did not promise that the Council would believe him.

It gave the living a little space in which to speak.

“Ilyra?” he asked.

“Her account reached Myrrh with your request. She has been relieved of her night duty pending the review. She is alive.”

Eryth closed his eyes briefly.

The captain let him read the message again before she folded it.

“I won't ask you where the scribe is hiding. I will ask that someone come to the ferry court tomorrow to agree on a place.”

“You will stop the road watch from taking Tavin?”

“I will put him under this review before they enter him under a different order.”

She went to the account table herself. Eryth watched her write the instruction and require the officer to acknowledge it in front of the kiln master and the workers whose lives had just been threatened by the broken sample.

That afternoon, Eryth brought Tavin to the weighhouse.

Maren was already there. She had cleaned Elen's wound, changed his bandage, and found a position in which his leg did not have to bear its own weight. The scribe was asleep, breathing evenly.

She looked at Tavin's hand and then at Eryth.

“Alive,” she said.

“And under a witnessed protection order. It isn't permanent safety.”

“There isn't any.”

She made room against the wall.

Only after Tavin had drunk and eaten did she begin telling Eryth what she remembered.

Rhydian had arrived at the Quiet House three nights before the river, as Elen had said. He had come without a temple escort. Maren had taken his wet cloak and admitted him to the closed court. The other visitor was already inside.

“You saw that man?” Eryth asked.

“From behind. Gray sleeves. No Council colors. He kept one hand inside his robe when your father entered. I don't know whether he was hurt or hiding something.”

“And their conversation?”

“I told Elen the truth. I wasn't in the room.”

She rested her hands on her knees.

“Afterward, your father asked whether the house still kept its old field samples. I said those were in the repair store. He asked who knew how to read a seal without waking what it contained.”

Tavin looked up.

“That would have been my master,” he said. “Before I had the work.”

“Did Father speak to him?”

“I don't know. I wasn't there that night.”

Maren went on. Rhydian had asked her to leave a message for the keeper of the store: do not destroy a damaged seal merely because the account attached to it has been corrected.

She had remembered because the instruction sounded more suited to a book than to a ward.

“Did he sound frightened?” Eryth asked.

“He sounded tired. I could make that into fear for you. It wouldn't make the memory better.”

Eryth accepted the rebuke.

Tavin unwrapped the plate he had saved from the gallery. One compartment was broken and empty. The others still held their minute lights.

“These are Akashic elemental atoms,” he said. “That's what the old accounts call the grains. Smallest seeds of a working's nature. Weight. Heat. Motion. Things we learn to use long before we learn to separate them.”

He touched a sealed compartment without opening it.

“The record can remember where a sample came from. Sometimes more than the person writing the record intended.”

Eryth thought of Kael's living page. “Sometimes it can tell a lie in a familiar hand.”

“Then you ask it something you can check.”

They began with the empty compartment. Tavin showed him the overcut route, then turned the plate so light from the vent ran across the older grooves beneath it. Eryth steadied his breathing and let a faint line of dawnfire touch the rim.

Images moved behind his eyes: green crystal, iron filings rising, a hand resealing the little cavity. He withdrew the light before the scene could become a voice.

“Crystal Caves,” he said.

Tavin nodded. “That part matches the old entry.”

“Who was the hand?”

“We haven't checked that part.”

They called the method Akashic divination in the old account: reading the traces held by a thing, then testing what the reading offered against what could be known. A later mark could obscure an earlier one. Desire could supply a face that the plate had never contained.

Eryth tried again only after he had written down what the first attempt had cost him: a tremor in his right hand, pain behind one eye, and the temptation to search for his father in every shadow.

The second reading showed an inventory recess deep in the caves. A long wooden object rested in it, plain except for empty seal beds along its grain.

Tavin found the corresponding entry beneath the correction.

An unfinished waystaff. Ancient even when the inventory had been cut. Withdrawn from use until its elemental seals could be brought into agreement.

“Can it open a path between realms?” Eryth asked.

“That's what it was meant to do.”

“And close one?”

“Not if the person finishing it learns only the opening.”

Eryth looked at the route to the Crystal Caves.

For the first time that day, he had a reason to leave that was not another attempt to reach his brother before the damage became real.

He stayed two nights at the weighhouse. An independent bonesetter came after Maren vouched for her. A meeting was arranged under Myrrh's order at the ferry master's store, with the kiln master and two river workers present. Elen chose to give his account there. Tavin and Maren chose to stand beside him.

Before Eryth left, he carried a plain note to the captain for Vaelin. It gave no hiding place. It said that Elen was alive, the witnesses had obtained a public hearing, and no one should be sent alone into an archive room. He said he was following a route found in an old record, without naming its destination. He asked Vaelin to preserve her copy of the river evidence until she could place it with witnesses she trusted.

Eryth's shoulder remained stiff. He could lift his left arm no higher than his chest. He left with fresh dressings, a new flask, and Tavin's copied route.

Tavin insisted on going as far as the cave mouth.

“You need someone who knows what the grooves mean,” he said.

“You just escaped being used for that.”

“Then let me decide what my work is for.”

PART 4 OF 5

One Mouth for the Stars

Kael

The stolen light survived three days because I spent those days doing almost nothing else.

I slept beside the core, waking when the gold began to slip out of relation with the dark. I learned how little pressure it needed to remain confined and how quickly confinement became suffocation. Twice I nearly lost it. Once the recoil split the nail of my smallest finger without leaving a mark on the stone.

Vaelin would not touch the working.

She remained near the boundary until the captain returned with a message and someone from Myrrh's review. They spoke where I could see them. I could not hear every word.

Afterward, Vaelin told me only what my brother had permitted to travel.

“Elen is alive. There will be witnesses when he speaks.”

“Where?”

“That wasn't in the note.”

“And Eryth?”

“Following something he found.”

She did not offer to bring him back to me.

I kept the original river report. Vaelin took one ordinary copy to the reviewer outside the line, with a written account of where she had found it. She returned without asking my approval. I did not try to stop her. The Council's lie might yet cost it something useful to me.

The living page remained closed. I had begun to distrust any answer that arrived before I had learned the question.

Instead, I worked from the threshold forms I had copied into my Doctrine after the Vestige Chamber. They did not tell me how to make a crown. They gave me several incompatible ways to hold an opening in place.

Most required a source I did not possess.

The captured Council light supplied one missing relation: a working could hold a shape apart from the hands that had made it, provided something else kept its edges from escaping.

I worked around the relic where it remained embedded in the core between the two foundations. The first pillar stood above it. The second remained broken, its rubble untouched over the buried stair. I built no third support. I used a loose shallow basin to mark the place where the receiving aperture would be held.

One opening. Here, in this world.

The dream of a crown had shown me its limitation. A ring made from the energies of one scar would know only that scar's hungers. I wanted the elemental natures of distant worlds: the weight that gathered stone beneath a cold star, the heat that lived without a sun, the movement of a sky with no ground beneath it.

Akashic elemental shards, each carrying a concentration of those deeper atoms. Not enough to empty a world. Enough to bring its rule into a circle I could command.

I would not scatter receiving gates across the land and trust them to agree. Every shard would pass through the same portal into the same basin. The opening would close between alignments. Then I would turn its reach toward the next source without opening a second portal, here or at the source. Distant material would be drawn along that alignment into this one aperture. I was not building a road that travelers could enter from either end.

I drew that restriction before I drew the crown.

Vaelin read the diagram when she came to check the stair's supports.

“How do you know where those things are?”

“I don't. Not all of them.”

“What tells you whether a source can survive what you take?”

“That isn't what the diagram measures.”

She set down the stick she used for walking.

“You understand that's an answer.”

“Yes.”

The first alignment came from the relic. When the captured gold crossed its dark half at a particular angle, I saw a field of drifting mineral fragments against a starless depth. The image returned each time I reproduced the angle. It might have been memory. It might have been a view. I could not yet tell.

I opened the aperture no wider than my palm.

Cold pressed upward through the basin. The gold tried to spread. Darklight caught its edges, holding one trembling oval in the air. Beyond it, a pale fragment turned slowly through darkness.

I had left the means of collapse within reach of my own knee. I had learned that much.

The fragment moved toward the opening.

Everything metal on the platform moved toward it.

My knife scraped across the stone. A loose buckle struck the basin. The exposed roots bent, not growing, only yielding to a weight that seemed to have found a new direction.

“Close it,” Vaelin said.

I tightened the receiving boundary.

The fragment stopped at the mouth. Its edges shone with tiny moving signs. It was larger than the aperture now, though it had not looked large a moment earlier.

I had mistaken its distance.

The first pillar groaned.

I broke the alignment before I could decide to be brave about a calculation I had not made.

The oval collapsed. The fragment vanished with it. My knife fell flat. I struck the edge of the basin with my cheek and lay there until the clearing stopped tilting.

Vaelin did not come through the little defense to lift me.

“One mouth,” she said. “It can still swallow too much.”

The failed passage left a single grain behind, chipped from the fragment as the aperture closed. It lay in the basin, drawing a faint silver line through the dust.

I did not touch it.

Using two ordinary stones, I guided it into a small hollow lined with the remaining captured light. The gold resisted its pull. Darklight held the gold. For several breaths, the three forces remained apart.

Then I covered the hollow with a loose cap and left a narrow vent where any escaping charge could spend itself against empty stone.

The first shard had arrived as less than a shard. A grain. A failure made small enough to keep.

It had cost most of the captive dawnfire and another day of strength I could not replace by sleeping.

I wrote down the loss. Beside it, I drew an empty interval in the future crown.

There would be many such intervals. Each source would need its own agreement with the others. One portal could gather them; it could not make them coexist merely because I demanded a circle.

I studied the sealed grain until the light faded from the trees.

Then I began calculating what the next alignment would require.

PART 5 OF 5

The Staff in the Stone

Eryth

The Crystal Caves shone before Eryth and Tavin reached the mountain.

Light moved beneath the exposed quartz seams as though the rock held a slow dawn of its own. Above them, small stones drifted in the cold air and settled again when the wind changed. The path climbed between ridges where iron-rich sand had arranged itself in long, fine combs.

Tavin stopped before the first arch.

“Anything loose and metal comes off.”

Eryth looked at Aetherium.

“Including that.”

“If we need it?”

“You won't need it dragged through your shoulder.”

They wrapped the sword and their buckles in a workcloth and hid the bundle in a dry cleft outside the entrance. Eryth disliked leaving the blade. He disliked how close that feeling came to believing he could not enter a place without carrying a way to wound it.

Inside, the cave floor moved under his first step.

Not much. A stone shifted the width of his thumb, then steadied beneath his weight. Quartz columns rose around a dark central passage. Between them hung fragments of rock, turning slowly in currents that brushed against his teeth.

Tavin kept his good hand against the wall.

“The old route follows the seams that don't shine.”

“You said you'd come as far as the mouth.”

“The mouth has more teeth than I remembered from the drawing.”

They found the inventory recess beyond the first descending passage. Its door was a flat shelf of crystal standing upright without hinges. An old mark on the floor matched the overcut groove on Tavin's plate.

Eryth knelt beside it and let his breathing settle.

He did not ask to see the finished staff. He asked what had been placed here.

The first answer was a pressure in his palm. Then an image of wood lying across stone, a ring turning above it, hands withdrawing before the two could meet.

He stopped the divination and described it aloud.

Tavin checked the mark against his copy.

“An interrupted binding,” he said. “The entry says unfinished. That agrees.”

“The hands?”

“Still unchecked.”

Eryth touched only the groove that matched the stored route.

The crystal shelf lowered into the floor.

The staff lay behind it on two ordinary wooden rests. It was longer than Eryth's arm, dark with age, its surface worn smooth in places and left rough in others. There was no jewel at its head. Empty seal beds followed the grain, so shallow that he might have mistaken them for scars in the wood.

He lifted it with both hands and nearly dropped it when his shoulder failed.

Tavin caught the lower end.

“Slowly.”

The wood was neither warm nor cold. Its emptiness felt deliberate, a capacity left unfilled rather than a thing drained of life.

Eryth turned it toward the light.

The nearest seal bed answered the grains in Tavin's closed compartments. Other beds remained dark. He could feel their differences without knowing their names: patterns too dense to separate, a whole language of elemental atoms folded into possible relations.

“All of them,” he murmured.

“What?”

“It was meant to hold a way of addressing every elemental nature. Not to pour them together.”

Tavin touched one blank bed with the tip of his wooden probe.

“A seal for what belongs here. Another for what must remain elsewhere.”

Eryth thought of the man the captain had named. He thought of his brother finding a living body inside a line and deciding that made it available.

He set the staff down before anger could become the first thing he put into it.

The floor shifted.

A deep sound rolled through the passage, too slow to be mistaken for a falling stone. Farther within the caves, two green lights opened above the height of a man.

The guardian stood among the floating fragments. Its body was a massive arrangement of dark stone, held together by forces Eryth could feel pulling at the old injury in his shoulder. As it moved, the fragments around it turned in the opposite direction.

Beyond the guardian, golden filaments drifted in a high chamber, folding over one another like cloth before a loom had learned to hold them.

Tavin saw Eryth look.

“Don't take another thing.”

“I wasn't reaching for it.”

“Good.”

The guardian lifted one arm.

The floor beneath Tavin rose at an angle. He slid toward the descending passage and caught the edge of a quartz seam with his good hand. The staff struck the stone beside Eryth's knee.

Eryth dropped flat and caught Tavin's wrist.

His left shoulder burned. The seam began to move beneath them.

“Let go of the plate,” he said.

“It's in my coat.”

“The samples.”

Tavin could not reach them without releasing his grip.

The guardian lowered its arm. Another part of the floor rose. They were not falling into a pit. They were being carried apart by stone obeying different directions.

Eryth put the unfinished staff across the widening gap. It could not hold both their weight. He did not ask it to.

He touched the nearest empty seal with a thin thread of dawnfire and reached, through the divination, for the memory of the sample he had seen in the kiln.

Weight drawn toward a point. A working with no understanding of the body it pulled.

He could command the staff to overcome it. He could fill the seal with everything he had and hope the stronger force was his.

Instead he asked where the two moving stones still agreed.

A narrow band of pale light appeared along the staff's grain.

He turned the wood until that band lay across both surfaces. The pull did not stop. For a moment, the stones moved together.

“Now, Tavin.”

The man found purchase with his foot. Eryth hauled him across, crying out as his shoulder took the weight. They rolled onto the same ledge just as the pale band went dark.

The staff struck the floor and remained whole. Tavin pulled the sample plate from his coat and laid it flat on the ledge, well away from his shaking hand.

One seal bed now held a fine, incomplete mark.

Eryth reached for it, then stopped. His hand was shaking too hard for another working.

“Did you finish it?” Tavin asked.

“No.”

“Did it do what you meant?”

“For long enough.”

The green-eyed guardian advanced one pace. Stone fragments gathered around its shoulders. It had not been defeated. Eryth had not earned the chamber behind it.

He pushed the sealed field samples away from the edge with his foot and raised his empty right hand.

“We won't break the field.”

The guardian stood still.

Tavin looked at him. “Does it understand you?”

“I don't know.”

“Then who are you promising?”

Eryth looked down at the first unfinished seal, then toward the gold drifting beyond the living stone.

“Us.”

Somewhere deeper in the mountain, a passage opened with the sound of a long-held breath being released.

The guardian did not move aside.

CHAPTER 12

The Weight of a Golden Cloud

PART 1 OF 5

Voices Below the Field

Eryth

The passage opened beyond the guardian, and a human voice came through it.

Not a word at first. A cough, followed by the scrape of something heavy being dragged over stone.

Eryth lowered his hand.

“Did you hear that?”

Tavin had already turned toward the sound. The sample plate lay between his knees. He pressed his good hand against it, making sure its little compartments remained closed.

Another voice called from the dark.

“Is someone there?”

The guardian's green eyes did not change. Its arm remained across the way to the chamber of golden filaments.

“How many of you?” Eryth called.

“Three.”

“Can you reach the passage?”

The answer was lost beneath a groan from the mountain. A shelf of quartz rose between the voices and the newly opened mouth, stopping well above the floor. Beneath it, the space fell away into pale mist.

Tavin looked at Eryth's shaking hand.

“You can't hold another floor.”

“I know.”

“Knowing hasn't stopped you yet.”

Eryth sat because standing had begun to disguise how close he was to falling. He rested the staff across his knees and let the muscles of his right hand loosen around it. The incomplete seal gave no light. Whatever he had asked of it during Tavin's rescue had ended.

Across the gap, the unseen woman called again.

“We have an injured man. The ledge is turning.”

“We're trying to reach you.”

“Then try quickly.”

He looked at the guardian.

“They're inside the field you're holding.”

The golem turned one immense shoulder. The floating fragments around it moved in answer, and the ledge beyond the gap stopped rising for a moment.

It was already keeping them alive.

Eryth watched the strain pass through its body. Small stones broke away from one elbow and circled back into place. The guardian could hold the field apart, or close it. Neither movement would build a road for people who could not survive the space between.

Behind its arm, the golden filaments drifted sideways through the same current that held the fragments aloft.

Eryth touched the edge of his torn robe. Cloth weighed almost nothing beside a body. A filament weighed less.

“Tavin. Your probe.”

“What are you going to ask it?”

“Whether the gold can carry what the stone can't.”

Tavin handed him the wooden tool.

Eryth lifted it toward the nearest thread. The guardian's arm shifted, stopping the point before it could enter the chamber.

He did not force it farther.

“I need a way across. I won't cut it out.”

The golem stood motionless. For a while, Eryth heard only the strained breathing of the people beyond the mist.

Then the guardian lowered two fingers into the drifting gold.

A single filament caught between them. It stretched toward Eryth, pale and almost weightless, trailing the faint sensation of a warm wind.

He laid the wooden probe beneath it.

The thread settled without breaking.

Tavin exhaled. “That looked less like permission than a very careful warning.”

“We'll honor both.”

They tested the filament with an empty water flask. Eryth passed a trace of light through the staff's unfinished mark, asking only for the relation he had already felt: the direction in which two things could move together.

The flask rose a hand's breadth. When he tightened his grip, it swung sharply toward the wall.

He released the pressure.

The flask dropped into Tavin's lap.

“It doesn't lift straight up,” Tavin said.

“It takes the current.”

“And the current isn't always going where you want.”

Eryth looked toward the far ledge. A gray shape had appeared at its lip: a woman's hand, gripping stone.

“We can work with that.”

He unwound the clean length of linen tied around his waist. It had been meant for his next dressing. Tavin spread it across the staff and used the wooden probe to draw the gold along its weave.

More filaments followed the first. They came reluctantly, extending from the chamber without severing, until the golem folded its fingers and divided the little bundle from the rest.

Eryth felt the loss of connection. The threads sagged.

“Now it has only what we give it,” Tavin said.

“And what it can borrow from the field.”

They worked with awkward hands. Tavin's right could hold nothing small. Eryth could not lift his left arm high enough to draw cloth over his head. They fastened the weave across his back and good shoulder, leaving the burned side as free as the bindings allowed.

Before the gold closed over the weave, Tavin fastened a broad carrying sling across Eryth's chest. It held the staff diagonally against him, clear of the cape's hem. Eryth could draw its lower end free with his right hand without lifting his injured arm.

The gold gathered at the hem. It spread over the linen in a loose, cloudlike sheet, neither fully cloth nor fully light.

Eryth stood.

The first step lifted his heel from the stone.

He caught himself against Tavin before the field could turn him sideways.

“A cloak that tries to walk before its wearer,” Tavin said.

“Help me turn.”

They tested the movement once more with a small wrapped stone tied into the lower fold. The weave carried it easily until the current reversed. Then the hem snapped downward and the linen binding pulled hard against Eryth's ribs.

He learned to turn before the reversal, not fight it afterward.

The lesson cost him a strip of skin where the cloth dragged over his collarbone.

“You can't fly wherever you please,” Tavin said.

“I only need to reach that ledge.”

“And come back.”

“And come back.”

The guardian drew one foot aside. A thin path opened around it toward the gap. It had not repaired anything. The cave still shifted, and the damaged field still pulled in conflicting directions. For several breaths at a time, however, a current ran from their shelf toward the trapped people.

Eryth waited for that interval.

Then he stepped off the stone.

The golden weave caught him under the ribs. His feet dropped, rose, and began to turn toward the empty depth. He spread his right arm and bent his knees as Tavin had told him.

The far ledge came toward him too quickly.

He struck its edge with one boot, caught a quartz projection, and dragged himself onto the shelf on his stomach.

Three people stared at him.

A broad-shouldered woman knelt beside a porter whose leg lay twisted beneath a wrapped splint. A younger worker crouched near a fallen basket, holding a rope that ended in nothing.

The woman looked at the gold moving across Eryth's back.

“Can that carry two?”

Eryth looked into the gap he had just crossed.

“We'll find out carefully.”

PART 2 OF 5

The Shortened Reach

Vaelin

Kael slept with one hand beside the portal's collapse lever.

Vaelin watched from the ordinary stone near the blood line. His fingers moved occasionally, as though he were trying to close them around something that slipped away whenever he woke.

Beyond him, the basin stood empty. The first cosmic grain remained beneath its loose cap in the small hollow. She knew where it was because Kael looked at it before he looked at the ridge whenever a sound disturbed him.

She had watched the failed alignment. She had seen the drifting fragment appear harmless until its distance changed. Kael had stopped that attempt himself. He would count it as proof that the next could be controlled.

Vaelin counted it as a warning that the next might reach someone who could not pull a lever.

She waited until his breathing deepened.

The northern binding plates were mostly dark. He had spent their charge taking the Council's light, and what remained was being guarded in the relic rather than wasted on a continuous fence. The dangerous route was marked. The western approach, where the fallen pillar needed watching, remained passable.

She rose with the walking stick beneath her left forearm, using her elbow rather than the strained wrist to bear her weight.

Her right hand had begun to heal badly. The skin pulled when she spread her fingers. She could still hold a broad object between her palm and forearm. She could not trust a narrow grip.

The tool she took was a flat chip of ordinary slate.

She stopped beside the loose fragment covering the upper stair and checked its support. The lower steps remained buried. Water had dried into pale channels across the rubble. Nothing below it moved.

That was the work Kael expected her to do.

From there, she could see the unpowered arm beside the receiving basin. It was no more than a length of stone balanced on a pin, with a sliding stop beneath its far end. During the last trial, the arm had marked how far Kael let the alignment extend before the collapse lever could catch it.

He had cut three reference lines beside it.

Vaelin did not understand the distant source. She did not need to. The stop controlled travel through a local mechanism, and she had spent years making physical limits reliable for people who preferred to call them sacred.

She knelt with her injured hand tucked against her chest.

Kael shifted in his sleep.

Vaelin held still. One of the roots clicked against the platform, a small settling sound that made her imagine the entire Tower turning its attention toward her.

It did not.

She slipped the slate beneath the stop. The first attempt moved nothing. The second sent pain through her left wrist, and she almost dropped the tool.

She changed the angle, using the heel of her hand and the weight of her shoulder.

The stop moved inward by less than the width of her smallest finger.

Enough to make the arm meet its limit early. Enough, perhaps, to close the next receiving aperture before anything large could pass.

Not enough to change where it pointed. She would not send his danger toward an unknown place and call that resistance.

She took the slate away.

The old reference line remained visible beside the stop. She pressed damp grit into the groove with the edge of her sleeve. It would not survive close inspection. It only had to survive the glance of a tired man who believed no one else dared touch his work.

Kael's eyes opened.

Vaelin turned toward the stair before he spoke.

“What moved?”

“The support is holding.”

“That isn't what I asked.”

She looked back at him. “I heard a root settle. Did you feel it?”

He lowered his gaze to the core. His hand found the collapse lever.

“Stay away from the capped hollow.”

“I have.”

For once, the truth required no effort.

He watched her rise. She had to lean against the fallen stone before her ankle would take her weight. The pain was useful in a way she hated; it made her slow retreat look like nothing more than the movement of an exhausted woman.

At the boundary, she sat again.

The slate chip lay beneath the fold of her robe. She wanted to throw it away. Instead she kept it. A fresh piece of stone appearing beside the basin might answer a question Kael had not yet thought to ask.

She had made one small change to a machine she did not fully understand.

If it worked, no one would praise it. If it failed, she might have made the clearing less safe.

She watched the old grain's cap until the first bird called beyond the ridge.

Then Kael stood and began preparing the next alignment.

PART 3 OF 5

Bring the Living Across

Eryth

The woman's name was Dessa. She repaired the cave's older field seals for the mountain settlements and had come with two workers when the lower passage began to move.

“The seal changed while we were beside it,” she said. “We lost the return shelf. The guardian caught the chamber before it folded, but it can't keep holding it this way.”

Eryth looked at the porter.

“Can he put weight on that leg?”

“No.”

“Can he keep his arms around me?”

The man answered for himself. “For longer than you can keep talking about it.”

Eryth crouched beside him. “Then you go first.”

Dessa pulled the younger worker closer and made him listen while she explained how to lift the injured man without twisting the splint. They were ordinary instructions. Eryth clung to their usefulness while the floor shifted beneath his knees.

The porter was heavier than the stone they had tested.

As soon as they reached the ledge, the golden weave sank around them. Eryth felt its threads seek the current, lose it, and catch again. His left shoulder burned where the man gripped his robe.

Across the gap, Tavin had looped a length of cloth around a quartz projection. He held the free end beneath his good arm.

“Wait for the high stones to turn,” he called.

Eryth watched the fragments above the guardian.

They turned.

He stepped out.

The current took the weave and carried them sideways rather than across. The porter gasped as the splinted leg struck Eryth's knee. Gold tightened over both their backs.

“Don't hold your breath,” Eryth said.

“Then stop giving me reasons.”

Eryth bent toward the destination shelf. The cape answered the change in weight. Its lower edge skimmed the mist, brightened, and lifted them toward Tavin's outstretched cloth.

He caught it with his right hand.

For an instant, all three men were joined by a piece of linen that began to tear.

Tavin dropped backward, using his body rather than his injured hand to pull. Eryth's boot found stone. They fell together onto the ledge, the porter still clinging to him.

The guardian brought one enormous hand down beside them. Its fingers formed a barrier between the rescued man and the shifting edge.

“It can help here,” Tavin said, breathless.

“It couldn't reach him there.”

Eryth laid the porter inside the protection of the stone fingers.

The gold on his back had thinned. He could see ordinary linen through it.

“You need to wait,” Tavin said.

“They can't.”

“Then give it something it can take without taking the rest of you.”

Eryth looked toward the high chamber. The guardian had moved its arm away from the remaining golden threads. A narrow current passed beneath them, then curled back toward the gap.

He stood within that flow and held the staff across the cape's hem.

The unfinished seal warmed against his palm. A little gold returned to the weave. It borrowed the passing force; the damaged seal below remained untouched, still failing in whatever way Dessa had come to repair.

He waited until the threads would bear their own shape again.

Then he went back.

The younger worker made the second crossing almost standing, arms locked around Eryth's waist. They struck the far shelf hard enough to send pain up Eryth's legs, but they arrived together. Tavin took the worker's wrist and pulled him behind the guardian's hand.

Only Dessa remained.

The ledge beneath her had begun to rotate.

Eryth saw her crouch low, keeping her weight near the wall. A thin line of quartz broke away beside her foot and vanished into the mist.

“I know the repair,” she called. “Don't leave me where I can't reach it.”

“I'm coming.”

He meant the promise. He did not yet know whether his body could keep it.

Tavin caught the cape's lower corner.

“The binding's tearing.”

One of the linen knots had split. Gold slid through the loosened weave in a thin stream.

The younger worker crawled forward. He unfastened the cloth belt around his waist and held it out.

“Use this.”

Tavin worked it through the damaged edge with his good hand. Eryth held still, fighting the urge to look constantly toward Dessa.

“Who taught you to knot cloth around a broken thing?” he asked.

“People who kept breaking things,” Tavin said.

The answer nearly made Eryth smile.

Then the far ledge dropped.

Dessa disappeared below its upper edge.

Eryth stepped into the current before Tavin had finished tucking the last knot. The gold caught him badly. He turned through the air, one shoulder lower than the other, and struck the tilting ledge on his side.

Pain took his breath.

Dessa had one arm hooked around a projection beneath him. He slid toward her until he could reach her sleeve.

“Can you climb?”

“If you give me something that stays still.”

The staff lay across his chest. He pushed its lower end toward her. She caught it, wedged one foot into a crack, and dragged herself up until her shoulder struck his.

“You came back,” she said.

“We're not back yet.”

The current had reversed. The cape pulled toward the far wall instead of home.

They crouched together on a ledge becoming too narrow for both of them.

Across the gap, the guardian turned its whole body. Floating stones gathered against its back. The green in its eyes dimmed as it took more of the chamber's weight.

For three breaths, the current straightened.

“Now,” Eryth said.

Dessa locked her arms around his waist. They fell into the gold.

The cape held them halfway across.

Then the repaired knot slipped.

Eryth heard cloth tear beside his ear. The gold on his left side loosened and streamed behind them. They began to turn downward.

He did not have enough strength to lift them with dawnfire.

He used what remained to hold the loose threads against his ribs, making his own robe part of the broken weave. The heat burned through cloth. Dessa cried out, then tightened her grip.

Their feet struck the guardian's outstretched fingers.

The golem lifted its hand.

Stone rose beneath them until Tavin and the younger worker could pull them onto the ledge. Eryth lay face down, unable to move his left arm. The golden weave settled across his back like a wet sail.

Dessa knelt beside him, breathing hard.

“All three,” he said.

“All three.”

He turned his head far enough to see her.

“Then tell us how to mend it.”

Dessa looked past the guardian toward the dark below.

“You don't begin at the shining ring,” she said. “That's the part everyone tries to repair. The return notch is underneath. If you fill the ring before the notch is open, you lock the wrong weight into it.”

Tavin frowned. “The old diagram marks that notch as a break.”

“Because someone copied it without understanding what it returns.”

The mountain moved again.

Dessa put a hand beneath Eryth's good elbow.

“I can show you. But we have to go together.”

PART 4 OF 5

A Heart With Chambers

Kael

The second alignment closed before I ordered it to.

For a moment, an amber flake hung on the far side of the receiving mouth. It turned slowly in a darkness threaded with red. I had chosen it because it looked smaller than the mineral fragment that had nearly torn the platform apart.

I had learned to distrust that appearance.

I had not expected the collapse arm to strike its stop while I was still measuring the pull.

The aperture folded. The amber flake vanished without crossing. No second grain lay in the basin when I looked.

I sat back on my heels and kept my hand away from the cap that held the first sample.

The remaining captive gold flickered.

Vaelin watched from the boundary.

“It closed,” she said.

“I noticed.”

“Before anything came through.”

“I noticed that too.”

I checked the receiving mark, the angle of the light in the relic, and the small distance between the basin and the core. All were where I had left them.

The stop was not.

I scraped a little damp grit from the reference line beside it. A pale scratch crossed the stone where something broad and hard had pressed against its edge.

The platform could shift. I had seen it shift. A root might have lifted the arm and let the stop settle in a new position.

I looked at Vaelin's walking stick.

She looked back at me.

“Did you move anything near the basin?”

“I checked the stair support. It is still holding.”

“That isn't an answer.”

“It's the work I came here to do.”

I could have seized her and required a different one. The thought came without shame. I did not act on it because I needed to know whether the mechanism could betray me without a hand, and hurting her would not settle that question.

I moved the stop back to its mark.

Then I disconnected the alignment arm entirely.

The next attempt would wait until I could control what happened between gathering power and spending it.

Until then, the Tower was a mouth attached to my blood. Every operation asked for more strength at the exact moment a mistake made me least able to give it. The old crystal heart could draw, remember, and grow. It could not distinguish a useful reserve from a hunger that happened to find something living.

I needed another kind of core around it.

Not a replacement for the relic. Its roots remained embedded in the scar, joined to the foundations and to the ache behind my ribs. I could not lift it out without undoing more than I understood.

I could give its force somewhere to wait.

I drew three chambers around the heart in ordinary charcoal. One to receive a charge. One to hold it apart from the roots. One to release only what the next working could bear.

The first attempt joined all three too closely.

The stored warmth ran straight through the holding chamber and returned to the roots. A silver vein climbed the side of the first pillar. I broke the feed before it could begin another growth, and the effort left me retching beside the basin.

Vaelin did not call it progress.

Neither did I.

I spent the rest of the day shaping the channels from loose pieces of the fallen stone. I moved nothing that sealed the stair. The work was slow. My right hand could hold a broad piece, but the old cuts opened whenever I pressed a narrow edge. I learned to brace the stones against my knee and hated every small concession my body required.

The second holding chamber had an empty space around it.

I used the surviving mineral grain to set a direction through that space, without letting it touch the captured gold. Its pull gave the circulating force something to turn around. It supplied no fuel. When I stopped feeding the loop, the loop slowed and died.

That failure pleased me more than the first brightness had.

Something that could run out could be measured.

I made the release gap narrower. I put the vent against a dead piece of stone, where overflow would spend itself without reaching the forest or the buried door. I placed the charge break within the hollow of the new casing, where it could not be nudged by a passing stick.

By nightfall, the shell around the root-heart looked like a broken bowl divided by black ridges.

It was ugly. The first true piece of machinery in my Tower usually has more grace in the stories people tell of it.

I put my palm against the receiving chamber.

Cold entered my wrist. I let it take a little of me and shut the feed before the trembling began. The holding chamber brightened. A thin path of Darklight traveled around the mineral grain and returned to its beginning.

For several breaths, it continued without taking anything more from my hand.

Vaelin rose.

“What have you changed?”

“I can keep a charge separate from the roots.”

“For how long?”

“We're finding out.”

I opened the release gap toward one of the remaining defensive plates.

A loop rose from it, no wider than my fist.

I took my hand away from the receiving chamber.

The loop remained.

One breath. Another. The holding chamber dimmed by a visible degree. On the sixth breath, the light drained, and the loop fell harmlessly into the stone.

The root-heart still pulled at my ribs. I had not freed myself from it. I had made one working that did not need to take its whole cost from me while it ran.

I looked at the dark little bowl and saw what it could become.

A power core for the Darklight Tower. A place to store what I captured, a governor to decide when it was spent, a way to feed the receiving portal without letting every alignment claw directly through my body.

It would not create the power.

That was a different problem, and one I had already decided other people could be made to solve.

Vaelin watched me cover the new break.

“Leave a way for someone else to stop it.”

I pressed the casing into place.

“Someone else has been stopping enough.”

Her face gave me nothing I could prove.

I left the portal closed that night. The failed second alignment had brought no shard, the captured gold was almost spent, and the first mineral grain could not make another element out of its own nature.

But the holding chamber had kept a pulse.

I slept with my hand against its unlit wall and dreamed of a heart large enough that I would no longer have to hear the smaller ones feeding it.

PART 5 OF 5

The Return Notch

Eryth

Dessa would not let him stand until she had retied the bandage beneath his robe.

“You can't mend a seal if you fall into it.”

“I'm not planning to fall.”

“Neither was our porter.”

Tavin sat beside them, tying the torn golden weave with the last of the younger worker's belt. He had stopped trying to hide the shake in his damaged hand. The worker held the cloth steady for him.

Beyond the ledge, the guardian lowered one arm into the mist. A narrow stone shelf rose toward them.

Dessa studied it.

“That's as much of the old route as it can hold. It won't carry all of us.”

“Then the injured man stays here,” Eryth said. “With someone who can help him.”

The younger worker nodded. He took the flask and moved behind the guardian's protecting fingers.

Eryth, Dessa, and Tavin went down.

They used the repaired cape between them rather than making it bear another flight. Spread along the current, it took part of their weight while their feet found the broken shelf. The gold thinned wherever they asked too much of it. They paused at each turn to let the field pass through the weave again.

At the bottom, a ring of brilliant crystal filled a hollow in the wall.

It looked complete.

Light ran around it in a smooth circle. Beneath that brightness, a darker groove disappeared into the stone at an angle Eryth would have mistaken for damage.

Dessa knelt before the dark groove.

“There.”

Tavin brought the sample plate close enough to compare the marks without touching the ring.

“The copied route runs across it.”

“Yes. Someone tried to make the field return along the path that fed it.”

Eryth looked at the shining circle. “Can that work?”

“For a small working. For a little while. Then the weight keeps coming back with nowhere else to go.”

The guardian's hand scraped against stone above them.

Dessa drew the correct path in the dust with two fingers. It passed beneath the ring, through the return notch, and back into the mountain along a separate seam.

“We open that first,” she said. “Then we take the false bridge out. After that, the ring can sit where it belongs.”

“What happens between those steps?” Tavin asked.

“The ledges move.”

“How far?”

“Far enough that we should decide where to put our feet now.”

She showed them.

Eryth laid the staff across two fixed points beside the ring. The unfinished mark warmed beneath his right hand. He did not ask it to repair what he had only just learned to recognize. He asked it to hold the distance between the two points while Dessa worked.

The field pressed against the wood.

His left shoulder answered with a pain so familiar it had begun to seem part of the staff's weight.

“Ready,” he said.

Dessa pushed her wooden tool into the return notch.

Nothing happened.

She changed the angle and struck it with the heel of her hand. A thin flake of crystal lifted. Light spilled beneath the ring, and the shelf under Tavin's feet dropped by the height of a step.

He caught the cape's repaired edge.

Eryth's staff bent.

“Not yet,” Dessa said. “Don't put the force back into the ring.”

“I'm holding the points.”

“Keep holding them.”

Tavin reached the false bridge with his probe. His good hand could reach it only if he leaned out over the newly opened gap.

The golden weave took his weight.

For a moment, Eryth saw the whole repair as a set of obligations passing between people. Dessa could open the return. Tavin could read the overwritten route. The cape could carry a little weight. He could hold the points, but none of those things would save anyone alone.

Tavin worked the probe beneath the bridge.

The tip snapped.

He stared at the broken end, then thrust his damaged right wrist against the side of the plate to keep it from sliding while he turned the remaining wood with his left.

“Again,” Dessa said.

He tried again.

The false bridge came free.

Light struck the cape from below. Gold spread across the cloth in a sheet so bright that Eryth could see the bones of his own fingers through it. The repaired knot held.

Above them, the guardian lowered its head.

Its field reversed.

The ring tried to move sideways through the wall. Eryth felt the staff pull toward it, carrying his arm with the same impatient force that had dragged Aetherium at the kilns.

He could not hold the ring itself.

He held the place where it had to remain.

The incomplete mark in the staff's grain lengthened. A pale line closed around its first seal bed, joining the two points without swallowing the space between them.

“There,” Dessa said. “Now let the return take it.”

Eryth loosened his grip by a fraction.

The stored pressure rushed through the reopened notch. The cape snapped outward, caught the escaping current, and carried Tavin back onto the shelf instead of letting it throw him into the gap.

The ring settled.

Its light became quieter. The dark groove remained open beneath it, doing work that did not need to shine.

The mountain stopped moving under their feet.

Eryth went to his knees.

Dessa caught the staff before it could strike the repaired ring. She laid it beside him, keeping his hand upon the completed mark until the last borrowed force had passed out of it.

“One seal,” she said.

He looked at the many empty beds farther along the wood.

“One.”

“Don't let that make it small.”

They climbed back together.

The guardian stood above the restored passage, its stone fingers no longer needed as a wall around the porter. The younger worker had helped him sit upright. When he saw Dessa, he began to laugh, then stopped because laughing hurt.

“Did you mend it?”

“We did.”

“Then I'd like to leave before you find anything else worth fixing.”

The gold remained in the cloth after the urgent current had passed. It lay across Eryth's arms in soft folds, bright as sunlight seen through a cloud. He could feel it remembering the paths it had carried them along, but it did not tighten to his hand or claim him as its wearer.

Tavin looked at it.

“What do we call the thing that kept us from becoming part of the floor?”

The porter shut his eyes. “A very good cloak.”

“The Golden Cloud Cape,” Dessa said. “If it has to have more ceremony than that.”

Eryth smiled for the first time since the ledge had opened.

Then he carried the cape into the high chamber from which its threads had come.

The guardian watched without raising its arm.

He laid the weave on a curved bed of quartz where a gentle current lifted its hem. Tavin set the sample plate beside it. Dessa showed him how to release the little cups from their retaining slots without opening their seals. Together they placed the intact cups in the old sample recess,

entrusting their unknown relations to its separate protective hollows. They kept the maintenance plate, now empty of its surviving grains, with a record of where each sealed cup had been left.

“You're leaving it?” Tavin asked.

“It can hold more here than I can carry away.”

“And if you need it again?”

Eryth looked at the living stone standing between the chamber and the wider mountain.

“Then I'll have to ask.”

The guardian placed its hand against the quartz bed. Gold flowed once through the cape, then settled. The cloth remained whole.

They led the injured porter out by the restored passage. Outside, Tavin recovered the workcloth holding Aetherium and their buckles. Eryth waited until they were beyond the magnetic seams before taking the sword onto his back again.

The mountain air was cold and ordinary. He welcomed both qualities.

Dessa walked with him while the two workers rested beside the path.

“The staff can hold a threshold in place now,” she said. “Within the strength you give it. That doesn't tell it where the threshold leads.”

“The other seals.”

“One of them, at least.”

She drew a leaf on the back of Tavin's copied route. Three points rose from it like the beginning of a constellation.

“The Grove of Eternal Stars. Ask for Lyria, if the paths let you reach her. The keepers there read destinations from living patterns. We used to send them seals that could stand upright but couldn't remember the right road.”

“Will she help?”

“She may ask what you intend to do with a road once it belongs to you.”

Eryth looked down at the leaf.

Tavin came to stand beside him.

“I'm going back to the ferry,” he said. “Elen will want to know that his troublesome survivors are still troublesome. And someone should explain why I came back with an empty sample plate.”

“You don't have to make another journey for me.”

“I know. That's why I can tell you where I'm going.”

They clasped forearms carefully, avoiding the injuries each had learned to see.

Eryth waited until Dessa and the workers began taking the lower path with Tavin. Then he turned the ancient staff in his hand. One completed mark lay quiet in its wood. Around it, the unfilled seals held their different silences.

The route toward the Grove ended at the edge of the page.

Beyond the ink, the forest waited to decide whether it would become a road.

CHAPTER 13

The Road That Refused

PART 1 OF 5

A Mile Beyond the Milestones

Eryth

By the second morning beyond the mountain, Eryth could lift his left hand high enough to wash the back of his neck.

He counted that as improvement. Then he tried to fasten his pack without setting it down and sat on a roadside wall until the pain stopped making the countryside flash white.

Tavin would have said something unkind and useful. Eryth had already begun to miss him.

Their roads had divided below the caves. Tavin had chosen the inhabited valley, the witnesses, and work that needed his actual hands rather than the hands a younger man might have lent him. Eryth had watched until the bend took him. There had been no last promise to meet at a particular hour. They had learned what such promises cost when roads acquired checkpoints.

Now the unfinished staff rested against Eryth's knee. Its first seal held a quiet line through the grain. The remaining beds looked like ordinary damage in very old wood.

Dessa's directions were wrapped around his bread.

Follow the dry watercourse until the stones cease to remember a river. Take the eastern bank when both banks appear eastern. Do not correct the milestones.

He had asked her what the last instruction meant.

“You'll know what you want them to say,” she had told him. “Leave them alone anyway.”

He ate, changed the pad beneath his shoulder binding, and went on.

The watercourse narrowed between low hills. Its bed was clean of mud, though rain had fallen during the night. Smooth stones lay in little heaps along both banks. Some were pale and warm beneath the cloudy sky; others held cold enough to make his palm ache. He did not take any.

Near noon, he found the first milestone.

A road had once crossed the channel there. Most of its surface was buried beneath grass, but the stone stood upright, its worn arrow pointing downstream. Beneath the arrow someone had recently cut a second one, deeper and straight across the first.

Eryth looked where the new mark pointed.

A wooden causeway ran between the hills. It was too narrow for two carts to pass. Its planks shone with rain, and a length of pale surveyor's cord stretched beside it, tied at regular intervals to black stakes.

He had not heard the water until he saw the road.

It ran underneath the planks, fast and perfectly clear. Leaves moved below its surface without going anywhere. Silver leaves. Violet. A single gold leaf turned around its own stem.

Someone coughed beyond the bend.

Eryth laid a hand on Aetherium's hilt, then took it away and called.

“Who's there?”

The answer was a stone striking wood.

He followed the sound to a woman lying beside the third stake. She wore a road worker's leather apron, dark with water. Her right boot had been cut down the front. Roots no thicker than fingers had grown through its eyelets and into the mud beneath her heel.

“Don't pull the cord,” she said.

“I wasn't going to.”

“Everyone does.”

He crouched beside her. Her lips were gray. One hand held a short blade, its point worn bright from digging.

“How long?”

“Since the light changed. I don't know which change.”

He examined the roots without touching them. They had not pierced her skin. The boot leather had swollen around them, turning restraint into a vice.

“I can cut your boot away.”

“There's a root under the heel.”

“I see it.”

“If you cut that, the others tighten.”

There were fresh cuts on two of the smaller roots. Milky sap darkened the woman's knife.

Eryth put his pack beneath her head. He made her drink a little before he set the staff across two dry stones.

The first seal had held floating rock. It would not know a living root merely because he wanted it to.

He laid two fingers against the staff and found the small agreement between wood, stones, and the weight of the boot. He did not ask the root to die or the foot to become weightless. He held the boot's present shape while the leather tried to shrink.

The pale mark brightened.

“Keep still,” he said.

“I've become accomplished at that.”

He cut the stitching along the back of the boot. The root beneath the heel pulled against the held leather. Pressure passed up the staff into his wrist.

The woman saw his face.

“Stop if you have to.”

“Lift your toes first.”

She did. He eased the ruined boot away from her ankle, leaving its sole caught in the roots. The moment her foot was clear, he released the seal.

The leather folded in on itself with a wet crack.

Neither spoke until it had stopped moving.

The woman sat up. Her ankle was swollen, but she could move her toes.

“Senna,” she said. “I mend roads. Usually they remain mended.”

“Eryth.”

She looked at the staff. “Do you mend those?”

“I'm learning.”

“Then you should leave.”

He glanced down the causeway.

“How many?”

Senna closed her eyes.

“Two still in there. Halven laid the route. Merec drove the material cart. I got as far as this stake.”

“Can they walk?”

“Merec couldn't when I last saw him. Halven told me to fetch help.”

“How far?”

“On the plan? Half a mile.”

“And off it?”

She pointed to the silver leaf turning beneath the planks.

“That was beside me when I left them.”

Eryth helped her onto a dry patch of bank. He tore a strip from the least damaged part of her apron and bound the ankle. While he worked, she told him about the new road.

Spring floods had taken the old crossing. The road guild had promised payment for a replacement before the next grain convoy. Halven had found a shorter line through the wood and brought instruments that could hold a survey bearing when the land disagreed.

“Did he have permission?” Eryth asked.

“From the guild.”

“From the wood?”

She looked at the roots holding her empty boot.

“I didn't know there was anyone to ask.”

He gave her half his remaining bread. Beyond the causeway, a light moved between the trees, too steady for a lantern carried by a walking person.

A low howl passed over the water.

Senna reached for his sleeve.

“If you find an ordinary turning, take it. We kept going because the cord said straight.”

Eryth set her knife within reach, shouldered his pack carefully, and stepped onto the first plank.

Behind him, Senna said, “I'm coming far enough to show you what he built.”

“You can't stand.”

“I can put my weight on the other leg. And I know which parts of that road are ours.”

He considered her, then gave her the staff to lean on while he cut a branch into a crutch.

They went together at the speed her ankle allowed.

PART 2 OF 5

The Price of Shelter

Kael

The first people who came asking to serve me were carrying someone else's stone.

There were six of them, counting the woman who drove the cart. The blocks had been quarried for a roadside watchhouse the Council had ordered and then decided it could no

longer afford. A dispute over payment had become an accusation of theft. By the time the carter reached my boundary, a clerk had declared the entire load impounded and its movement a further offense.

She showed me the order from beyond the blood line.

“It's their stone,” I said.

“It becomes their stone when they pay for it.”

“And you have come to me for payment?”

“For somewhere their officers won't take the cart.”

Her name was Hesta. She had gray at one temple and a habit of checking her horses before answering a man. The mason beside her called himself Darel. Dust had settled into the creases of his eyelids. He looked past me at the upright pillar, the broken foundation, and the rubble where a stair remained buried.

“That isn't a tower,” he said.

“It will be.”

“It'll need more than stolen stone.”

“Then we agree on something.”

Vaelin stood by the northern approach, leaning on her stick. She had heard them arrive and made certain they heard her.

“Once you're inside, his protection has a different meaning.”

Hesta studied the line in the earth.

“Can we come out again?”

“Yes,” I told her.

At that moment, I meant it.

I had discovered the weakness of working alone: everything that needed doing happened while my hands were required somewhere else. The shell around the embedded root-heart could store a little power and release a measured pulse. It could not dress stone, bring water, set a brace, or persuade a cracked block to occupy the place I had drawn for it.

I offered them shelter within the scar and the use of an abandoned shed near its edge. In return, they would unload the cart and lay a working floor around the two foundations. Hesta would keep ownership of her horses. Darel would direct the ordinary work.

He insisted on saying the word twice.

“Ordinary. No one touches your shining parts.”

I accepted that too.

Their arrival did not give me another source to feed from. The blood boundary remained what I had made it. I could not take the horses' strength from where they waited outside, nor reach through the workers to anything beyond the line. They brought blocks, rope, tools, food, and three old ward-lamps among the salvage they hoped to sell.

The lamps interested me most.

Their reservoirs were nearly exhausted. One had lost its cover. Their stored light belonged to no distant hand now. Hesta carried them across the boundary herself and set them on a sack at my request.

“Those weren't included,” she said.

“What do you want?”

“Grain.”

“I have less grain than you do.”

“Then something I can sell.”

I gave her the silver clasp from my discarded cloak and two small pieces of worked copper recovered from the ruined platform. She tested the silver with a file. Only after she was satisfied did she hand over the lamps.

I admired the clarity of the exchange. It would have pleased me more if every useful thing could have been obtained so cheaply.

By evening, Darel had laid a crescent of flat stone beside the standing pillar. He would not build across the rubble covering the stair.

“Something's taking weight underneath,” he told me. “Move that fall without shoring it and you'll have a hole where you expected a floor.”

“Leave it.”

“I intend to.”

He was competent enough to be inconvenient.

I drained the first lamp into the regulator shell while the workers ate. Nothing grew brighter at once. That was the achievement. Earlier, any new charge had tried to become light, heat, roots, or hunger before I could give it a task. Now it entered a narrow channel around the embedded relic and remained there, turning against the dark.

The mineral grain in its separate hollow steadied one relation between the currents. It did not feed them. A millstone was not the river that moved it.

I released one pulse into a lifting cradle I had cut beneath a loose block.

The stone rose the height of my hand.

Darel came across the platform with his mouth full of bread.

“Put it down.”

“It weighs more than three men can carry.”

“And if it falls, it weighs exactly that.”

He brought two wooden chocks, pushed them beneath opposite corners with a pole, and made his workers stand clear before he allowed me to lower it.

The pulse ended. Pain moved from the relic into my wrist, duller than before but unmistakably mine. The lamp had provided most of the light. I had provided the binding that kept it useful.

“Again,” I said.

“Tomorrow.”

“There is charge left.”

“And there is a cracked sling. Tomorrow.”

I could have let him decide the hours of work he had agreed to perform. I could have waited while he replaced the sling in daylight.

Instead I told him the officers might return before morning.

Hesta stopped chewing.

“You said we'd be safe here.”

“You will be safer behind a wall.”

“We agreed to a floor,” Darel said.

“Then finish enough floor to hold one.”

He looked toward the boundary. His tools lay in a pile beside the stone. I closed a thin loop of Darklight around their iron heads.

The youngest worker rose. Darel caught his arm before he could speak.

Vaelin crossed to the tools. She did not touch the loop.

“Give them back.”

“They can use them.”

“They can use them while they do what you want.”

I met her eyes.

“Yes.”

There was no advantage in pretending she had misunderstood.

Darel set down his bowl.

“Two more courses,” he said. “Nobody works underneath a hanging block. Nobody goes onto the stair fall. Then we stop.”

I agreed because I needed stone that would remain where it had been put. He had extracted a limit from me, and the existence of that limit would help him tell himself he had chosen the rest.

When darkness came, the workers lit ordinary torches.

I kept the remaining lamps for the core.

PART 3 OF 5

The Guardian's Answer

Eryth

The forest began without an edge.

One moment the causeway ran between wet hazels. The next, silver leaves hung above Eryth's head, and small violet lights moved among branches too high to have belonged to the trees he had seen from the watercourse.

Senna stopped.

“This is where the cart turned.”

There were no wheel marks. The survey cord passed through the bark of a silver trunk and emerged on the other side without a knot or hole.

Eryth touched the cord with the staff.

The first seal gave no answer.

“It isn't holding something in place,” he said.

“It held the bearing. Halven said the ground could move as much as it liked once we had that.”

Above them, a golden leaf opened like a hand. A mote fell from its center and drifted past Eryth's face.

For an instant he smelled his father's ink.

He turned too quickly. Pain caught his shoulder, and the mote moved on, carrying a sound that might have been pages or rain.

Senna watched him.

“What did you see?”

“Something I wanted to see.”

He walked after the light without meaning to.

An arrow struck the plank in front of his foot.

Its shaft was white fire held to the shape of wood. The point had passed through the plank without splitting it. Light spread from the wound in a narrow line across the causeway.

“Stay behind that,” a woman said.

Eryth froze.

The water ahead rose in a smooth arch. Something enormous moved underneath it, lifting the causeway until the survey stakes snapped one by one. Roots surfaced, braided around a dark body the size of a hay wagon. Pale fungi opened along its back. Its head was an arrangement of knots with no face Eryth could read.

Where its shoulders brushed the air, spores rose like flour.

Senna dragged herself behind him.

Eryth reached for Aetherium.

“Draw it if you need to cut rope,” the woman said. “Do not offer that thing another wound.”

She stood on a living branch above the broken road. Her hair caught the silver of the leaves and the gold beneath them. She might have been young. She might have belonged to a measure of years for which young had no meaning.

A bow rested in her hand. Another arrow waited against the string.

The root creature lowered its head.

The arrow in the plank brightened. The creature stopped short of its line, its body trembling under a force that had not gone away.

“That won't hold long,” the woman said. “The bank on your left. Step where the wolf steps.”

A wolf emerged from the shadows beside Eryth.

It was made of distances between stars. Points of light formed its joints; darkness gave its body depth. When it turned, the constellations along its flank changed without losing the shape of a breathing animal.

Senna made a small sound.

The wolf moved onto the bank. Mud accepted its paws without marking them.

Eryth helped Senna follow. Beneath the first patch of fern, the ground felt solid. Beneath the next, it gave like a stretched skin. He drew her back before she put weight there.

The wolf looked over its shoulder, impatient.

“Exactly where it steps,” the woman repeated.

They crossed twelve paces of bank. Behind them, the root creature drove its shoulder through the causeway. The arrow's light bent, then flew upward into the bow waiting in the woman's hand.

She released it into another trunk.

The resulting line turned the creature away from them. It went crashing into the water, carrying broken planks and a length of survey cord.

The woman dropped from the branch.

“I am Lyria.”

Eryth inclined his head, catching his breath. “Dessa sent me.”

“Dessa is alive?”

“Yes. We got her out of the Crystal Caves.”

Lyria's gaze moved to the first seal.

“And something unfinished came with you.”

“It was in the old inventory chamber.”

“I know where it was left.”

“Did you know who left it?”

“Not well enough to supply the name you might want.”

He accepted that. The grove was already offering too many things that resembled answers.

Senna leaned against a tree.

“There are two men inside.”

“I know.” Lyria looked at her swollen ankle. “I've been keeping the roots from closing the central channel around them.”

“Can you get them out?” Eryth asked.

“If I leave the Oak long enough to reach them, the channel closes. If I pull them along the line your surveyor made, it will carry everything attached to them into the same point.”

“What point?”

“The one he ordered it to reach.”

She pointed through the trees.

At the heart of the grove stood the Cosmic Oak.

Its silver trunk was broader than a house. Some of its roots lay exposed, crossing the ground in ridges tall enough to hide a person. Violet and gold light moved in their creases. High in the crown, leaves gathered into slow constellations and parted again.

One side of the trunk had a dark wound.

A pale cord ran into it.

“Old passages drew more from this place than they returned,” Lyria said. “The wound was closing. Your road has found it.”

Senna swallowed.

“I didn't know.”

“You know now.”

There was no cruelty in the answer. It left her nowhere comfortable to stand.

Lyria led them beneath an arch of roots. The star-wolf went ahead, pausing at places where Eryth could see nothing wrong. Each time it paused, Lyria changed their course.

“Is the creature yours?” he asked.

“The wolf answers me. The roots answer what has been done to them.”

“I meant the other guardian.”

“So did I.”

They reached a hollow beside the Oak where the ground stayed dry. Lyria pressed her palm against the trunk. A faint shudder passed through the wood and stopped.

Only then did Eryth see the lines of effort around her mouth.

“They took three orientation hearts,” she said. “Small growths from the roots. Your surveyor fitted them into his stakes. They let a living path recognize where it can go. Bound together, they can be made to insist that every path goes to one destination.”

“Can we take them out?”

“Yes. Separately. Returned to living roots before the next is released. Break all three at once and everything they've gathered will try to go home through the same wound.”

“And the men?”

“Between the second and third stakes. One is trapped beneath the cart.”

Eryth looked up at the immense tree.

He had come for a seal that could name a destination. Instead he had found someone who had already learned how to name one badly enough to endanger everyone around it.

“Tell me where to start.”

Lyria held out her empty hand.

“The staff first. May I?”

He gave it to her.

She turned the old wood slowly, careful of its unfilled beds.

“This remembers how to bear a threshold,” she said. “It doesn't yet know which threshold deserves the name you've given it.”

“Can it learn?”

“Yes. You will have to survive the difference.”

PART 4 OF 5

A Direction Worth Keeping

Eryth

The first orientation heart was the size of a plum stone and full of moving night.

Lyria showed it to him inside the broken top of a survey stake. It had been wrapped in fine wire and pinned across its natural grain. Each time the cord tightened, a little light moved within it toward the Oak's wound.

Senna knelt beside the stake with her bad foot stretched behind her.

“I helped make these,” she said.

“Then show me how they open.”

She took a small wrench from her apron. The cover had warped. Eryth held the stake steady with both hands while she worked the threaded collar loose.

He could have used the staff. He saved it.

When the cover lifted, the forest around them changed.

A tree that had stood to his right appeared ahead of him. The strip of sky above the causeway widened into an impossible breadth of stars. Somewhere very near, a man shouted Senna's name.

She jerked upright.

“Merec?”

The voice called again from the opposite side.

“Don't answer by moving,” Lyria said.

Senna forced herself to remain still.

Lyria put one hand around the exposed heart without taking it out.

“The bearing is borrowing every route that touches it. Those might be his words. They do not tell you where his mouth is.”

Eryth thought of a handwriting that could reach through a closed page. He watched the physical thing beneath Lyria's fingers.

“How do we tell?”

“We need a direction that is free to refuse us.”

From her quiver she took a spent arrow. Its light had dimmed to a thin white shell around a hollow shaft. She broke off the head and laid it in Eryth's palm.

It weighed less than a dry leaf.

“Celestial matter remembers relation,” she said. “This came from a path I held without moving its destination. It still knows the difference.”

“Can we put that into the staff?”

“Not while it is only my answer.”

She opened a shallow pocket in the Oak's bark and took out a disc of silver-black wood, fallen from a knot rather than cut. Its center was hollow. She set the arrowhead within it, point floating clear of the rim.

The light swung toward the trapped orientation heart.

Then it swung toward Eryth's hand.

Then toward the sky.

“It has too many answers,” he said.

“It has no question it trusts.”

Senna looked between them.

“Can it be made before they drown?”

Lyria's expression sharpened.

“We are making it because they may drown.”

Water had begun to rise around the far stake. The root guardian moved beneath it, turning slowly with the force of a mill wheel.

Eryth took the disc in his right hand and laid his thumb against the unfinished staff's second seal bed. He let a trace of dawnfire cross the gap.

The floating point stilled.

A narrow glimmer ran toward the open stake. Behind it, another glimmer curved around a fern and ended at an exposed root.

Lyria watched without speaking.

“That one,” Eryth said.

“Why?”

“It doesn't reach where I wanted to go.”

“That isn't enough.”

He looked more carefully. The straight glimmer continued to burn whether Senna moved her wrench or not. The curved one changed when a root lifted beneath the fern. It bent around the movement, maintaining the connection without insisting that the obstruction cease to exist.

“It answers what's there.”

Lyria nodded.

Together they lifted the first heart out of its wires.

The cord snapped taut. Eryth felt it pull through the air at the small bones of his hand. He kept the disc level while Senna opened a seam in the exposed root with her wrench. No cutting. The seam was already there, pinched shut by a dead strip of bark.

Lyria laid the heart inside.

Silver light traveled through the root.

The forest gave a long, uneven sigh.

For a moment Eryth could see the entire causeway. The cart stood on a tilted platform beyond a deep channel. One wheel had fallen through the planks. A man lay beneath its raised bed. Another was roped to the rail, bent over something clutched against his chest.

Senna cried out.

The view folded shut.

“Alive,” Eryth said.

“For now,” said Lyria.

The disc's pale point had gone dark. A new mark lay on its rim, no wider than a hair.

“What is it?” Senna asked.

“A beginning,” Lyria said.

Eryth turned it over. There was no hidden fastening or reservoir. It had not made a path. It had witnessed one that existed and survived being used.

“A compass,” he said.

Lyria's mouth changed slightly.

“If we finish it.”

They returned to the Oak. Lyria could no longer keep her hand away from its trunk for more than a few breaths. Dark lines spread up the wounded bark whenever she tried.

“The second heart is beyond the guardian,” she said. “I can draw it away from the narrow bank. The wolf can show you where to stand. I can't make the ground accept you if you cut your own way across it.”

“I'm not asking you to.”

“You may feel differently when it begins to move.”

She handed him the unfinished compass.

He fastened it inside his robe, against his chest. Senna gave him a coil of work rope and the wrench.

“Halven will tell you the last stake must stay,” she said. “He said the route would tear without it.”

“Will it?”

“Yes. He may be telling the truth about that part.”

Eryth tightened the rope around his waist. Lyria braced both feet against a silver root and drew her bow.

The arrow she released passed above him into the dark.

The guardian rose to meet it.

Roots uncoiled from the channel. Its fungal shoulders spread, shedding spores that gathered around the arrow like moths. Lyria drew a second line of light across its path, turning its bulk toward an open stretch of water.

The wolf ran.

Eryth followed.

A root lifted beneath his leading foot. He stepped where the wolf had stepped, trusting a patch of moss that looked too slight to hold him. The moss supported his weight. The apparently solid earth beside it split open to reveal black water.

The guardian struck Lyria's first arrow. Light scattered through the spores.

A dozen small root limbs began to grow where the sparks fell.

Eryth understood why she had warned him about wounds. There was no harmless place to spend a blow. Whatever he cut would become more surfaces for the grove's fear to inhabit.

The narrow bank disappeared.

He planted the staff against a submerged root and woke the first seal.

The root held its position for three breaths. He used two to climb onto it and the third to leap after the wolf.

His left hand missed the next branch.

Pain blinded him. His shoulder struck bark, and he slid toward the channel.

The wolf seized his robe between teeth made of starlight.

Cloth tore. The pull gave Eryth just enough time to hook his good elbow over the branch.

He hung there, gasping.

The wolf released the cloth and waited.

“You could have chosen a lower path,” Eryth said.

It showed no interest in his opinion.

Ahead, the cart platform turned into view.

The man roped to the rail looked up.

“Senna?”

“She's alive. Lyria sent me.”

The man flinched at Lyria's name.

Under the cart, Merec opened his eyes.

“Then tell him to put that thing down,” he said.

Halven tightened both arms around the last survey stake.

PART 5 OF 5

Where the Line Went

Vaelin

Vaelin waited until Darel had finished arguing before she approached him.

He was sitting on an overturned trough, looking at his hammer where it lay inside Kael's binding. The workers had completed the two courses he had promised. Kael had released the tools only long enough for them to be used, then caught the metal again when the last stone settled.

“I should have turned the cart around,” Darel said.

“You still might.”

“With what to live on afterward?”

She did not offer him a brave answer to a practical question.

Across the platform, Kael bent over the shell he had built around the relic. The old root-heart remained embedded between the foundations. Its light came through the new channels in brief, uneven pulses. Each pulse left him breathing harder.

“Does it take from us?” Darel asked.

“Not merely because you're here.”

“That's a careful answer.”

“It needs to be.”

She told him where the blood boundary lay and which marks belonged to the Council's separate outer severing work. He had mistaken them for parts of the same defense. She made him walk far enough to see the difference.

“If those outer markers begin shining together,” she said, “bring the workers to this bank. Don't run toward the northern plates. They won't protect you.”

“And you?”

“I'll come if I can.”

He studied her stick, the stiffness with which she lowered herself beside the nearest stair brace.

“What keeps you here?”

“Some things I know. Some I still need to learn.”

“Does he let you leave?”

“He has not stopped me yet.”

She put her hand against the brace. The wood had shifted a little under the new floor's weight. She had a legitimate reason to inspect it. That fact had become increasingly useful.

Above the brace, one of the regulator's narrow cutoff pieces rested in a groove where Kael could reach it. He had moved it since the failed alignment. The small alteration she had made before that failure was no longer present.

He had found the difference.

She could not tell whether he had understood it.

Vaelin checked the timber, inserted a thin wedge beneath its foot, and left the cutoff untouched.

“Mark every load before you set it down,” she told Darel. “Weight. Position. Which way it tries to fall when the light changes.”

“For you?”

“For whoever has to get someone out from under it.”

A shadow covered her hand.

Kael stood above them.

“What did you change?”

“The foot of that brace.”

He looked at the wedge, then at the cutoff piece.

“Before.”

She could have asked what he meant. It would have told him that she knew.

“I have repaired supports here since you began putting more weight over them than the ground could bear.”

“That isn't an answer.”

“It is the one you can check.”

For a long moment he watched her.

Then the core gave a thin ringing sound. Kael turned toward it, one hand already rising to steady a current only he could feel.

Vaelin got to her feet without Darel's help.

She had bought no safety. She had learned where his attention would go when two necessary things failed at once.

Eryth

Halven had tied the stake to his chest.

Fine wire ran from its crown around his ribs and through the rail behind him. His hands were blistered. The orientation heart shone between his fingers, trapped inside a cage of little brass arms.

“Don't undo it,” he said. “The road is carrying the cart.”

Eryth looked beneath the tilted bed.

Merec's thigh lay pinned between a crossbeam and the side of the platform. The axle had broken without falling free. A turn of the wheel pressed the whole load farther down.

“How long has he been there?”

“Long enough to hear Halven explain it,” Merec said.

His voice was dry and faint.

Eryth gave him water a mouthful at a time. Then he climbed onto the cart's high side and examined the load.

It held stone markers, spare planks, and a squat lantern enclosed in a wire basket. The lantern gave no ordinary light. Its glass was full of bright moving dust.

“What is that?”

Halven didn't answer.

“The things that fell from the leaves,” Merec said. “He said we'd sell them after the route opened.”

Eryth felt the unfinished compass stir against his chest.

The motes pressed toward him inside their glass.

One made a sound like his father's chair scraping across a floor.

He turned the lantern away.

“Those belong to the grove.”

“They were drifting in the air.”

“And you were walking on the ground. Neither made you available to be taken.”

A tremor passed through the platform. Halven cried out and tightened his grip on the stake. The wires drew blood across his knuckles.

Eryth had wanted an easier villain. A man who lied about the danger would have been simpler to disobey.

The surveyor was telling the truth: the forced bearing had become part of what held the cart above the channel. Releasing it without providing somewhere for the weight to go would crush Merec before the grove could reclaim its stolen heart.

“There's a second stake,” Eryth said. “Where?”

“Under the rear wheel.”

He looked.

The stake had broken through the platform. Only its metal crown remained visible, caught between two spokes. A white line ran from it into the root beneath them.

He could not reach it without moving the cart.

He could not move the cart without changing the line.

From the bank came the distant sound of Lyria's bow.

The star-wolf crouched at the platform's edge, looking down into water that no longer reflected the trees.

Eryth stripped the rope from his waist and passed it beneath Merec's arms. He tied the other end around a silver root above the rail.

“This won't lift you,” he told him. “It will keep you from going under if the floor breaks.”

“I'll take that.”

He used Aetherium to cut the cart's sideboards away from the trapped leg. The blade passed cleanly through seasoned wood. He kept it far from the living root.

Halven began to weep without making a sound.

“You're going to leave me tied here.”

“No.”

“You should.”

“That isn't useful either.”

Eryth sheathed the sword and set the staff between the cart bed and the root. The first seal woke under his thumb.

Weight arrived through the wood like a door slamming against his whole body.

He had held falling stone in the caves with help and a field that could be brought into agreement. Here the cart was being pulled in two directions at once. The seal could bear a limited load; it could not decide which direction ought to exist.

“Halven. Open the lantern.”

“The spores will come.”

“They're coming already.”

Across the channel, pale shapes flowered between the trees.

Halven fumbled with the basket. His tied hands could not reach the latch.

Eryth shifted the staff onto his good shoulder and leaned his weight behind it. His left arm shook as he stretched toward the lantern.

The compass inside his robe flashed.

For an instant he saw a curved line beneath the platform, an opening inside the root rather than across the water.

Then the cart wheel turned.

The second stake broke free of its spokes.

A pulse of silver struck the root. The platform dropped half a handspan and stopped against the staff's holding field.

Merec screamed.

Halven's wire cage sprang open. Its trapped heart remained in place, held by his bleeding fingers.

“Don't let go yet,” Eryth said.

He could not tell whether Halven heard him.

The root beneath the platform split along a natural seam. Darkness opened inside it, threaded with moving stars. The unfinished compass pulled against Eryth's chest toward that opening.

A celestial arrow struck the rail beside his face.

Its point turned downward.

Lyria was showing him the only route still willing to take their weight.
It led under the cart, under the water, into the wounded heart of the Oak.
Eryth bent his knees against the staff's crushing resistance.
“Merec,” he said. “When I tell you, hold your breath.”

CHAPTER 14

The Star Compass

PART 1 OF 5

Beneath the Wounded Tree

Eryth

The arrow in the rail was going out.

Its light withdrew from the feathers first, leaving a thin white shaft that trembled above the opening in the root. Eryth had time to understand that Lyria could show him the way or keep it open. Not both for much longer.

“Halven. My knife.”

The surveyor stared at him.

“On my belt. Take it.”

“I can't reach.”

“Then loosen the wire around your waist.”

“The stake—”

“Keep the heart in its crown. The wire is holding you to the rail. It isn't holding the road.”

Halven looked down as though seeing the arrangement for the first time. One brass arm had sprung loose, freeing the loop around his ribs. He drew it over his head, inch by inch, while his other hand kept the small heart pressed into its cage.

Eryth's knees began to shake.

The staff held the cart's weight in relation to the root beneath it. Every movement of the water changed that relation. He could maintain it for a little while. He could not turn himself into a permanent part of the platform.

Halven came free of the rail and took the knife.

“Cut Merec's rope above the knot,” Eryth told him. “Pass the free end through the opening below us.”

“You tied it to keep him up.”

“Now we need to lower him.”

Merec bared his teeth.

“If you're discussing a different man, I wish he'd move.”

The strained joke brought Halven back to his hands. He cut the rope and threaded it around a thick fork in the root, making a rough lowering line.

Eryth shifted the staff a finger's width.

Pain went through his shoulder so fiercely that the cart disappeared. He saw only white, then the staff's dark grain inches from his face.

He had lifted the crossbeam off Merec's leg.

“Now.”

Halven pulled. Merec dragged himself backward with both elbows. His trapped boot came away empty, and he made a sound that was worse than the scream had been.

Eryth kept holding.

The star-wolf dropped through the opening beneath the platform. Its body broke into separate lights as it passed between two roots, then gathered again below. For a moment Eryth saw wet bark, a sloping shelf, and air.

“There's somewhere to stand,” he said. “Lower him.”

Halven paid out the rope. Merec slid down feet first. Water rose over his knees, his chest, his mouth. He vanished beneath the surface.

The rope jerked twice.

Alive. Still moving.

Halven followed, clutching the third stake against his chest. Eryth stopped him with a word.

“The lantern. And the broken stake by the wheel.”

Halven looked at the glass full of stolen light.

“Leave it.”

“Take responsibility for carrying it.”

The surveyor caught the lantern's handle over his wrist. He pulled the second stake free from the broken spokes and pushed it through his belt.

Then he was gone.

Eryth counted four breaths. He could not afford a fifth.

He released the first seal and threw himself into the opening.

The cart struck the platform behind him. Wood exploded against wood. A broken plank caught his pack, wrenching him sideways as cold water closed over his head.

He let go of the pack's shoulder strap.

For a terrible instant it remained caught around his injured arm. He could not turn. The staff knocked against something beneath him, nearly torn from his hand.

Light moved below the water.

The wolf caught the dangling strap and pulled downward.

Eryth slid free of his pack and struck a slope of living bark. He rolled, coughed water, and came to rest beside Merec in a space full of silver twilight.

Above them, the root seam closed to the width of a man's hand.

The ruined cart remained outside.

Halven sat with his back against the wall, both stakes across his lap and the lantern clutched between his knees.

“My pack,” Eryth said stupidly.

“Gone,” Merec told him.

Eryth looked down. Aetherium remained in its separate harness. The staff was still in his hand. The unfinished compass pressed against his chest. He had lost bread, spare clothing, dressings, and Dessa's written route.

He could remember the route. The bandages would be harder to replace.

Merec's leg was swollen above the knee. The angle was wrong enough that Eryth did not try to straighten it. He folded his torn outer robe beneath the limb and bound two pieces of broken rail along its sides.

“Tell me if you can't feel your toes.”

“I can feel rather too much of everything.”

“That will do for now.”

Halven began turning the lantern's latch.

“Wait.”

“You told me to open it.”

“Before we were inside a hollow root with nowhere for the light to go.”

Something tapped against the lantern glass.

The motes were not knocking at random. They gathered along the side facing the Oak's heart, then scattered whenever the survey stakes brightened.

The star-wolf stood near a low passage ahead. Beyond its forepaws, pale spores drifted through a web of fine roots.

Eryth took out the unfinished compass.

Its point shivered between the two stolen hearts.

No line appeared.

“Lyria?” he called.

A voice answered from above and to his right, close enough to have come through a wall.

“I can hear you.”

“Three of us below the platform. Merec is hurt. We have the remaining hearts and the lantern.”

“Keep them apart.”

Halven moved one stake away from the other.

The wall stopped trembling.

“There are living seams in the roots around you,” Lyria said. “Return one heart to a seam the compass accepts. The last one will be carrying the whole forced route. You must give the route somewhere to end before you release it.”

“Where?”

“I can't see that from here.”

Eryth looked at the blank point in his hand.

For the first time since entering the grove, the lack of an answer felt honest enough to use.

PART 2 OF 5

A Measure of Fire

Kael

The motion lamina arrived on the sixth day after Hesta's cart.

Before that, there were failures small enough to teach me something. An aperture that collapsed before it had fully formed. A source alignment that returned only a cold pressure against the basin. One attempt that made every new stone in the floor tremble and persuaded Darel to refuse the platform until I had repeated the test with nobody standing on it.

He could refuse unsafe positions. He could not leave with his tools. I allowed the distinction to remain.

The regulator shell now had three shallow storage channels around the old embedded root-heart. Each held a finite portion of whatever charge I could put into it. The channels

discharged separately through a cut stone throat. When a current rose too far, it escaped along a vent facing bare ground.

Nothing in that arrangement created power.

The first purchased lamp was empty. Most of the second had gone into failed alignments. The third waited beside my knee. I supplied the dark binding myself and paid for it in weakness I was becoming practiced at concealing from the workers.

The lone mineral grain stayed in its lined hollow, providing a fixed tendency against which I could measure the currents. It had become useful precisely because I had stopped asking it to be a treasure large enough to solve everything.

I drew the aperture above the same basin.

One mouth. The shell kept its edges steady while I changed the source relation within the relic.

This time the alignment showed a band of dark mineral fragments turning around a light too distant to warm them. I did not open anything among those fragments. I brought a narrow relation between their motion and my waiting basin, and drew one loose flake along it.

It approached slowly.

At the mouth it became a thin, curved lamina, no wider than my thumbnail. Its edges fluttered though the clearing was still. Dust rose from the basin and began to travel in a small persistent circle.

I closed the portal as soon as the flake crossed.

The mineral band vanished. Silence returned with the force of a dropped weight.

The lamina kept moving.

I caught it between two shallow cups of glazed stone, leaving enough space for its motion to spend itself without striking the sides. When I linked the lower cup to an empty lifting cradle, the cradle turned a quarter-circle.

It did not turn again.

The lamina had given up part of its stored tendency. Its strange nature remained, but another movement would need another charge. That limitation offended me less than it once would have. A thing that obeyed the same price twice could be made part of a machine.

Darel watched from behind the line I had marked for the workers.

“That's all it does?”

“That is all I have asked it to do.”

“Ask it how much rope it can twist without breaking.”

He had begun to think in uses despite himself.

I told him to bring a spare length.

We spent the afternoon finding how much force the cradle could accept. The motion sample did not carry an inexhaustible wind inside it. The core fed it a measured pulse; its nature gave that pulse a direction. Too much made the cup chatter. Too little accomplished nothing.

By dusk we could turn a loaded cradle far enough to bring a block from the cart's edge onto the new floor.

The men still hauled. Darel still placed chocks. I had gained a tool, not a wall that raised itself.

The heat cinder cost more.

I waited until the next morning, after sleep and food had restored enough of me to hold the binding. The portal remained closed throughout that interval. Nothing stood open at the distant source. The receiving basin was an ordinary basin again, cold beneath my hand.

The next alignment revealed a seam of red mineral beneath a sky without a sun. Heat moved through the seam in slow pulses. Black shapes rose beyond it, too indistinct to tell me whether they were stone, growth, or something capable of noticing what I did.

Vaelin stood near the cutoff.

“Can you tell what depends on it?” she asked.

“No.”

“Then choose somewhere you can.”

“That might take weeks.”

“Yes.”

I opened the aperture.

The first breath of heat blistered the glaze inside the basin. I narrowed the alignment until only a spark-sized fleck separated from the glowing seam. Behind it, the red light spread into a crack.

The crack was larger than the thing I was taking.

I saw it. I continued.

The cinder crossed the mouth no larger than a pinhead. I broke the alignment before the disturbed seam could send anything else.

Hot air struck the platform.

One of the workers dropped his pole and staggered backward. Darel caught his collar. The block they had been moving slid half off its chocks and pinned the loose end of Darel's sleeve against the floor.

“Vent,” Vaelin said.

I was already reaching for the cutoff, but the cinder had pulled the receiving light toward itself. If I released the whole channel at once, the sample would follow the discharge and be lost.

“Kael.”

I closed a small ash-lined cup around the cinder first.

Only then did I open the vent.

The delay lasted less than a full breath. It was long enough for Darel to leave skin beneath the block when he pulled his arm free.

Light struck the empty earth beyond the platform. The closest weeds blackened. The blood boundary caught the outward feeding tendency and turned it back; the vent spent only charge already held inside the scar.

When the ringing in my ears stopped, Vaelin was kneeling beside Darel.

“You waited,” she said.

“Yes.”

“For that.”

She looked at the small cup.

I would later build workings that could balance whole arrangements of unlike forces. I could have pretended this moment had taught me the value of a life. What it taught me was

that an emergency needed separate releases if I wished to keep both the sample and the worker.

I added another cutoff to the drawing.

Darel looked at his scraped forearm while Hesta wrapped it.

“The next test waits until the floor is empty,” he said.

I nodded.

He mistook agreement for remorse only if he needed to.

The cinder warmed a little cup of water before its first stored heat diminished. I closed it in ash-lined stone, separate from the motion lamina and the regulating grain. It would give a charged working the nature of heat. It would not keep my Tower warm for nothing.

Three small acquisitions. Three different containments. More empty spaces remained on the page where I had drawn the Halo.

I looked at those spaces and wanted them filled.

PART 3 OF 5

What the Roots Remembered

Eryth

Halven had drawn six possible exits on the damp bark with a piece of charcoal.

Each drawing ended at the same little square.

“The roadhead,” he said. “That's where the fixed bearing goes. That's where it has to go.”

Eryth looked from the marks to the low passage ahead.

“Where does that go?”

“Back into the Oak.”

“You said everything went to the roadhead.”

“On the bearing.”

“Then we stop asking the bearing.”

The unfinished compass lay in Eryth's open palm. Its point had steadied when he moved the second heart away from the third. It shifted again whenever he looked at Halven's little square.

Desire was not merely confusing his sight. Dawnfire carried the question he meant, including the part he had not spoken. He kept asking for the place where rescue would already be finished.

He closed his eyes.

What could bear Merec's weight? What could be reached without tearing a living root? Where could the stolen heart return without carrying the other one with it?

He opened his eyes before the questions could become a wish.

A thread of light curved toward a seam beneath the wolf's forepaws.

Eryth crawled to it. A curtain of spores moved across the opening, brightening in time with the heart in the broken stake.

The root guardian was on the other side.

Through a gap he saw the massive knot of its shoulder. New roots were knitting across the places Lyria's arrows had torn. It had no permanent wound he could use as a weakness. Every injury had given it more places from which to grow.

Halven lifted the knife.

“No,” Eryth said.

“It'll reach us.”

“It already could.”

Fine roots had threaded through the chamber while they argued. One lay across Merec's splint. Another touched the lantern, then recoiled from its glass.

Eryth set the compass beside the seam.

“Open the broken stake.”

Halven put down the knife. He used Senna's wrench, which Eryth had kept looped through his belt, to loosen the remaining brass arms.

The second heart came free.

The guardian struck the outer wall.

Bark bowed inward. Merec covered his face with both hands.

“Slowly,” Eryth said.

He did not know whether he was speaking to Halven, the roots, or himself.

The heart crossed the last handspan into the seam.

Its light spread through the wood in branching lines.

For one instant Eryth saw the grove from below: thousands of roots, each holding a different memory of where it had found water, space, or another living thing it could grow beside. A path was not a straight mark imposed upon all that movement. It was an agreement that remained true while the things making it continued to live.

The impression passed.

He had no names from it. No voice. Nothing that could be mistaken for his father's testimony.

The guardian drew back.

Along the compass rim, a second hairline mark appeared.

The last stake began to burn.

Halven cried out and dropped it. Eryth caught its wooden base before the heart struck the floor, but the line attached to it had already tightened. The chamber leaned. Merec slid toward the low passage.

Eryth planted the staff across the opening and woke the first seal.

The passage held its shape. Merec stopped against the staff, gasping.

A crack opened along the ceiling.

Lyria's voice came through it.

“The road has lost two of its anchors. Where is the last trying to go?”

“The roadhead,” Eryth called.

“Where is the heart trying to go?”

He stared at the stake.

The survey cord pulled east. The light inside the caged heart moved west, toward the wound in the trunk above them. The two directions crossed through their bodies.

“Home.”

“Give it a place to arrive.”

“How?”

“The small wooden bowl you're holding was part of this tree.”

The compass.

Its rim had come from a fallen knot in the Oak. Lyria had not given him a trophy. She had given the wandering point something with a history it could find.

Eryth set the compass in a dry hollow beneath the opening in the ceiling.

The point turned toward the stolen heart.

“We can end the forced route here,” he told Halven. “Inside the thing it was taken from.”

“The road will disappear.”

“Let it.”

Merec gave a breathless laugh that turned into coughing.

Halven looked at him.

“I thought we could be paid before anyone knew.”

“I know,” Merec said. “I was on the cart.”

There was no forgiveness in it. There was room for the next necessary act.

Halven held the last stake while Eryth used the wrench on its crown. The wire had been tightened so fiercely that one turn broke the tool's smallest jaw. He used the broken end to pry the cage open.

The chamber moved again.

He kept the first seal active through the pressure of his knee against the staff. The force traveled up his leg into his spine. Sweat ran into his eyes.

“Lantern,” he said.

Halven looked at him.

“The motes are trying to follow the heart. Let them go a few at a time.”

“They'll strike us.”

“Then keep the glass turned toward the seam.”

Halven lifted the latch a fraction.

One golden mote escaped.

It circled the compass, dipped into the wooden bowl, and settled along the pale point. A second followed. Then another.

The roots touching Merec's splint withdrew.

Outside, the guardian opened its fungal crown. Spores moved toward the escaping motes and settled around them, carrying their light back into the living wood.

Eryth eased the third heart out of its cage.

The cord snapped.

A straight white line appeared through the chamber, brighter than anything around it. Beyond it lay the roadhead under a gray afternoon sky. Eryth could see his lost pack caught against a milestone. It looked close enough to reach.

Merec lifted his head.

“Is that out?”

The compass point turned away.

“No,” Eryth said.

It was where the force wanted them to go. Nothing in that line had agreed to carry three living bodies there.

He put the heart into the wooden bowl.

White light collapsed inward.

The straight road broke without a sound.

Then water struck the ceiling, and every root in the chamber began to move.

Eryth flung one arm over Merec and held the staff with the other. The first seal could preserve a small space. It could not preserve the whole wound while the grove healed around it.

“Lyria!”

“I have you.”

The ceiling seam opened.

A rope dropped through, knotted at regular intervals. Above it, Senna lay across a root with the line wrapped around her waist and both hands braced against the bark. Lyria stood behind her, one palm on the Oak, her free hand holding the rope where it passed over a fork.

The star-wolf sprang upward. Its lights gathered around the rope, showing every knot.

Eryth tied Merec into the sling first.

He and Halven pushed while the two women hauled. The passage tried to narrow around Merec's hips. Eryth turned the staff, finding the small agreement that let wood bear weight without closing on flesh.

Merec rose through the opening.

Halven went next, carrying the now-empty lantern.

Eryth picked up the compass.

The orientation heart had dissolved into a ring of tiny stars around the pale point. It was not gone from the grove. Its light ran through the bowl into the root beneath his hand, a relation that persisted when he lifted it.

He climbed two knots.

His left arm failed on the third.

Senna caught his wrist before he fell. Pain burst through his shoulder, but her grip held.

“I know,” she said through her teeth. “I'm sorry. Keep climbing.”

He found another knot with his foot.

They dragged him into daylight while the hollow below them closed.

The root guardian emerged from the channel behind the ruined road. Its body was smaller now, though still immense. Fungi folded against its shoulders. It rested one branching hand on the bank, then lowered itself among the roots where its shape became difficult to separate from the grove.

Alive. Still guarding.

Eryth lay on his back beneath the Cosmic Oak, the compass against his chest.

For several breaths, the only direction he wanted was air.

PART 4 OF 5

The Second Pattern

Eryth

Senna made broth in the lantern's empty metal basket.

She lined it with a small cooking bowl Lyria produced from a hollow in the Oak. The arrangement was ugly and worked perfectly. After the things Eryth had seen, he found that reassuring.

Merec slept beneath a canopy of gold leaves. Lyria had found straight fallen branches for a better splint. The swelling in his leg had not vanished. He would need people with a litter, a steady road, and time away from carts.

Halven sat beyond the fire, unwinding the wire from his hands.

“Will the guild send help?” Eryth asked Senna.

“If I get to the old crossing. They have a store there.”

“Will they come here?”

“They'll come for Merec.”

She glanced at Halven.

“They may have different ideas about the rest of us.”

Eryth watched a mote drift above the surveyor's bowed head. It carried the smell of wet rope this time, not ink.

“Tell them the route is closed.”

“They'll want their instruments back.”

“They can have the wire.”

Senna smiled for the first time.

Lyria came down from the exposed roots. The wound in the trunk had narrowed, though a dark crease remained. She looked tired in a way that made Eryth understand how little age had to do with it.

“The wolf will take her to the crossing tomorrow,” she said. “It will bring the litter party by a route that can carry them.”

“Can I go?” Halven asked.

Lyria turned toward him.

“Yes.”

He seemed less prepared for permission than punishment.

“I took from this place.”

“You have returned what could be returned. You will speak about what you did where other people might repeat it.”

“They may not believe me.”

“You can make them find a different witness before they build.”

He lowered his eyes. “I can try.”

“That will be work enough to begin with.”

The following day, Eryth remained beneath the Oak while Senna and the wolf went for help. His shoulder had stiffened so completely that he could not get his robe on without Lyria's assistance. She cleaned the reopened skin, replaced the dressing with soft barkcloth, and told

him the arm would heal more reliably if he stopped using pain as evidence of what was necessary.

“I haven't found a way to schedule the falling things,” he said.

“Other people can carry some of them.”

She set the finished compass between them.

In daylight it looked simple: a shallow dark wooden bowl, a floating point of silver-white celestial matter, and a ring of little stars that would not remain in quite the same arrangement. No needle marked north. No lid confined it.

“The Star Compass,” Eryth said.

Lyria touched one finger to the rim.

“Yes.”

“Did we make it, or did we find what it wanted to be?”

“We chose the bowl. I gave the arrow. You taught the point a question. The hearts and motes supplied what had been taken from them. None of those things would have made this alone.”

He appreciated the refusal to turn actual work into destiny.

She laid his ancient staff beside it.

The second seal bed held a faint mark. It had begun during the rescue, when the compass found the viable route under the cart. Begun was not finished. He had learned that distinction in the caves and had the pain to remember it.

“What does a destination mean?” Lyria asked.

“A place you intend to reach.”

“For a traveler.”

“For a working, the place its force reaches.”

“Even when the two differ?”

He looked at the compass.

“The roadhead was the name Halven gave it. The wound was where it actually arrived.”

Lyria placed three ordinary stones on the ground. She ran a thin thread of light from the first to the third, bending it through the second. Then she laid a leaf over the middle stone.

“Close the route that harms the covered place,” she said.

Eryth turned the staff toward the third stone.

The mark in its second bed flared, then faded.

He had named the visible end. The thread beneath the leaf kept brightening.

He stopped before forcing more dawnfire through the wood.

“Again,” Lyria said.

This time he used the first seal to hold the thread's small beginning in place. He let the compass show him how the line behaved. Its point did not turn toward the third stone. It inclined toward the covered middle, where the force had begun to gather before continuing outward.

Eryth touched the staff to that relation.

A slender line settled along the second seal bed.

The light beneath the leaf went dark. The unburdened part of the route remained.

He withdrew his hand. The new pattern stayed.

For a moment he was tempted to ask it for his father.

The want rose so quickly that the staff turned in his fingers.

Lyria put no hand on it. She waited.

Eryth breathed until he could distinguish a known living person in a known dangerous place from a name his longing could attach to any brightness.

“I don't have a destination,” he said.

“No.”

“Only someone I want to find.”

“That is a reason to search. It isn't a direction.”

He set the staff across his knees.

They practiced with water running through three channels between the roots. With motes that traveled toward a leaf while their light accumulated somewhere else. With a real path to a pool, where the compass refused the shortest crossing until Eryth noticed a bird sitting in a hollow beneath it.

The second pattern did not make him see every road. It identified the actual destination of a relation he could touch or reliably trace, and the routes still capable of reaching it. If the evidence was missing, it went quiet. If he tried to replace evidence with insistence, his hand began to shake.

He learned to stop at the silence.

Toward evening, he held both learned patterns together for the first time.

The staff fixed the beginning of a narrow light-thread and named the place where its force truly landed. When Lyria moved the apparent end, the name did not move with it.

Eryth closed the harmful part.

It stayed closed until she lifted her hand.

Then the thread returned exactly as it had been.

He stared at it.

“I didn't release the seal.”

“No,” Lyria said.

She made the same small gesture again. The earlier arrangement of the thread returned, including the connection he had cut.

“What happened?”

“I gave it a former pattern to repeat. Your two seals can hold and recognize. They have not learned the difference between what must continue and what has already been ended.”

Eryth felt the cold of a new problem settle beneath his ribs.

A door could remain where it stood and lead where it had always led, yet reopen through the memory of having once been open.

“Where do I learn that?”

Lyria looked toward the stars beginning to gather above the Oak.

“Tempus keeps the Labyrinth of Time. If a recurrence can be questioned without tearing the lives caught inside it, he will know how.”

PART 5 OF 5

What Could Be Carried

Kael

Hesta demanded her horses on the morning I began bending the crown's first physical frame.

I had bought no horses. They were hers. That did not prevent me from resenting the demand.

“We need grain,” she said. “Lamp oil. Bandages. Darel needs another chisel, unless you intend to shape stone by looking offended at it.”

I sat with three strips of salvage metal across my knees. They were ordinary material, softened by ordinary coals. The core had no charge to waste on a forge that fire could manage.

“Who will you tell where you've been?”

“Everyone at the checkpoint already knows where the cart went.”

“Who else?”

“Whoever has flour.”

Vaelin stood nearby with Darel's small slate. He had begun recording the weights of the blocks, their positions, and the direction in which they shifted during each test. Her attention remained on the slate, which meant she was listening carefully.

I let Hesta take the cart.

The workers' bound tools remained behind. Darel would stay because leaving the others without tools would cost them their work. Hesta would return because the people waiting here needed what she could bring. There were more ways to close a gate than laying stone across it.

When she had gone, I fitted the heated strips around a circular wooden former.

They made an ugly open frame, too wide at the back, interrupted by spaces where separate containments would eventually sit. I added three crude spacers and held it above the drawing in my Doctrine.

Nothing happened.

The frame was not the Halo. There was no advantage in lying to myself about that. It gave my hands something to measure while I worked out how the future crown would relate unlike elemental natures without letting one consume the rest.

Below the platform, the core released a stored pulse into the lifting cradle.

A block rose. The motion lamina guided its turn. Four workers hauled the lines, and Darel lowered it onto the wall's next course. When the pulse ended, the cradle stopped. They waited while I prepared another finite charge.

The floor now reached around the standing pillar and the broken second foundation. A low wall had begun along one side. The buried stair remained buried and shored. The unknown thing beneath it offered no instructions.

All of that had taken days, sore hands, supplies, and arguments. I wanted a Tower visible from every approach. I had a working place that could survive another load.

Vaelin returned the slate to Darel and came to the edge of the platform.

“Will you unbind their tools when Hesta comes back?”

“When the wall is safe.”

“You'll decide that too.”

“Yes.”

She looked at the metal frame in my hand.

“Another circle.”

“This one will hold more.”

“You keep confusing that with enough.”

I set the frame down carefully.

I had not confused the two. Enough was a condition other people hoped to reach. More remained available to anyone willing to decide who would pay for it.

Eryth

The litter party arrived with six carriers, two poles, and a woman who examined Merec's leg before speaking to anyone else.

Eryth stayed out of her way.

She approved the splint, disapproved how long the injured man had gone without proper care, and accepted that none of them could improve the past by agreeing more loudly. Senna brought bread, bandages, and a small pack bought against the road guild's debt to her.

“This isn't a gift,” she told Eryth. “They owed me more.”

He took it with thanks.

Halven gave the carriers his own pack for Merec's head. Before they left, he placed the stripped survey crowns beside the Oak.

“Should I destroy them?”

Lyria shook her head.

“Take them. Show how they were used.”

He looked frightened again. This time Eryth thought it might become useful.

The wolf led the party away along a path wide enough for the litter. No silver cord held it straight. It bent around living roots and followed ground that accepted the weight. Soon the leaves closed behind the last carrier.

Eryth remained one more night.

In the morning, Lyria set the Star Compass in a hollow at the Oak's base. Its point turned toward a gap in the eastern crown, where three stars were still visible through daylight.

“Touch the relation,” she said. “Don't take the image for a road.”

He laid the staff beside it.

The second seal warmed under his hand.

He saw no grand vision. Instead he understood a sequence he could test: the old watercourse upstream from the corrected milestone; three dry basins cut into pale rock; a ravine whose northern wall cast a stair-shaped shadow at morning. Beyond that shadow, the route ceased to behave like an ordinary trail.

At its farthest relation stood suspended stone against a depth of stars.

The Labyrinth.

He repeated each landmark aloud. Lyria corrected the order of the basins and made him repeat it again.

The compass point settled.

“Will that road remain?” he asked.

“Long enough for a traveler who keeps walking. If it changes, the pattern you learned can recognize the difference where you meet it. It cannot make the old route true because you prefer your directions.”

Eryth lifted the compass.

Its weight was almost nothing. He imagined how useful it would be on a road where every answer could shift. He imagined his brother holding it, asking it to find a path that the destination had already refused.

“This belongs here,” he said.

“It was made here. That doesn't decide everything.”

“The people who need it will have to come where its directions mean something.”

Lyria held out her hand.

He placed the Star Compass in it.

She returned it to the hollow. The silver bark folded around the bowl without closing over its point. Small stars moved through the living wood, and Eryth understood that the Oak was not a box in which a prize had been hidden. It was part of what kept the compass honest.

“Keep it,” he said.

“I will.”

He checked what remained his to carry.

Aetherium. Water. Food. Fresh dressings. The plain ancient staff with two stable patterns along its grain and other places still unfinished.

No golden weave from the caves. No compass taken from the Oak. Help received did not have to become a possession to remain real.

Lyria walked with him to the first ordinary-looking trees.

“Do you mean to bring your brother through one of these paths?” she asked.

“No.”

The answer surprised him by needing no struggle.

“What do you mean to do?”

“I need to learn what can be closed without crushing the people near it.”

“That is a more difficult question than where a road goes.”

“I've noticed.”

The star-wolf waited beside the watercourse. It accompanied him as far as the milestone with its two conflicting arrows, then stopped.

Eryth turned.

For an instant the animal looked almost ordinary, a patient shape beneath the trees. Then sunlight moved through its ribs, and the stars inside it answered.

He raised his uninjured hand.

The wolf went back into the grove.

Eryth left the milestone as it was and followed the watercourse upstream. By midday he found the first dry basin. Before evening he reached the pale ravine.

He made a small camp outside it, ate Senna's bread, and loosened his shoulder binding before sleep.

At dawn, if the directions held, a shadow would show him the way to a place that had learned how to keep a moment from ending.

He laid the unfinished staff within reach and slept while the night was still willing to pass.

CHAPTER 15

The Door That Remembered

PART 1 OF 5

The Unfinished Minute

Eryth

The last waymark stood in the bed of a river that had forgotten its water.

The morning shadow on the ravine’s northern wall had led Eryth over a narrow stair of rock and into this upper watercourse. By midday he found the marker half buried beneath pale gravel. Three cuts crossed its face. Rain had softened the upper two; the lowest remained sharp enough to catch a fingernail. Beyond it, the valley narrowed until the cliffs appeared to meet.

He had eaten the last of his fresh bread that morning. His shoulder remained stiff beneath the fresh dressing. He had managed to fasten his own cloak, although the reach sent a tight pain down his arm. He sat beside the marker before attempting anything with the staff. The grain lay dark beneath his thumb. Two completed patterns waited in its shallow beds, neither brightening merely because he wanted an answer.

He drank, counted his remaining food, and considered the cliff.

The route Lyria had shown him ended here. The Star Compass remained with her, within the keeping of the Cosmic Oak. What he carried was his memory of its answer and the pattern he had learned by helping make that answer possible.

He put the staff against the lowest cut.

A thin line appeared across the gravel. It pointed toward the cliff, then bent sharply upward.

“Of course,” he said.

The ledge stood higher than his head. He could see no way to climb it with his left arm. He followed the line farther and found a slab balanced over an old channel. Its near end sank beneath his foot. The farther end rose, becoming a step.

He waited to see whether it would carry him.

The slab moved again. Another stone turned above it. Beyond the cliff, stars appeared where solid rock had been.

Eryth withdrew his foot.

The valley did not vanish. Gravel still grated beneath his boot; a moth circled the small pool left by the previous night's rain. But through the opening between the stones, a passage hung across an immense darkness. Other passages crossed above and below it. Some were whole. Others ended in broken edges with nothing beneath them. Small lights moved among the suspended stones as though each had its own patient destination.

A man stood on the nearest landing.

His robe was the color of ash after rain. In one hand he held a clear crystal, no larger than a plum, with a narrow golden line arrested inside it. His other hand was pressed against the wall of a passage Eryth could not yet see.

“Can you walk?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Without needing that arm?”

“Usually.”

“Then bring your rope. Hurry without jumping.”

Eryth tied one end of his rope around the waymark. He tested the first slab again and climbed. Each stone settled under his weight, then yielded to the next. The destination pattern kept the thin route visible. It did not widen the stones or spare him the climb.

On the landing, the ash-robed man looked first at his face and then at the staff.

“An old tool,” he said.

“An unfinished one. Are you Tempus?”

“Yes. I can answer more when they are out.”

A sound like a great pot cracking came from behind him.

Tempus stepped aside enough for Eryth to see the chamber.

Its floor was circular, perhaps twenty paces across. A stone rib curved through its center, carrying two doorways back to back. Through the nearer doorway, a short stair descended toward the landing where they stood. Through the other shone a white, wavering light. Between the rib and the far wall, two people crouched beside an overturned tool basket.

The woman had wound a cloth around one forearm. The man beside her was holding his boot away from the ground.

“Stay where you are,” Tempus called to them. “I have another pair of hands.”

“Good ones?” the woman asked.

“One and a half,” Eryth said.

“That puts us ahead.”

He moved toward the stair. Tempus caught his cloak.

“First, watch.”

A drop fell from a small stone cup above the near doorway.

It landed on the first stair without breaking.

Another followed. The drops accumulated in a trembling line. A crack opened through the lintel; white dust ran down the jamb. The floor between the two travelers and the exit tipped toward the light at the farther door.

The man swore and grabbed the basket.

Eryth lunged. Tempus held him back with surprising strength.

The central rib broke.

For an instant the entire chamber was falling.

Then the dust lifted.

Stones returned to the places they had occupied. The drops rose one after another into the cup. The floor leveled beneath the travelers, and the great fracture in the lintel narrowed until it was only a dark hair across the stone.

The woman remained bent over her arm. Blood spread through the cloth.

The man had dropped the basket. It lay where he had released it.

“How long?” Eryth asked.

“From the first drop to the fall? A little less than two minutes.”

“How long have they been there?”

“Longer than that.”

Tempus showed him the crystal. The line inside it had shortened.

“I have confined the recurrence to this chamber. It repeats the last sound arrangement of its stone. I cannot give their bodies an earlier hour. Nor yours, if you enter.”

The woman lifted her wrapped arm. “We remember. We get thirsty. We keep everything the stone does to us.”

“What happened here?”

“We came to replace the approach marks,” she said. “The inner wall shifted while we were measuring. Joren was on the wrong side.”

“So Ona came after me,” the man said. “Before you admire her judgment.”

Tempus's hand shook against the wall. The crystal steadied it.

“I can preserve the standing interval,” he said. “I cannot stand in every part of it.”

Eryth understood the invitation without mistaking it for a promise of safety. He untied the rope from his waist, leaving its other end anchored outside the Labyrinth, and passed the coil to Tempus.

“Keep that end here.”

“Your own possessions will not be restored if the stone breaks them.”

“Then let's try not to break them.”

He entered as the first drop fell.

The third step moved beneath him. He caught the near jamb with his right hand. Above his knuckles, the fine crack opened.

A voice came through it.

“Below the break. Keep the living on your side.”

It was hurried, rough with thirst, and gone before he could look for its owner.

Eryth lowered his hand. A sliver of stone sheared away exactly where his fingers had been.

He glanced at Tempus.

The guardian's mouth was closed.

“Was that you?”

“Walk,” Tempus said. “Questions can wait longer than the floor.”

PART 2 OF 5

A Place for Every Hunger

Kael

A wall rises slowly when every stone has to be carried by someone who would rather be elsewhere.

Over the next four days, I learned to distinguish the people who disliked me from those who hoped to profit by staying close. The distinction mattered less to the masonry than I had expected. Both kinds wanted meals. Both grew careless when tired. Neither could hold a stone in position while I argued with the core.

Hesta returned with grain, oil, and the chisel Darel needed. The deliveries did not buy back the workers’ freedom to leave.

The new work climbed around the old foundations. The first pillar still stood at its center. The broken second had become a problem that required bracing instead of a grievance that could be answered by pride. Beneath the rubble, the buried stair kept its silence.

I did not mistake the silence for emptiness.

The regulator shell had given my workings intervals. Before it, I had spent strength because a thing needed doing. Now I could store a measured charge, close the input, and release a portion without offering the whole of myself to the result.

It made power countable.

It did not make power free.

One morning a stone hung halfway to the new wall when the charge fell below the lifting mark. The rigging took its weight with a crack. A man on the scaffold dropped flat. Someone below shouted my name as if it were a warning used in place of falling stone.

I could have paid for another pulse with my blood.

I let the rope hold.

“Lower it,” I said.

Darel looked from me to the suspended block. “We have men under that rig.”

“Then move them.”

He did. The lowering took the better part of an hour. By the end of it, the six workers hated me more intelligently than they had that morning.

I wrote the failed lift in the margin of my calculation. A useful machine had to survive the refusal of its maker to be generous.

The crown required the same discipline.

I had shaped no closed circle. I had loosened the crude spacers of the inert frame and exchanged its wooden former for clay that could bear a hotter test. What lay on the table was the same unfinished arrangement of separate arcs, with empty intervals between them. Fine channels cut along the inner faces would carry captured light. Darklight would enclose them. Each elemental sample would have its own seat and its own restraint before I required anything to answer with the rest.

The old mineral grain, chipped from that first disastrous fragment, remained in its separate hollow near the regulator. I used its tendency to gather weight as a reference. I did not grind it into the crown and hope its nature would become obedient because the pieces were smaller.

The next alignment opened after the laborers had gone to their evening meal. I had spent the afternoon feeding the regulator my own strength; the salvaged ward-lamps had little left to offer.

I sent no one through it. There was nowhere for a traveler to enter at the source. The single receiving mouth formed above the basin in our world, narrow and trembling, while the pattern I had chosen reached for a moving flake of blue-white material beneath a remote, lightless sky.

It might once have belonged to a mountain. It might have been the frozen skin of a sea without shores. The alignment did not give me a history. It gave me proximity, resistance, and the first dangerous suggestion of cold.

I drew the flake nearer.

The basin rang.

Not loudly. A small, clear note, like a spoon striking a glass in a room where everyone has stopped speaking.

Every drop of moisture on the receiving stones whitened into frost.

I cut the draw.

The mouth closed before I could persuade myself that another moment would make the collection worth its cost. What remained in the basin was a scale no broader than a fingernail. Its edge glowed blue. The rest looked like ordinary clouded glass.

The regulator had lost two stored portions. A third was bleeding through the vent.

Vaelin stood beyond the working with her stick under one hand.

“How much did you take?” she asked.

“That.”

“From what?”

“A source that could bear more.”

“You didn't answer.”

I used a pair of stone jaws to lift the scale into an empty cup. The jaws whitened with frost. The captured gold around the cup drew tight, then held.

“No,” I said. “I didn't.”

She watched until the cup was covered. Then she went back to the men checking the scaffold. She had learned that I could not be shamed into forgetting what I wanted. I had learned that this did not stop her speaking.

I tested the new sample against a single crown arc.

Cold entered the gold channel. Darklight contained it for the length of three breaths, long enough for frost to cover the clay form beneath it. I closed the feed. The arc warmed slowly, holding its shape.

One nature. One place. A small success.

I tried to bring the mineral reference into relation with it.

The clay split.

The chilled arc slid inward, dragged toward the grain. Its gold channel brightened almost to white. I drove my knife through the temporary binding and broke the contact before the two samples could pull the regulator into their disagreement.

The knife struck the floor in two pieces.

For some time afterward I could not feel the middle fingers of my right hand.

I sat on the stone with the ruined clay in my lap. The shape I wanted remained visible in the broken pieces. A crown that assigned a place to every hunger. A crown that would let me carry command away from the center that had become my tether.

The incomplete arcs offered no relief from that tether yet.

Above me, someone hammered a wedge into the scaffold. The sound was irregular. Whoever held the hammer was tired.

Berrin had died within reach of my hands. That was a fact no calculation changed. I had found use for his death, and the use was gone. I could have made the emptiness afterward into a warning about continuing.

Instead I had made it into a requirement for a better reservoir.

I set the clay pieces beside the drawing and began again with the intervals.

PART 3 OF 5

The Other Door

Eryth

The floor began moving before Eryth reached the tool basket.

He set the staff across the shifting seam and found the first pattern with his thumb. The wood took a pale line along its grain. Under it, the two sides of the floor agreed to remain level for a moment.

Ona stared at the staff.

“Can you keep that?”

“For a little while. Can you walk?”

“Yes. Joren can't.”

“Can,” Joren said. “Badly.”

His boot had swollen tight around his ankle. Ona had cut the laces, but the leather still held the foot in a shape it no longer wanted to bear. He was older than Eryth had first thought, with gray beginning at his temples and the strained patience of a man who disliked needing help in front of someone he had once taught.

Eryth looped the rope around his chest, beneath the arms.

“When I say move, use Ona. Tempus will take the rope from the other side.”

“And you?”

“Keeping the floor.”

The near doorway stood open. He could see Tempus through it, planted on the landing with the rope wound around his forearm. The route to him was clear.

Eryth touched the second seal.

A narrow light followed the floor toward the stair. Then it stopped at the doorway.

The doorway was closing.

Stone had begun growing across its opening from both sides, folding inward like two leaves. The far door brightened as the near one narrowed. Through the white light, Eryth glimpsed shelves, a table, a man bending over an open record.

His thumb slipped on the staff.

The floor lurched.

“Monk,” Ona said.

Eryth forced his gaze away. “Move now.”

They managed three steps before the stone leaves met in the near opening. The rope ran through a shrinking slit. Tempus shouted something Eryth could not hear.

The closing stone caught the rope and dragged Joren backward.

Eryth let the floor go long enough to seize the knot. Ona caught the man's coat; together they pulled him away from the tightening line. Eryth drew Aetherium with his right hand and cut the rope.

The blade went through cleanly.

Joren fell against him. The chamber tipped.

“Under the rib,” Ona said. “Here.”

She hauled them toward a low recess beside the central support. They crowded into it as the floor broke outward. Eryth put the staff across their knees, its first pattern holding the edge of the recess long enough for the fall to pass.

The dust rose.

Stone returned. The near doorway opened, and the severed end of the rope dropped on the stair.

Eryth stayed on his knees.

His shoulder had opened beneath the binding. He could feel the warm patch growing under his shirt. Aetherium lay within reach. He picked it up, checked the blade, and sheathed it before his hand shook harder.

Tempus came to the bottom of the stair but no farther. His palm remained against the outside wall.

“Can you hold the interval here?” Eryth asked.

“Briefly, if you all remain in the recess.”

They pressed closer. The first drop swelled beneath the cup and did not fall.

“What was that room?”

Tempus looked toward the far door. Its light had dimmed to the color of paper held before a lamp.

“What did you see?”

“A man at a table.”

“Joren sees a quay,” Ona said. “Before the south bridge fell. I see our workshop when my hands still belonged to me.”

She tried to flex her wrapped fingers. The effort ended in a sharp breath.

“Past?” Eryth asked.

“Sometimes a record,” Tempus said. “Sometimes an arrangement that could have been. Sometimes the desire brought to it. That chamber once allowed their study without passage. Its restraint has worn through.”

“Can a person be there?”

“A living person can stand in a corridor of the Labyrinth. A likeness in this door does not establish one.”

“My father disappeared.”

He had not meant to say it. Once the words were out, he wanted to make them more useful by adding every piece of evidence he carried: Eldra, the white fire, the Sky Falcon, the account Maren had given. He stopped himself before grief became another weight Tempus had to hold.

“Then you have a reason to look carefully,” the guardian said. “And a reason looking may hurt your judgment.”

Eryth looked at the staff instead.

The two learned patterns were still present. He had used the first to steady the floor. The second had identified a path that existed until the door closed.

“Why did the near exit close?”

“The central rib carries the strain of both openings. When the white door widens, this one draws shut. When this one is held open against that strain, the rib breaks sooner.”

“Close the white one.”

“I have. Each recurrence restores its earlier opening.”

Tempus lifted the Chrono Crystal. Eryth could see small clouds forming inside its clarity.

“This preserves a chance to leave. It cannot decide what the chamber is allowed to repeat afterward.”

“Could we leave through the other?” Joren asked.

“The floor would collapse behind you into an unverified destination,” Tempus said. “I could no longer keep you within this interval.”

Joren nodded slowly. It was the nod of a man consenting to a danger he could understand over one that offered him everything.

Ona unwound the top layer of her bandage. There was a cut across the back of her wrist. Deeper beneath it, swelling had begun to stiffen the hand.

“The upper hinge did that,” she said. “First time. I caught the door where it was already split.”

Below the break.

Eryth glanced toward the crack. No voice returned.

He tore a clean strip from the inside of his robe and helped Ona bind the wound. She told him where to place it. Her knowledge of stone had not made her eager to surrender knowledge of her own body.

Then they counted what they had: half a rope, two wooden wedges, a small hammer, three narrow measuring rods, his water, Ona's nearly empty flask, and enough food for people who were not already exhausted.

“An impressive rescue party,” Joren said.

Ona gave him the smaller flask. “Try drinking instead of reviewing it.”

Tempus's face tightened.

The suspended drop lengthened.

Eryth set the staff across his knees and studied the grain. Beneath the first two governing seals, a deeper unfilled bed curved back on itself. Smaller elemental beds branched away from it. Lyria had already shown him the danger of an earlier opening returning; here, watching water hesitate above a stair that had already caught it, he began to see what that lesson required of his hands.

PART 4 OF 5

Marks on the Underside

Vaelin

Vaelin found the alteration because the new chalk was cleaner than the old.

Darel had marked safe loads on the scaffold uprights. He used a broad, blunt piece of white stone and pressed harder at the end of each stroke. The figure beside the east lift had been rewritten with a sharp point. The weight permitted there had increased by nearly half.

She touched the new mark with her thumb.

A guard stepped closer.

“Leave the works alone.”

“Find the man who changed this.”

“It came from above.”

She looked at the empty scaffold. “How high?”

The guard did not smile. He was one of the men who had arrived after the first payments of food, a narrow-faced fellow with a borrowed leather breastpiece and a sword that hung badly from his belt. Kael had given such men permission to be certain. They used it before they had learned much else.

Vaelin put her stick against the post and rubbed out the new figure.

The guard caught her elbow.

She turned her wrist, stepping close enough that his reach became a liability. Her injured leg would not support a fight. She needed him to understand that a fight would still cost him something.

“Take your hand away.”

“Kael said—”

“Then bring him. Let him tell the people under that lift which part of their scaffold he has strengthened.”

Darel had heard. So had the men laying out the next stones. One of them set down his mallet.

The guard released her.

He went to the inner platform. No order came back. For the rest of that morning, the lift carried only the loads first marked upon it.

Vaelin knew better than to call that a victory. It was a delay purchased by witnesses.

She needed more of those.

The carters left their delivery tallies beneath a flat stone near the unloading ground. Stone, lime, rope, oats. Ordinary words made the growing walls possible. Each receipt carried the mark of the load master and the date of delivery. Beside some, Darel had begun copying from his small slate the pulses used to lift the stone. Vaelin recognized the load records she had asked him to keep, now joined to the receipts that would travel with the carts.

One line for a discharge. A crossed line if the regulator failed to release cleanly. A circle when the vent had to take the remainder.

The men who made the marks cared about broken ropes. They had recorded a different kind of weakness without knowing its value.

Vaelin waited until Hesta came for her receipt. The carter had gray at one temple and the same expression she wore when a horse was being asked to trust rotten harness.

“Who keeps the rejected tallies?” she asked.

“Nobody. We use the backs.”

“May I have these?”

Hesta looked toward the inner platform before answering.

“They're mine until he pays the full weight.”

“Then keep them. I want to copy the marks.”

“For the Council?”

“For anyone standing beside a wall when it decides to breathe.”

Hesta studied her face. Then she put three damp sheets on an empty barrel, holding their corners while Vaelin worked.

She used charcoal from the cookfire. Her fingers were clumsy. She copied the order of the strokes, the location of each lift, and the mark for a failed release. On the back she drew the

ground she could actually see: the inner platform, the basin, the low drainage cut beyond the new wall.

She did not fill unseen spaces with certainty.

“The vent runs that way now,” Hesta said, pointing toward the cut. “They told us to leave the channel clear.”

“Who told you?”

She named Darel. Vaelin wrote that down too.

A shadow crossed the paper.

Kael stood on the edge of the inner platform, close enough to see what she was doing. He had wrapped his right hand. The cloth was gray at the fingertips.

“You've taken an interest in accounts,” he said.

“Your lifting marks don't agree with your loads.”

“They agree now.”

“Because I changed one back.”

“I heard.”

For a moment she thought he would name the earlier failure in his alignment. He had looked at her differently since then, comparing what he knew of her hands with what had happened to a reachable piece of his apparatus. Suspicion had narrowed his gaze without giving it a fact to rest upon.

Instead he looked at Hesta.

“Your cart is empty.”

“Still waiting on payment.”

“Take the grain listed. There is no coin today.”

“Then I won't bring the next load.”

Kael's face did not change.

“You will discuss that at the road.”

Hesta gathered her receipts. Vaelin kept the copies beneath her palm until the carter had gone. She knew the road had guards now. A discussion there would not resemble this one.

Kael watched the corner of the copied map lift in the wind.

“You think you can measure me with that?”

“I think stone falls on people whether or not you feel understood.”

He turned away first.

Vaelin let him go. She folded the papers inside the lining of her coat, beside the evidence she had already refused to surrender, and went to find out which guard had been sent after the carter.

PART 5 OF 5

The First Permission

Eryth

On the next attempt, they reached the doorway before it began to close.

Joren moved with one arm around Ona's shoulders and the other across Eryth's sound side. Eryth held the staff forward like a short rail. Its first pattern carried a portion of the man's weight; its second kept the three of them on the narrow route between the shifting floor seams.

They were slower than Eryth had hoped and faster than Joren believed possible.

“Nearly,” Ona said.

Beyond the threshold, Tempus reached for Joren's coat.

Then the white door opened fully.

The room beyond it was their father's workroom in Eldra.

Eryth knew the table. He knew the small crack beside its right leg, where Kael had once dropped a heated lamp and Rhydian had insisted the burn remain as an explanation for future care. He knew the shallow bowl of sand used to dry fresh ink. The high window held a square of cloudy morning.

Rhydian stood from his chair.

“Eryth?”

The name had the exact upward turn that belonged to surprise restrained for the sake of a sleeping house.

Eryth stopped.

Joren sagged against him.

The near doorway narrowed a hand's breadth.

“Keep moving,” Ona said.

In the room, Rhydian put his palm flat on the table.

“Don't come farther. The floor—”

White fire moved across the window.

Eryth drove the staff toward the center of the rib and tried to hold both openings.

The first seal burned beneath his thumb.

The floor steadied. The near doorway stopped closing. For an instant he had both routes: the living man against his shoulder and the father standing beyond a light he had spent too many nights remembering.

He could hold them.

He could ask one question.

“Where are you?”

Rhydian's mouth moved.

The staff bent.

Eryth felt the strain choose his injured shoulder because it was the weakest part of the arrangement. Pain whitened his sight. The two doors widened together, pulling opposite sides of the central rib apart.

“Let the far one go!” Tempus shouted.

Eryth did not know how. He had given the same holding pattern to both, and the failing stone had accepted the gift as a single demand.

Ona struck his hand.

His thumb left the seal.

The floor dropped beneath Joren's good foot.

Eryth caught him by the belt. Ona seized the near jamb below the crack and hauled with the bleeding arm. Tempus reached through the narrowing gap, got his hand under Joren's collar, and dragged the man across the threshold.

The stone leaves shut between them.

Joren was outside.

Eryth and Ona were not.

The far room flared white. Rhydian disappeared in it.

Ona pulled Eryth into the recess as the lintel fell.

The recurrence caught the chamber.

Dust lifted. The rib mended. The doorway opened.

Joren remained on the landing beside Tempus.

He was breathing hard, alive, one boot gone. It lay inside the chamber where his foot had pulled free, and the returned floor had failed to put it back on him.

For several breaths Eryth could look at nothing else.

One person out. One boot left. One injury carried across the edge.

Ona bent over her arm. Fresh blood ran between her fingers.

“You made it worse,” she said.

“Yes.”

“Did you see him?”

“I saw someone who looked like him.”

“That isn't what I asked.”

Eryth lowered his head. “Yes.”

The word cost him more than admitting the mistake. For a moment, against everything he knew about records and longing, he had seen his father. His body had believed before his judgment could catch it.

Ona breathed through her teeth while he tightened her bandage. She did not comfort him. He was grateful for it and ashamed of the gratitude.

Outside, Joren tried to stand. Tempus pushed him back onto the stair.

“Sit. Help by remaining where we put you.”

The guardian held the drop again. The line in his crystal was shorter. Eryth could see the effort now in the tendons of his neck.

“You could have told me it would use his voice,” Eryth said.

“Yes.”

“Why didn't you?”

“I did not know what you would bring to it. I told you what its answers could be.”

Eryth almost argued. The beginnings of a dozen accusations rose readily, each promising relief if he could make another man responsible for the exact thing grief had done to his hand.

He let them pass.

“What can I trust in that room?”

“What you can verify outside it. Nothing about your father's fate has become certain because this place knows the sound of your hope.”

Ona looked toward Joren.

“And some things,” she said, “are easier to verify.”

Joren lifted his bare foot and gave them an unhappy little wave.

Eryth laughed once. The sound broke painfully against his chest.

He drank a mouthful of water, then passed the flask to Ona. There was less left than he had expected. The chamber had returned its stones several times. It had returned none of the water they had swallowed.

He began watching the edges.

At the beginning of each interval, the white door stood a little open. The near door stood wide. As the white opening grew, the near one contracted. Both changes ran through a fine channel along the base of the central rib.

He had been looking at the door leaves. The channel remembered before they moved.

“Ona. The measuring rods.”

She passed him one.

He laid it across the channel and scratched the moment at which the white door began to widen. Then he marked the position of his own knee on the floor beside it.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“Seeing what comes back.”

Tempus released the held drop.

Eryth stayed in the recess with Ona, holding its edge while the chamber spent the interval. He did not approach either door. He watched his marks.

The floor tipped. The rib broke. The stones returned.

The scratch on the channel vanished.

The mark on the measuring rod remained.

Eryth shifted the rod. Its wood carried the evidence of a moment the stone no longer admitted.

He tried again with a broken piece of the chamber's own floor. He cut a line on its upper face, set it inside the recess, and watched. At the turn, the line disappeared. The fragment returned to the floor that had originally held it.

Nothing had multiplied. Nothing had been healed. The same chamber was being compelled to repeat a chosen arrangement while their bodies and what they had carried into it went on paying for the difference.

“The first arrangement,” he said.

Tempus looked at him.

“The white door is already open when the recurrence begins. Everything I do afterward gets taken away.”

“Yes.”

“If I close it at the end, the chamber borrows an earlier permission and opens it again.”

The guardian's hand tightened on the crystal.

“What would have to keep the closing?” he asked.

Eryth looked at the mark on the wooden rod. Then at the empty bed in the ancient staff.

He could not simply demand that all time stop. Tempus was spending himself to preserve less than two minutes in one room. Eryth had no crystal, no endless reserve, no knowledge of what a larger demand would tear away.

But the staff had carried two learned agreements from places that were now far behind him. The wood did not forget them when the stone chose an earlier state.

He put his thumb beside the unfilled governing seal.

Across the chamber, the white door brightened.

Rhydian sat at the table again. He turned a page, looked toward the opening, and began to rise.

Eryth did not reach for him.

He watched the small channel at the base of the rib begin the action that would close the near exit. A line passing beneath a door. A permission older than his refusal.

The chamber was not merely remembering its fall.

It was remembering that this door had once been allowed to open.

CHAPTER 16

What the Wood Kept

PART 1 OF 5

A Closing Made Now

Eryth

Ona asked for the knife before Eryth realized she meant to cut her sleeve away.

He gave her Aetherium instead. She looked at the sword, then at him.

“For cloth?”

“It's the edge I have.”

She laid the damaged sleeve against the stone and sliced through it with careful pressure. The cloth came away stiff with blood. Her forearm had swollen beneath the bandage; a dark bruise ran toward her elbow.

“Has it gone numb?” he asked.

“Two fingers. The others wish they had.”

He loosened the wrapping. She watched his hands and corrected him when he pulled too tightly. Outside the chamber, Joren had found a narrow board among the tools that had fallen onto the stair. He pushed it through the open doorway. Eryth laid it beneath her wrist and made a splint.

The first drop waited above them. Tempus's borrowed stillness had begun to tremble.

“How many more?” Eryth asked him.

“I won't promise the crystal a number it hasn't agreed to.”

“Can you stop preserving the room while we're here?”

“Yes.”

“What would happen?”

“The damaged doorway would finish collapsing.”

Ona tightened the last knot with her teeth. She spat out a thread.

“Then we should stop needing it.”

Eryth spread the measuring rods across his knees. One carried the mark the floor had forgotten. He turned the staff beside it until the third governing bed faced upward.

He had tried holding place. He had tried choosing a destination. Both had worked. Neither had stopped the chamber calling an earlier arrangement of its door a stronger authority than his present refusal.

He could fill the third governing seal with a command to remain shut. It was the easiest thought, and for that reason he distrusted it.

He touched the wood with the smallest light he could hold.

A line formed in the empty bed. It curved inward, then broke apart.

The staff grew warm under his hand. No mark remained.

“Wrong shape?” Ona asked.

“Wrong question.”

“Then ask one about getting us out.”

He deserved the sharpness. He turned the staff toward the near doorway and followed its second pattern until the present route became clear. Joren sat beyond it. Tempus stood with one hand on the wall. Their outlines remained when he looked away and looked again.

Through the white door, Rhydian turned the same page.

Eryth watched the motion to its end. His father's right hand traveled to the corner of the paper. The little finger paused over the drying sand. Then the page turned, and the room brightened.

Again.

A record could repeat a true thing. Repetition did not make the man behind it living. Nor did Eryth's recognition establish that the likeness came from anything beyond his own memory.

He made himself say that aloud.

Ona listened, then asked, “Will knowing it make you let go?”

“I don't know.”

“I need you to know before you try carrying me.”

The suspended drop fell a fraction lower.

Eryth put the staff down.

For as long as he could remember, finding Rhydian had been a direction. Even when the way vanished, there had been somewhere to face. A witness, a river, a sealed record. Kael could become someone Eryth scarcely knew, the Council could alter its accounts, their house could remain an empty shape in memory, but the search made those losses seem unfinished.

If his father was still somewhere, perhaps there remained a person who could put the family back into sentences that made sense.

Ona's bandage darkened while he sat with that hope.

He looked at it until it became the thing he could not look past.

“I won't hold the white door open again,” he said.

“Even if he calls?”

“Yes.”

She nodded. “Then tell me where to put my feet.”

They used the next interval to test the closing.

Eryth placed one wooden wedge beneath the white door's lower leaf. Ona held the other against the far side with a measuring rod. He stayed below the break in the central rib. The staff's first pattern took the hinge's weight while the two wedges guided the leaves together.

The room beyond narrowed to a white stripe.

The near exit widened.

Joren called encouragement from outside. Eryth asked him to stop counting aloud; the borrowed rhythm confused his own sense of the floor.

He pressed the staff against the closed seam and tried to carry that shape into the third governing seal.

For a moment it held.

Then the first drop rose instead of falling.

The returning arrangement reached the base of the door.

Eryth's new line vanished from the stone. The leaves thrust apart. One wedge split under the pressure. Its broken end struck his right palm, driving a splinter beneath the skin.

He cried out and lost the staff.

Ona hit him with her shoulder before he could fall toward the open room. They landed together in the recess. She dragged the staff in by its lower end, using the splinted arm despite the pain it brought to her face.

Stone broke above them.

The recurrence took it back.

Eryth sat with his injured palm open on his knee. A thin line of blood crossed it. The splinter was visible beneath the skin.

Ona stared at him.

“You kept your promise,” she said.

He looked toward the white door. It had opened. He had not helped it.

“Yes.”

It was a smaller answer than escape, but it belonged to them now.

While she held his hand, he used the point of Aetherium to ease the splinter out. He washed the cut with a little of their remaining water. The pain was clean and immediate, with none of the grandeur he had once expected from a quest.

Tempus watched the third governing seal bed.

“You copied a closed door,” he said.

“Yes.”

“The chamber owns many copies. What happened here that it cannot claim to have happened before?”

Eryth looked at Ona's splint, at the blood on his own palm, at Joren outside with one bare foot.

Then he understood why the drawing had broken apart.

He had offered the staff an image. Another arrangement that could be replaced by an earlier one.

What he needed to preserve was an act.

A particular door, leading to a particular unverified place, closed by someone standing here now. The wood could keep that decision through the return of the stone that surrounded it.

He picked up the staff with his bandaged hand.

This time he did not ask it to remember a door that had never been opened.

PART 2 OF 5

The Price of the Road

Kael

The roadkeeper brought the ward instrument wrapped in a horse blanket.

Two of my men walked beside him. Neither carried the bundle. I had told them that if they wanted wages for guarding an object they should begin by learning why its owner feared dropping it.

The keeper stopped beyond the blood line.

Behind him, the two impounded wagons stood on the lower road. One carried flour. The other carried ordinary glass packed in straw. Their drivers had argued that the road did not belong to me.

I had found that argument persuasive enough to require an answer.

The answer stood beside the wagons with swords.

“You release both carts,” the keeper said.

“When I have the instrument.”

“And the drivers.”

“They are with the carts.”

“You release them too.”

Vaelin stood near the unloading ground. She had come when the keeper entered the clearing and remained where he could see her.

I said, “Yes.”

He lowered the bundle and opened it.

Inside lay a shallow framework of silvered wood carrying six spokes of captured gold. It was a Council road ward, portable enough to move between threatened crossings. I had seen its kind shelter tollhouses during storms. Its light could hold falling branches clear of a roof or turn a thrown blade aside. On a well-kept road, it could spend most of a season doing nothing.

This one had been charged recently.

The keeper held a control rod with a thin cord running to the frame.

“Disconnect it,” I said.

“If I break the relation, I can't draw it back.”

“I know.”

“The eastern shelter will have no ward.”

“Then take it somewhere safer.”

He stared at me. For a moment I thought he would carry the instrument away and leave the wagons where they stood. That would have complicated my men rather than troubled my conscience. I had already decided what the road would teach anyone who challenged the first demand.

Vaelin spoke.

“Your people should hear what this cost.”

“They will,” the keeper said.

He twisted the rod. The cord of light separated cleanly from the frame and withdrew into it. The rod went dull.

Only then did he lift the instrument across the blood line.

I felt the boundary examine the incoming working. No distant source remained attached to it. The gold it carried was already present, stored in a frame a man had surrendered because I controlled where his neighbors could go.

The old prohibition stood. It did not make the transaction innocent.

I took the ward from him and set it beside the inner platform.

“Open the road,” I told my men.

One hesitated. He had begun to enjoy the authority more than the purpose for which I had given it.

“Now.”

He went. We watched the drivers climb onto their wagons. The first team moved, then the second. One wheel struck a rut and a long, fine crash came from the glass beneath the canvas.

The keeper flinched.

“Send your claim to the Council,” I said.

“I will send them the names of the men who stood here.”

“Then spell mine correctly.”

He gathered the blanket and left. Vaelin followed him as far as the line, speaking too quietly for me to hear. She returned without looking at the instrument.

“You could have bought it,” she said.

“With what?”

“The same answer every person you take from must find.”

I knelt beside the frame. Its light responded to the shadow of my hand, tightening around each spoke.

The keeper had charged it well. Most of its reserve remained intact. If I had broken it open, the gold would have fled into a bright, useless moment. I spent the rest of that day separating its channels one at a time, guiding their light into a covered reservoir beneath the inner platform.

The reservoir was a part of the regulator's new shell, divided from the embedded root-heart by two closures. I could open either. I could not open both without giving the stored gold a direct path into the core's hunger.

I marked that fact where no laborer could mistake the closures for ordinary clamps.

Darklight held each golden portion in its own narrow course. The whole remained finite. I recorded six original spokes and the loss suffered moving them. One portion went into stabilizing the new housing. Less than another was reserved for the next alignment and its trial.

The greater share stayed covered.

A crown would require a joining I had still not accomplished. I meant to have something left when I learned how.

That night, the platform did not shine as brightly as the stolen ward had shone in its blanket. Concealment always impressed people less than display. Yet behind the stone cover, the gold waited without running through my body, and I slept for several uninterrupted hours.

When I woke, my hand had begun to recover feeling.

Beyond the wall, the men who had guarded the wagons were asking which stretch of road we would claim next.

I let them finish their breakfast before I answered.

PART 3 OF 5

On This Side

Eryth

They did not begin immediately.

Tempus could no longer hold the first drop still for long, but the low recess remained the safest part of the chamber during a turn. Eryth and Ona crouched there through one complete

recurrence without working. They divided the last of the water. He ate a piece of hard bread slowly enough to keep it down.

Joren sat on the landing, holding the end of the remaining rope. This time it would not cross the upper part of the opening. They had passed it around the base of the jamb, below the place where the stone leaves first met.

“If it catches,” Eryth told him, “let go.”

“I might get you halfway.”

“Then help from there. Don't let it drag you back.”

Joren looked at Ona.

She said, “Do as he says.”

Eryth inspected the staff. There was no hidden gem to uncover, no name that would make the wood become someone else's finished answer. The first two patterns followed its grain like scars healed without concealing themselves. The third governing bed waited below them, with narrower elemental beds branching through the grain.

He understood the work more clearly now and liked it less.

To preserve an act of closing, he had to complete one. The white door's two leaves must meet, the false destination must be separated from the passage out, and the stone's attempt to borrow its earlier state must be caught at the channel where it entered the hinge.

All while the floor moved.

Ona took the unbroken wedge.

“I can hold this with my good hand.”

“You can take the first stair as soon as it opens.”

“And let you drop that thing again?”

He would have argued if the memory of her pulling him into the recess had been less recent.

“Stay below the break.”

“I learned that one expensively.”

Tempus raised the crystal.

The drop fell.

They moved together.

Eryth planted the base of the staff in the shallow channel. The first seal steadied the lower hinge. He did not give it the whole floor. He chose the weight he could bear and left the rest to move around it.

The second seal found the near stair and the landing beyond. For an instant the chamber’s reflections showed several paths superimposed: a doorway unbroken, a doorway walled up, a stair ending in stars. The seal answered only the present route, the one he could trace to the landing where Joren sat with a bare, swollen foot.

He let the other images go.

Ona drove the wedge beneath the far leaf. She braced her good shoulder against it and pushed.

The white room contracted.

Rhydian stood beside his table.

This time he did not call Eryth's name. He lifted the open book a little, the way he had lifted a household account when one of the boys was about to leave a task half done.

“Before you go,” he said.

Eryth's breath caught.

There had been hundreds of such mornings. Before you go, take this to the binder. Before you go, tell your brother the supper bowl is not a place for ink. Before you go, close the window; the rain will reach the papers.

He had remembered the white fire so often that he had nearly lost the ordinary voice it had taken from him.

The likeness gave it back.

Ona made a low sound of pain beside the door.

Eryth did not know whether some true remnant of Rhydian stood beyond that light. He could not prove the room empty. The longing in him seized that uncertainty as if uncertainty were a duty.

He put his bandaged palm flat against the wood.

“If you're there,” he said, “I don't know how to reach you safely.”

Rhydian waited.

“I can't make her pay while I find out.”

He turned the staff.

The first seal moved the lower hinge inward. Ona pulled the wedge free before the closing leaf could crush it. Eryth used Aetherium's sheathed length as a lever against the other side, keeping the blade covered so a slip would not cut the person working beside him.

The white stripe narrowed.

Rhydian put down the book.

Eryth kept his eyes on the seam until it closed.

Silence entered the chamber.

Not peace. Stone still grated beneath their feet. The lintel cracked, and the rope jerked across the stair. But the white door was shut.

Eryth brought the second seal to its destination one last time. He did not try to name the room beyond it as the true past or the place where his father waited. He followed the actual connection as far as the first bend behind the leaves. Beyond it, the pattern went quiet. That was enough to distinguish this opening from the living passage behind him; it gave him no authority to name the farther destination.

Then he pressed the empty seal bed against the hinge channel.

He gave it the closing that had actually happened.

The strain went through his wounded hand. The wood accepted the outline, then held it when he began to withdraw. A pale hook curved along the grain, crossing itself without becoming a circle.

Behind them, the near exit opened fully.

“Go,” Eryth said.

Ona took two steps and stopped. The floor between her and the stairs had begun to separate. Eryth held the staff against the hinge with his right hand and reached back with his left.

His shoulder would not lift far enough.

Joren threw the rope.

Ona caught it against her chest. She wound it once around her forearm above the splint and pushed off the tilting stone. Tempus pulled from the landing. Her boot struck the first stair; Joren caught her coat and dragged her the rest of the way.

He heard her land beside Joren.

Then the recurrence reached the hinge.

The old opening came back as a pressure, exact and cold. He felt the chamber present its claim: the door had been open at the beginning; therefore the door belonged open again.

The third seal answered with the act he had kept in the wood.

Closed here.

To this route.

After that beginning.

The two leaves shuddered.

Their seam remained shut.

Eryth nearly lost his grip. The staff was not creating strength for him. His own dawnfire ran through the pattern, thinning with each breath. A crack traveled across the floor toward his foot.

He had kept the door. He still had to leave.

“Eryth!” Ona shouted.

He turned the staff away from the hinge.

For an instant he was certain the door would open behind him as soon as its keeper moved. Instead the new mark passed into the closed seam and remained there, an agreement carried by the doorway itself. It would not make the stone indestructible. It would not prevent a different working breaking through. It refused this one earlier opening, on this one route, from being used again.

The cost of setting it had already been paid.

Eryth drove the base of the staff against the floor. Its first seal held a narrow strip level beneath his feet. Its second showed the passage that was still real.

He ran.

The upper part of the chamber fell behind him. The stair pitched. He struck his knee, caught the lowest jamb, and felt the staff start to slip from his hand.

Ona reached through the opening.

Her splinted arm could not take his weight. Her other hand closed around the collar of his robe.

Joren caught her belt. Tempus caught Eryth's wrist.

Together they pulled him over the threshold.

He landed hard enough to lose his breath. The staff struck the landing beside his face. Its third mark shone once, very faintly, and settled into the old wood.

Inside the chamber, dust began to rise.

The floor returned. The lintel lifted. The central rib stood whole again.

The white door stayed closed.

Tempus lowered the crystal a fraction.

For the first time since Eryth had arrived, the next drop fell, broke on the stair, and was allowed to remain water.

PART 4 OF 5

What They Called Spent

Kael

The quiet sample cost less to receive than to notice.

I chose its alignment from a pale seam that appeared when the cold flake and the older motion lamina were observed separately, each under its own restraint. Their records offered intersecting hints of a place where vibration failed to travel. I tested the hint without opening the portal. Twice it returned the same resistance.

On the third attempt I used a portion of the road ward's gold.

The single mouth opened above the basin. Material answered from the remote seam, following the alignment toward this world without a second doorway waiting at its origin.

The received flake was smaller than a barley husk.

I closed the mouth before lowering its cover.

Darel struck a scaffold pin outside the working. I saw the hammer fall and heard nothing.

Then I moved my head beyond the basin's edge. The next blow rang clearly.

A small circle of quiet lay over the receiving stones.

It was no absence of power. The sample spent the portion I had given it refusing the passage of sound. When the portion thinned, the hammer returned to my hearing.

I isolated the flake and wrote its cost beside the others.

The crown's separate intervals now had more natures to negotiate than I had reliable agreements between them. Weight gathered. Motion continued. Heat and cold sought their own terms. Quiet refused a thing the others did without noticing.

I could make each useful alone. Commanding them together remained a different labor.

I set three arcs around the clay form and fed them in order rather than at once.

For nine beats, a line of light traveled around the unfinished arrangement. Each sample answered and fell still before the next received its portion. On the tenth, the earlier motion returned through a channel I had already closed.

The arcs twisted.

I broke the trial before they could join.

A brief pressure struck the vent and ran down the drainage cut. Loose gravel lifted outside the new wall, traveled several paces, and fell. No worker stood in its path. Darel had kept the channel clear despite complaints that it wasted unloading ground.

I looked at the shut feed.

It was still shut.

The trace of its earlier open state had survived in the used housing and answered the next pulse as though the closure were merely an interruption.

I marked the failure carefully. I did not know how to forbid that return without strangling the working I needed.

For now, I could separate it from the next test.

“Take those two housings out,” I told the man waiting beside the platform. “No charge in them until I've recut the inner channels.”

He lifted the empty covers with padded tongs.

“Scrap?”

“Spent housings. Store them apart.”

I went back to the arcs.

A few moments later, I heard the covers touch each other. A small sound, scarcely worth turning toward.

I did not turn.

Vaelin

The empty cover moved after the man set it down.

Only the width of a finger. It slid across the plank, stopped, then returned to almost the same position. The carrier stared at it and shifted the other cover farther away.

Vaelin came down from the scaffold supports.

“Don't put them together.”

“He said they were spent.”

“Then leave them somewhere being wrong won't break a leg.”

She found Darel and showed him the pale scrape the cover had made. He bent over it without touching.

“Same direction as the last lift,” he said.

“Write that.”

He fetched his load sheet. She held it flat while he recorded the observation, the time between the failed pulse and the movement, and the position in which the covers had been laid. He wrote his own name beneath it.

The man who had begun calling himself quartermaster arrived with a list of things to be carried out on the next road load. The covers were already on it.

“The washworks takes damaged housings,” he said. “They owe for stone.”

“These still move,” Vaelin told him.

“Their workshops know how to strip a working.”

“Have you told them what working?”

He folded the list.

“Kael said store them apart.”

“Then ask him whether a cart counts.”

Darel looked up sharply. The quartermaster had an audience now. He could not pretend the question had never been asked.

“I'll ask,” he said.

Vaelin watched him go. She did not mistake his irritation for agreement.

With Darel's permission, she copied his entry onto the backs of her tally sheets. She added the destination from the quartermaster's list and the distinction Kael's workers were already erasing: emptied of useful charge did not mean emptied of every instruction the material had learned.

Hesta came for the next lifting marks before sunset. Vaelin showed her the copies.

“If those go on a cart,” she said, “the driver needs this warning before anyone ties the load.”

Hesta read the lines twice.

“I'll watch for them.”

“I will too.”

Across the clearing, the covered reservoir still held the greater share of the road ward's gold. Kael had put a guard beside it. Vaelin could see the practical improvement. He no longer needed to keep every stolen portion alive beneath his own hands.

The improvement frightened her more than the failed test.

She folded the new pages against the old and began looking for a way to carry them through a road that was becoming less free each morning.

PART 5 OF 5

An Ordinary Length of Wood

Eryth

Tempus did not release the chamber all at once.

He let the outer edge resume its own time first. Water ran down the steps. Small fractures opened in the floor where old damage could no longer hide inside an earlier arrangement. The central rib settled with a deep, final sound.

The white door remained shut.

“We should get farther away,” Joren said.

“We will,” Tempus answered. “One fold remains.”

He pointed to the thin break above the near jamb.

A faint sound came through it. Boots on stone, hurried breathing, the beginning of a question.

Eryth knew those footsteps. He had been listening to them from inside his own body when the warning came.

“This is where the interval touches its first edge,” Tempus said. “Only the sound. Nothing can be carried through it.”

Ona looked from the crack to Eryth.

“You heard somebody when you came in.”

“Yes.”

Tempus held the crystal close to the wall. “I can let the fold close without a voice. I cannot make it a road to another hour.”

Eryth looked at Ona's splinted arm, at the bandage over his own palm, and at the doorway through which they had pulled one another. He had learned the words in the time between hearing them and knowing why they mattered. No answer to the seal had arrived with them. No hand from elsewhere had done their work.

He rose carefully and stood below the break.

“Below the break,” he called. “Keep the living on your side.”

His voice went thin inside the crack. A moment later he heard his earlier, puzzled question, too faint to make out unless he already knew it.

The fold closed.

Eryth stepped back.

The crystal in Tempus's hand cleared a little, though its golden line remained diminished. He wrapped it in a soft cloth and placed it inside his robe.

“You keep that?” Eryth asked.

“The Chrono Crystal stays here.”

“Good.”

Tempus smiled for the first time, briefly and without triumph.

They rested in a room beyond the landing where time did nothing remarkable. A lamp needed trimming. A kettle took longer to boil than Joren thought reasonable. Ona fell asleep halfway through telling Tempus that the approach markers were insufficient for anyone carrying tools.

The guardian brought clean cloth, water, and a salve that smelled of ordinary bitter leaves. He cleaned Eryth's palm and checked the shoulder binding without pretending either wound had become unimportant because the staff was finished.

“Will she keep the use of her hand?” Eryth asked.

“I expect so. She needs rest and a healer who can follow the swelling.”

“And him?”

“No weight on the ankle until it has been examined properly.”

Joren opened one eye. “We are in a place where stairways float between stars.”

“Yes,” Tempus said. “And you have injured your ankle.”

Eryth laughed. This time it did not break apart.

He slept with the staff beside him. No dream gave him his father. When he woke, that absence hurt with the familiar plainness it had possessed before the white room tried to turn it into a route.

Tempus sat at the table examining the completed seal beds.

“The Staff of the Akasha,” he said, returning it when Eryth sat up. “Now it can finish the work it begins.”

“All of it?”

“All three governing patterns of a safe threshold. Where it stands. Where it leads. Which opening or closing is permitted to endure.”

Eryth ran his thumb beside the marks, careful of his palm. Between the three governing seals, the smaller elemental beds had settled into a connected order. They remained distinct, quiet until a particular nature addressed them. Completing the staff had given each a place in the working; it had not filled the wood with every power it might one day carry.

“It could open one?”

“With a destination you can identify, a place that can bear it, and power enough for the passage. You will still have to judge what you invite across.”

“And carry power?”

“A measured portion, addressed to its nature. Try to make it contain every force at once, and you will learn that old wood can break.”

Tempus took him to a service alcove before they left. A narrow stone panel had shifted across its entrance, trapping the warm draft from a small banked furnace on the other side.

Eryth tested the three patterns there without urgency. He held the panel, found the true opening, and moved a little of the furnace's existing warmth into the cold adjoining room. When he closed the passage, the draft stopped. The staff grew only faintly warm. The fire beyond burned a little lower.

No new heat had been made. No second destination had appeared because he desired it. The panel remained an ordinary panel, vulnerable to a mason's hammer.

The simplicity pleased him more than the light had.

By the time Ona woke, Tempus had arranged a level way to the outer shelter. She and Joren would rest there until they could travel with support. Neither asked to follow Eryth. Both had work, homes, and people who would be angry if they learned how close the Labyrinth had come to keeping them.

Ona caught his sleeve as he prepared to leave.

“If you find him another way,” she said, “you can still go.”

Eryth looked at her bandage.

“I know.”

“I mean after you know what the way costs.”

He nodded.

At the riverbed, morning light lay across the pale gravel. Tempus stood above him on the last suspended step while he retrieved the length of rope still tied around the waymark. The cut end was frayed. He coiled it anyway.

“Will the closed door hold?” Eryth asked.

“Against that recurrence, yes. Other damage will need other care.”

The answer was small enough to trust.

Eryth thanked him and began walking toward the lower country.

He carried Aetherium, the ancient wooden staff, fresh water, and food Tempus had packed in a plain cloth. His shoulder remained sore. His right palm hurt whenever he tightened his grip. The crystal stayed behind with its guardian; the white room stayed behind its door.

He did not know what his brother had built while he was gone. He did not know whether anyone at the ferry still waited for him or which promises had survived their makers.

For the first time, he could imagine an answer to Kael that did not require one of them to be brought home.

There were ways to close a dangerous path while leaving the person beyond it alive.

He would have to learn what stood on either side before he chose one.

The staff made a quiet, ordinary sound against the stones as he descended.

CHAPTER 17

What the River Carried

PART 1 OF 5

A Door Left Open

Eryth

At the ferry, nobody asked Eryth where he had been.

They asked whether he had brought a boat.

The woman who caught his sleeve stood barefoot in the churned mud above the landing. She had a split reed basket under one arm. Through its broken side he could see three loaves, a pair of wooden soles, and a little clay figure whose head had been wrapped in cloth to keep it from breaking.

“The boats are on the other bank,” she said. “They won't send them back.”

“Who won't?”

“The men who say the river belongs to the examination.”

On the far bank, a temple officer stood beside the ferry chain. The ferry itself lay empty against the pilings. Nearer, at the landing below Eryth, people waited with bundles and handcarts. Their impatience had exhausted itself. They watched the opposite shore with the terrible stillness of people who had already shouted everything they knew how to say.

Beyond the northward trees, a dark shape interrupted the skyline.

Eryth had remembered a pillar.

Stone now rose around it in successive, uneven stages. The lowest courses were broad and rough, the higher ones narrow enough that scaffolding stood visibly beyond the walls. No finished roof capped the height. Between two projecting ribs, a faint vertical glimmer moved and vanished.

His brother had been working while he was away.

So had everyone his brother required.

“Are you listening?” the woman asked.

“Yes. Is someone hurt?”

“My sister's on the other side. She said she'd wait at the house with the blue lintel. They told us to leave the lower road. I don't know if they told her.”

Eryth looked downstream. The water passed beneath the ferry rope without foam. A reed turned slowly beside a mooring post. Its lower half remained fixed in the current while its upper half bent against the wind.

He knelt.

The reed straightened. For a moment its shadow remained bent.

“How long has that been happening?”

The woman followed his gaze.

“Since the carts came from the Tower.”

He set the staff across his knees. Its old wood looked dull after the impossible light of the Labyrinth. Three shallow patterns held their places along the grain, each distinct, none bright enough to reassure a frightened crowd. He had brought back no glorious garment, no shining compass, no crystal that could return an hour. There was this piece of wood, what he had learned, and a shoulder that still stiffened when he slept on it.

“Who told you to leave the road?” he asked.

“The captain. She's at the store.”

He found the ferry master's store with both doors open and benches dragged into the yard. Elen sat at a table beneath the eaves, his injured leg supported on a folded sack. Maren stood behind him. Tavin was using his good hand to hold a ruler against a sheet of paper while a river worker copied the line.

Their heads lifted together.

For an instant Eryth could not go nearer. He had imagined returning to a place that had held still for him. Instead, Elen's face was thinner. New papers weighted the table. A repaired crack ran through the store's front shutter. The work of remaining alive had continued without becoming simpler.

Maren reached him first.

“You're walking,” she said.

“Mostly.”

She touched the back of his hand, then let it go.

Tavin glanced at the staff. The ruler slipped.

“Did you find the rest?”

“I found enough to learn what it can't do.”

“That sounds promising.”

The captain came out carrying a shallow wooden tray. Inside lay a blackened buckle, a coil of pale fiber, and a stone that clicked against the tray each time someone spoke loudly.

“Don't touch these,” she said.

Eryth turned toward the little stone. It had moved before her last word ended.

“Where did they come from?”

“The washworks above the lower road. Three wagons were brought through before dawn. Broken Tower fittings, according to the drivers. Safe to unload, according to the paper.”

“According to the people unloading them?”

“Two haven't come out.”

“Why are you here?”

“I came for Tavin. My men are keeping people back. Two warders went in already. One returned without his boots. The other is with him and can't bear to have anyone touch his arm.”

Eryth looked toward the river.

“And the far bank?”

“An archive officer stopped the ferry to prevent the movement of unexamined evidence. He has decided frightened people might carry some.”

A voice from the doorway said, “They might.”

The Myrrh reviewer stood inside, holding a sealed instruction. Her eyes were red from too little sleep.

“I have required him to distinguish people from objects,” she said. “He has sent for clarification.”

“Send someone to the blue-lintel house,” Eryth told the captain. “A woman is waiting for her sister. Tell them to move uphill.”

The captain gave the order to one of her guards without asking why he had begun with that.

Elen pushed a folded page toward him.

“The hearing's still open.”

“I know.”

“You don't. They tried to close it twice. Once because we agreed too closely, which meant we'd prepared the account. Once because Maren remembered a different hour from me, which meant we were unreliable.”

Maren put a hand on the table.

“We can tell him later.”

“No,” Elen said. “One thing now.”

He waited until Eryth looked at him.

“If you go there, don't make all this depend on whether your brother admits it.”

The river moved beyond the yard. On the tray, the little stone rolled toward the Tower and stopped.

“I won't,” Eryth said.

He turned to Tavin.

“What do you need?”

“My plate. A length of cord. Somebody who doesn't expect me to work with two hands.”

“You don't have to come.”

Tavin lifted the ruler from the table.

“Neither do you have to say that every time.”

The captain led them through the crowd. At the head of the landing, Eryth stopped beside the woman with the basket.

“Someone's going to your sister. Move your things above that stone wall.”

“Will the river rise?”

“I don't know yet.”

She searched his face for the answer he had refused to manufacture. Then she nodded and began telling the people nearest her to move.

Eryth followed the captain up the lower road.

A quarter mile beyond the ferry, the first spilled light lay across their path. It had the shape of a broken wagon wheel. No wheel remained inside it.

PART 2 OF 5

The Witness Who Walked

Vaelin

Vaelin knew the quartermaster was going to search her because he had washed his hands.

Usually he came to the stair supports with lime beneath his nails and the day's figures written on his sleeve. Now his fingers were clean. Two of the newer men followed him, trying not to look at the folded sack beside her walking stick.

“Everyone leaving the works is being entered,” he said.

“Then enter me.”

“Everyone's belongings as well.”

Behind him, the Tower's unfinished wall blocked a piece of the morning. Men moved along its timber walk carrying stone baskets. She knew the sound of their pace. When the core's measured pulse reached the lifting frame, they hurried. Between pulses, they saved their breath.

One of them stumbled. The basket struck the parapet. The quartermaster did not turn.

“By whose order?” Vaelin asked.

“You know whose.”

“I'd like you to say it.”

His eyes moved toward the center of the scar.

“Kael's.”

She had folded the sack around a loaf, two fresh dressings, and the broken sole of a sandal. The things she meant to take were already elsewhere. That did not make the search harmless. Men who began by searching a bag often discovered authority to search the person holding it.

“You may look inside,” she said. “You may not touch me.”

The youngest man opened the sack. He seemed disappointed by the sandal.

“What is this?”

“The reason I walk slowly.”

The quartermaster's mouth tightened.

“There are missing maintenance impressions.”

“Then search the maintenance room.”

“There are marks scratched out beneath the south cutoff.”

“Yes. The bearing shifted. I marked where it had been.”

“You weren't told to mark it.”

“The bearing wasn't told to shift.”

A thin ringing came from within the half-built wall. All four of them looked toward it. The laborers had begun to count under their breath.

Vaelin counted with them.

One. Two.

At three, the core released its next stored pulse. The lift dragged a load of stone upward. The lower beam shuddered, and fine dust fell along the stair rubble beside her feet.

The quartermaster stepped back.

“You'll wait here.”

“No.”

“You've been warned.”

“That isn't the same as being given a reason.”

She took up her stick. He moved across her path.

Beyond him, beneath the original standing pillar, Kael sat beside the engineered casing that had grown around the buried relic. Growth was the wrong word. She made herself remember that. Men had carried each length of metal. Hands had cut every collar and vent. The dark stone had not raised itself out of admiration.

Kael looked up as though the pause in labor had annoyed him more than the confrontation.

“Let her through.”

The quartermaster hesitated.

“She may have—”

“I can see that she may have.”

Vaelin passed him.

She did not approach the inner defense. The old blood boundary remained where Kael had written it, partly obscured by stone dust, still unmistakable to her ground-ward sight. Supply carts crossed along a marked route. Power did not reach out through that line to feed on the workers waiting beyond it. Kael had found other ways to make the world bring him what he wanted.

“Where are you going?” he asked.

“To speak.”

“You've been doing little else.”

“Where you can't decide who hears.”

The core casing clicked. A strip of captured gold showed briefly through its upper slit. Around it, Darklight kept the stored force from touching the neighboring channels before its appointed release.

Kael's hands were blistered. He had wrapped one thumb in clean cloth and left the other wounds bare. Behind him, on a low table, curved pieces of metal waited beside four closed vessels of different sizes. Some were no bigger than a thimble. None contained enough light to make the whole table visible.

“Taking my drawings?” he asked.

“No.”

“My measures?”

“Mine.”

For the first time, something in his face became still.

She had no reason to hide the distinction now. The receiving basin sat above the same old platform. It had one mouth and a succession of dangerous alignments. Each unlike fragment had appeared above that same shallow basin. She had watched the repeated closing, the rest intervals, the direction of each release through the vent. Her record contained no miraculous insight into distant stars. It contained the number of times a mason had been told to keep holding a lever after his skin began to burn.

“You mean to give them a way in.”

“I mean to give them a way to know what happened.”

“They'll use the first to prevent the second.”

“Some of them will try.”

“And you trust them?”

“No. I trust an account less when only one person is allowed to possess it.”

A hammer struck stone on the upper walk. Kael watched the sound travel through the core's fine gold lines.

“You altered my cutoff.”

She did not answer at once.

“Yes.”

“The failed alignment.”

“Yes.”

“You could have released the load into the buried stair.”

“I closed it early. You built over the supports before finding out why it had failed.”

“Those can both be true.”

She had prepared for his anger. She had not prepared for a true sentence used as a knife.

“They can,” she said. “I'll include both.”

He leaned back against the stone. She could not tell whether he was conserving strength or giving himself the appearance of ease.

“Go, then. Tell them every weakness you saw.”

He looked past her, toward the unfinished courses rising above the scar.

“They'll find me farther along when they come.”

She turned before the moment could become permission she owed him gratitude for.

At the outer supply yard, Hesta waited with two empty mortar tubs on her cart. The waste had gone before dawn on hired wagons. Hesta had learned of it from the ruts and sent a warning toward the ferry; whether it had beaten the loads, neither woman knew. Now she kept her eyes on her horse. Vaelin passed her without speaking. The copies of her daily marks were stitched into the reed mat beneath one tub. Hesta had agreed to carry work tallies to the ferry; Vaelin had told her exactly what they were. She had asked whether carrying them would put the rest of her crew at risk. Vaelin had answered yes.

Then Hesta had removed the name plate from her cart.

Now, as she reached the road, the quartermaster stepped out from the gate shelter.

“One thing,” he said.

The two men came behind him.

Vaelin tightened her grip on the stick.

“Your account of the outgoing waste,” he said. “You haven't signed it.”

She saw the paper in his hand. She saw the waiting cart. She saw the narrow strip of road between the supply yard and the captain's distant watch.

She did not try to outrun them.

She shouted, “Which account?”

The nearest laborers looked up.

The quartermaster lowered his voice. “There's no need—”

“The one saying the housings were spent, or the one saying men were ordered to load them without a full reading?”

A basket stopped moving overhead.

“You'll lower your voice.”

“Read it to them.”

Hesta clicked her tongue. Her horse started forward.

The quartermaster grabbed for Vaelin's arm. She drove the end of her stick through the loose gravel between his boots. Not into him. Into the ground line she had spent days repairing, whose simplest duty was to make uneven weight visible.

The gravel lifted around his ankles in a pale, harmless flare.

Every worker in the yard turned.

“Take your hand off me,” she said.

Under all those eyes, he did.

She walked to the road. Her knee nearly failed at the first rut. She did not stop until the captain's watch came out to meet her and the cart had passed beyond the bend.

Only then did she discover how badly her hands were shaking.

PART 3 OF 5

The Washworks

Eryth

The washworks had been built to clean quarry stone before it went downriver.

Three long settling troughs ran beneath an open timber roof. A drain carried the washwater into a reed bed. Above the troughs, a wheeled frame moved blocks from the unloading platform to the cutting floor. It should have been an ordinary place full of wet stone and tired backs.

Now the frame traveled six paces forward, struck nothing, and traveled six paces back.

Each return dragged the same length of chain through the same broken railing.

Each return tore the railing along a crack that had almost no whole wood left to give.

A man lay beyond it with one leg trapped beneath a fallen pulley. Farther inside, a woman crouched atop the middle trough. Water flowed up its sides toward her boots.

The captain's guards had marked a limit with sacks. One of them held a rope whose end disappeared beneath the pulley. His palms were raw.

“We can pull him halfway,” he told Eryth. “Then the chain takes him back.”

“Has anything crossed that line?”

“The water. It comes as far as the last sack, then drops.”

Tavin knelt beside a discarded packing lid. Three seals had been burned into the wood. One bore the simple impressed mark used for Tower deliveries. Another had split along the grain.

“Separate housings,” he said. “Packed together.”

“What was in them?”

He pointed toward the moving frame.

“Something that kept its last direction. Something that carried weight without support.”

“And the third?”

“Don't know.”

The woman on the trough heard them.

“My brother's under the beam,” she shouted. “Orren. He answers if you say his name.”

Eryth moved to the sacks.

“Orren!”

The trapped man lifted his head.

“How is your leg?”

“I'll tell you when I get it back.”

“What happens before the chain moves?”

Orren pressed his cheek against the floor, listening.

“Little click. In that black box. Then the water lifts.”

There was a click.

Water climbed the trough. The frame jerked backward. Orren cried out and bit the rest of the sound against his wrist.

Eryth forced himself to watch the whole movement.

If he put the staff against the moving chain, it might hold. If it held, the force would go somewhere else. Into the broken railing. Into Orren's leg. Into a roof already resting on one split post.

He went to the upstream end of the drain instead.

“What are you doing?” the woman demanded.

“Giving the water somewhere to fall.”

“He's over there.”

“I know.”

Tavin came beside him and looked down at the staff.

“That one?”

“The first holds the place. The second tells me which place I'm actually holding.”

“And the third?”

“Only after we get them out.”

The captain untied the rope from her guard's hands.

“Tell me where.”

Eryth pointed to a standing stone beside the drain. “Around that. No knots on anyone's body. If I say release, let the whole length go.”

She began threading it through the remains of the railing.

He set the staff's lower end in the drain and touched the destination pattern with his thumb. The water's apparent rise separated into two distinct pressures. One belonged to the slope of the trough. The other led back to a broken housing beneath the lifting frame.

He did not ask where the housing had been made. He did not follow it to his brother. He followed the water already here.

A thin luminous line reached from the staff along the drain stones.

“There,” he said.

Tavin drove a wooden wedge into the joint Eryth indicated. The old drain cover shifted. Water spilled beneath it, then doubled back as the foreign working tried to remember its earlier shape.

Eryth placed the first pattern across the opening.

Weight settled into the staff.

His shoulder protested immediately. He changed his grip, took the load through his right arm and braced the lower wood against stone. The drain remained open. A strip of water tore free of the climbing sheet and fell where gravity in this world expected it to fall.

The trough dropped a finger's breadth.

“Now,” he told the captain.

She crossed the sack line with the rope. One guard followed to the broken railing; the other stayed at the standing stone. Eryth kept his eyes on the drain while footsteps splashed behind him.

The click came again.

“Wait,” Orren shouted.

The captain flattened herself beside him. The frame rushed past with its empty hook low enough to strip the edge from her shoulder guard. The hook struck the end post. Once more the broken end struck its stump.

The woman jumped from the trough.

“Meda, stay there!” Orren cried.

She landed badly, caught the side of the frame, and slid beneath the returning chain. Her hand closed on her brother's coat.

Eryth felt the movement before he saw it. A new weight entered the working. The drain cover trembled beneath Tavin's wedge.

“Tavin. The loose trough stone.”

“I've only—”

“Use your foot.”

Tavin kicked the stone into the falling water. The stream divided around it. Eryth let the position seal yield a little. The staff could not hold the whole field. It could preserve a place where the people inside could move.

The captain passed the rope beneath Orren's shoulders.

“Pull when I lift,” she told Meda.

The pulley had pinned the man's trouser leg and part of his calf. Meda pushed both hands beneath its rim. The captain put her back against the fallen beam.

They raised it together.

Eryth heard the little click.

He turned the staff a fraction. The destination mark caught the frame's direction, identified its return to the broken post, and held that route apart from the downward path of the water.

The frame hesitated.

“Pull!”

The guard at the standing stone hauled. Orren slid clear of the pulley with a scream that emptied the whole yard of every other sound.

Meda scrambled after him. The captain rolled beneath the railing as the frame tore backward, missing her heel by inches.

Eryth released the first seal.

The drain cover leaped. Tavin fell away from it. Water struck the roof in a solid, shining sheet.

For a moment, everyone was outside the sacks.

Then the frame's repeated movement found the rope.

It caught a loop beneath the broken post and pulled it tight around the standing stone. The stone rocked. The guard tried to free the rope, slipped, and caught himself against the marker sacks.

“Let go,” the captain ordered.

The guard did. The rope snapped taut.

Eryth saw the stone's base lift.

If it fell into the drain, the whole returning load would have a new destination: the lower road, the landing, the waiting people.

He stepped across the line.

“Eryth!” Tavin shouted.

Aetherium came clear with a bright scrape. The movement tore at the healing split across his palm. He cut the rope on the first stroke. Its loose ends whipped past his face. The standing stone slammed back into its bed.

The empty hook struck him across the ribs.

He fell beneath the trough, the staff scraping out of his right hand.

For one breath he saw only the underside of the raised water, full of bright fragments that looked like sky.

Then the staff struck the drain lip and stopped.

He reached it before the click.

PART 4 OF 5

What a Crown Would Cost

Kael

The discarded housings cost me more than the men who had carried them away.

That sentence is ugly. I knew its ugliness when I wrote the figures. It did not prevent me from writing them.

The housings had been declared spent because their useful charge no longer answered my core. The quartermaster had arranged their removal in the same way he arranged mortar, meals, and the return of broken tools. He came to me with his accounts folded so that I would see the empty lines before I saw the names beneath them.

“There was an accident at the washworks.”

“How much remained?”

“We don't know.”

“What did you measure before sending them?”

“The men said the upper marks were dark.”

“Did you measure the lower ones?”

He looked toward the receiving basin.

“No.”

I could have enjoyed making him confess each mistake. There are small tyrants who mistake that enjoyment for government. I needed him able to understand the next order.

“Nothing leaves because one face has stopped shining. Nothing shares a wagon until its remaining natures have been tested apart. Write that where the loading men can read it.”

“The captain's at the works.”

“Then the Council may learn something useful.”

“And your brother.”

For a moment I heard the core without the Tower around it.

The same low double pressure. The same restraint that kept the gold from devouring the dark before the dark could suffocate the gold. The world narrowed around a fact the quartermaster had not known how to place in his account.

“Who saw him?”

“One of our drivers. He went back for the empty cart. Eryth came up the road with the captain and the man with the bound hand.”

“Armed?”

“A sword. A walking staff.”

“Describe the staff.”

“He said wood.”

The quartermaster seemed to understand, at last, that he had brought me a different kind of figure.

“Get a description from someone who looked.”

He left.

I did not open the joined warning page. It remained closed beneath its weight. My brother's return was a fact delivered by a man who had seen him on a road. I preferred that to a voice that knew how to sound like home.

On the table, the crown waited in pieces.

I had made the frame low and close, with no proud points that could gather a stray discharge. Ordinary metal provided the first obedience. Thin ribs curved around separate beds for the elemental shards, each isolated from its neighbors by a channel designed to hold light or shadow. When complete, the architecture would make one answering circuit without pretending its contents possessed one nature.

The cold flake lay under a dark lid. A pinhead of distant heat glowed within its own little vessel. The motion lamina, held so narrowly that it made the edge of its cup appear in two places, waited beside a tiny flake whose gift was the quiet between impulses. Four captured natures, too small to impress a man who believed power must arrive by the wagonload.

Each had come through one receiving mouth.

I had closed it after each alignment. I had paid for those closings, for the failed reaches, for material that could not cross without bringing a force larger than the basin could bear. The discarded housings contained those costs as surely as the successful vessels contained my progress.

Above me, masons fitted another stone into the inner wall. The core had no charge to spare for their lift until evening. They used rope and backs. I could hear their resentment in the pause between each shouted number.

I understood it.

Understanding is among the cheapest things a ruler can give.

I took a shuttered transfer lamp from the rack and filled it with a measured portion from the covered reservoir beneath the inner platform. Its two closures never stood open together. The pale working had been taken from the roadkeeper's surrendered ward instrument, cut free before crossing the blood line. No thread reached outward from it. Everything it could give was already inside the scar.

I opened the lamp a finger's breadth.

Gold entered the first crown channel.

Shadow rose from my palm to meet it. I kept them apart, shaping each around the other. The metal warmed. The nearest shard vessel answered with a faint chime.

For an instant, I saw the crown as it might stand finished: a low dark circle holding a dawn too cold to promise morning.

Then the gold broke across the empty interval between two beds.

The frame struck the table. One rib cracked. Pain ran from my wrist to my teeth.

I closed the lamp.

There remained a disagreement no increase of pressure could repair. The crown could assign a place to each nature. It could choose which one should answer. But when two possible relations were equally strong, it had no disinterested point from which to judge them.

A ruler, I thought, supplies the judgment.

The frame had just demonstrated what it thought of that answer.

I turned the cracked rib over. Beneath it, the oldest threshold figure in my Doctrine showed a long axial mark passing through a ring. I had treated it as a line of measurement because the surrounding text spoke of a bearing. Perhaps it was a bearing. Perhaps it had once been something a hand could hold.

Wood, the quartermaster had said.

A walking staff.

I set the thought aside without discarding it. Desire was an excellent maker of false correspondences. My father had taught me that, and I had disliked him for being right whenever the warning proved useful.

The damaged rib needed replacing. The crown needed a governing relation I had not yet found. My brother had come back into a country I had changed.

None of these facts required me to stop.

I drew a narrow bypass around the empty interval. It would not create balance. It might force incompatible demands to answer in succession long enough for the whole to function.

The price would be recoil.

I had a Tower full of places to send recoil.

PART 5 OF 5

A Small Enough Promise

Eryth

The staff returned to Eryth's hand slick with washwater.

He did not stand. The returning hook passed overhead, trailing the severed rope. Beside his face, beneath the trough, a black housing opened and closed along a hairline fracture.

There was the click.

He could reach the housing with the staff. He could crush it with Aetherium. Neither act would tell the gathered natures where to go when their walls were gone.

Outside the sacks, Tavin was shouting something.

Eryth dragged himself far enough to hear.

“The lower mark! It isn't spent!”

“I see it.”

“Don't close the upper one first.”

The housing had two nested grooves. The upper one sent the movement outward. The lower retained the instant at which the release had begun. Not time reversed across a valley. A damaged working obeying its own last remembered instruction, again and again, spending what remained each time.

Eryth set the first pattern against the housing's edge.

A place. This casing, beneath this trough. He left the frame outside the promise.

The second pattern found the returning load. It did not lead to a new world. Its destination was the same broken post, six paces away.

He laid that route down into the drain, where stone could bear the remaining force and water could carry its spent heat away.

The third pattern brightened under his thumb.

He remembered a doorway closing in the Labyrinth. A voice that had become his own only after he understood what the warning cost. The temptation to make loss into a passage and walk backward through it.

This was smaller. A broken box under a trough.

Smaller did not mean easy.

The first seal took the weight. The second distinguished the route. With the third, he barred the casing from recovering the arrangement it had held before the closing.

The click began.

He felt the sound try to finish inside the wood.

“No,” he said, although the working had no mind to persuade.

The staff twisted. His bruised ribs struck stone. Above him, the frame traveled forward one last time.

Water fell.

The silence afterward was full of ordinary things: splashing, coughing, Meda calling her brother's name, a guard retching into the weeds.

Eryth waited until he could hear water moving in only one direction.

Then he crawled out.

The captain caught his sleeve, avoiding the shoulder. Tavin took the staff before its wet weight pulled him down again. Eryth let him hold it. He had no strength left for making the gesture look deliberate.

“How long?” the captain asked.

“The dangerous discharge has run out. Its elemental natures remain. The pattern I left will keep it from finding the old release while we move it.”

“The Tower?”

He looked toward the dark shape above the trees.

“I stopped a broken piece. Don't call it more.”

They returned to the store with the rescued workers, three isolated fragments, and a record of the path the washwater had taken. Orren rode on a door. Meda walked beside him, holding his hand and arguing that he had never known when to get out of the way.

At the landing, the ferry was moving again.

The reviewer stood beside the chain, showing her order to the archive officer for the second time. Behind her, the kiln master and six river workers watched him read it. Eryth saw the woman with the reed basket embrace someone beneath the stone wall.

He sat on the store step and let Maren examine his ribs.

“Nothing moves where it shouldn't,” she said. “That doesn't mean you should try to move everything else.”

Vaelin arrived while he was drinking.

He stood too quickly. The cup slipped from his hand.

She leaned on her stick at the entrance to the yard, her face drawn, a strip of gravel dust across one sleeve. Behind her came an empty mortar cart and one of the captain's guards.

Eryth took a step toward her.

She lifted a hand.

“Let me sit first.”

He brought a chair.

For a while nobody asked her anything. Maren put water beside her. Tavin cut the stitching in the cart's reed mat with the tip of a small knife. Paper came out, folded flat, its edges darkened by mortar. Hesta watched until the reviewer acknowledged receipt, then turned her cart toward the road again.

“Five of mine are still there,” she said.

Vaelin did not ask her to abandon them. The captain sent a guard as far as the outer watch.

Vaelin watched him carry it to the table.

“Those are copies,” she said. “The marks were mine. I kept them because the official accounts recorded what each release was supposed to do.”

“And these?” the reviewer asked.

“What it did.”

She began with the dates she could verify. Who had been on the frame. Which bearing shifted. How often the receiving aperture had opened, and where its mouth remained when the alignment changed. When she did not know what lay at a distant source, she said so. When she had guessed at the meaning of a sound, she called it a guess.

Then she described her sabotage.

The reviewer stopped writing.

“You altered a cutoff without knowing what else it held?”

“Yes.”

“Did you know it could release into the stair supports?”

“I believed closing early would prevent that. I didn't know enough to promise it.”

Eryth looked at her.

She kept her eyes on the reviewer.

“Put that in.”

The pen resumed.

No one absolved her. No one took the rest of the account away because it contained something that cost its speaker.

Only when the first testimony had been read back did she look at Eryth's staff.

“You found it.”

“I finished what I could learn to finish.”

“He's making the crown.”

The word moved through the yard without being repeated.

Vaelin spread a drawing between them. The original standing pillar. The broken second foundation. The buried stair. The engineered casing surrounding the embedded heart. A single circle above the receiving basin.

“This is where it stands,” she said. “Whatever source he turns toward, the mouth stays here. These channels lead to the lift, the walls, the spill vessels. They carry workings. They aren't doors.”

Eryth placed the dead housing beside the drawing.

“And the core begins each release by recalling its last steady arrangement.”

Tavin touched the lower groove.

“That's why the piece kept doing the same thing.”

“The whole core will be able to change its arrangement,” Vaelin said. “Kael learns.”

“So must the closing.”

The captain folded her arms.

“If you can shut the mouth, why wait?”

“Because I need to know which route its force will take when it has nowhere else to go.”

“Into him, perhaps.”

“Into the men on the scaffolds. Into the buried stair. Into every charged wall he's made. Perhaps into him as well. I won't pretend choosing the first possibility makes the others disappear.”

She looked away toward the rescued workers.

“Berrin doesn't get to choose anything now.”

“No.”

“Do you understand why that answer isn't enough for me?”

“Yes.”

He did not ask her to want what he wanted. He asked for a basin, clean sand, and a place beyond the reed bed where a failed test could spend itself without reaching a house.

At dusk they carried one tiny residue from the closed housing there. Tavin identified its surviving natures. Eryth lent it a measured thread of his own dawnfire, barely enough to lift a grain of sand. Vaelin marked the shallow routes in the sand. The captain stood beside the release cord and required Eryth to tell her exactly when to cut it.

They tested position alone. The residue stayed put, but its influence passed the mark.

They added destination. The influence turned into the basin, but the old release tried to begin again.

With all three patterns, Eryth closed the small working and kept its earlier state from reasserting itself. The basin warmed. Sand fused into a thumb-sized patch of glass. Nothing beyond the marked circle moved.

Then his right hand began to shake.

He stopped.

Vaelin knelt beside the glass.

“You can't stand there holding him shut forever.”

“No.”

“And you can't make the river into the place that carries what he refuses to bear.”

"No."

The Tower glimmered between the trees. High on its unfinished side, a row of lamps went dark as charge was drawn elsewhere.

Eryth picked up the staff.

"We need the route he chooses when he believes nothing can refuse him."

Far away, above the black stone, a thin curve of light appeared.

It did not close.

Not yet.

CHAPTER 18

The Darklight Halo

PART 1 OF 5

The Shape of Hunger

Kael

Before I made the crown, I had to decide which part of the Tower could afford to go dark.

The quartermaster brought me the day's requirements on a board. The north lift needed two pulses to set its remaining stones. The shelter lamps would last until midnight if no one opened their shutters fully. One holding collar beneath the upper scaffold had begun slipping, and Darel wanted it replaced before the next load went up.

Beneath those figures, in a different hand, somebody had written: bread.

I studied that word longest.

“There's grain at the lower store,” I said.

“Hesta won't bring her cart inside until the tools are released.”

“She brought the stone.”

“She says she agreed to carry stone. She didn't agree to have her horses waiting under a lift that starts when no one asks it to.”

I looked toward the supply yard. From where I sat, I could see one of the horses standing beyond the boundary with its head lowered. A small, ordinary patience surrounded the animal. It had no interest in the architecture of my ambitions.

“Release the hand tools at sunset,” I said. “Keep the lifting chain bound.”

“They may leave.”

“Some may.”

“If Darel goes—”

“I heard him ask for a new collar. Give him one.”

The quartermaster turned his board over, although I had not finished with it.

“Take the upper lift off the core,” I said. “Take the west lamps off. Everything unused comes to the reserve.”

“There are men on the upper walk.”

“Then bring them down before you do it.”

This was not mercy. Dead men could not carry the stone I still required. More importantly, the scaffold's sudden fall might disturb the receiving basin when I needed its relation to the core exact.

I had learned to prefer cruelty with a purpose. It did not make cruelty smaller.

The quartermaster went to give the orders. I returned to the frame.

Its repaired rib carried the narrow bypass I had drawn the evening before. The bypass would allow a disputed force to wait while another passed. It could not decide which force ought to pass first. That judgment would remain mine, repeated as often as the crown demanded it.

I had mistaken the interval for a missing piece of metal. Now I knew it was a missing kind of agreement.

The difference did not stop a crown from being made.

It stopped a crown from being safe.

I laid out the elements in the order of their arrival, then moved them into the order of their uses. Cold belonged opposite heat. Motion required quiet across from it, and all four required separate beds within the captured gold. The remaining intervals belonged to the seals that kept each nature itself. The original chipped mineral grain stayed in the regulator where its limited use had become familiar. I did not pretend I could spend it twice.

Each shard vessel had a mark on its underside: the charge used to reach its source, the attempt lost before capture, the interval needed to close the single receiving mouth. Around these figures stood my bodily expenses, which the quartermaster did not enter on his boards.

I could no longer close my smallest finger. My left knee stiffened whenever I spent too long beside the heart. There were mornings when I spat blood before I could drink.

The crown would not cure these things.

It would make them cease to matter to those who stood before me.

Darel came down the inner scaffold ladder carrying a split wooden peg. A clean bandage covered the burn on his forearm.

“We need the brace before you empty that line.”

“You have a new collar.”

“A collar keeps the load in relation. It doesn't hold it up when you take its charge.”

He put the peg beside my drawing.

“Wood does, if you give us time to set enough of it.”

I resented the useful simplicity of the man.

“How long?”

“Until the shadow reaches the basin.”

“Half that.”

“Then leave half the charge.”

I looked at him. He did not lower his eyes. Fear had made him quieter since his arrival; work had left him something that fear could not bargain away.

I allowed the time.

While the men set their braces, I examined the report from the washworks.

Three people agreed that Eryth had used a plain staff. One thought it bore a jewel because he had seen light at its end. Another had been close enough to see that the light ran through marks in the wood. All agreed that the frame stopped moving after my brother went beneath the trough.

The most useful account came from the driver who had remained for his cart. He did not know what a temporal seal was. He described a sound that tried to happen and failed.

I set his account beside the axial figure in my Doctrine.

A ring. A bearing through its center. Three adjustments distinguished by their directions rather than their shapes.

I had no proof yet. I had a question worth sending into the world.

By late afternoon, the scaffold stood on timber. Most of the men came down carrying their last tools; Darel and two others remained to secure the final braces. The west lamps went dark.

A measured stream of captured light entered the reserve channels, leaving the shelter court in ordinary shadow.

At the core, the receiving aperture remained closed.

I would gather nothing more during the forging. No sudden gift from a distant realm would rescue an error in what I already possessed. The stored charge, the captured natures, my own strength: these were the limits of the work.

I drew the table nearer.

Above it, the unfinished Tower made a circle of evening sky.

PART 2 OF 5

What Could Be Asked

Eryth

The order reached the ferry folded inside a request for more sand.

The driver who brought it looked ashamed before anyone spoke to him.

“I was told to give it to the person in charge.”

“Of what?” Maren asked.

He shook his head.

The captain took the paper. She read it once, then handed it to the reviewer without removing the sand requisition wrapped around it.

Eryth waited until the reviewer laid it open on the table.

Kael required the return of records removed from the works, the surrender of charged property recovered at the washworks, and the withdrawal of the road watch. In exchange, he would undertake to govern future discharges within declared limits.

There was no request to see his brother.

That omission hurt Eryth more than he wanted it to.

“Declared by whom?” the reviewer asked.

The driver looked at his shoes.

“I only carried it.”

“You can stay for food,” Maren told him. “You don't have to carry our answer.”

He looked up at that.

Vaelin took the paper by its corner.

“The order makes the accident a question of ownership.”

“It makes you one too,” said Tavin. A second line required the attendance of anyone whose work had materially altered the Tower's safeguards.

Vaelin read it without changing expression.

“He can require.”

The captain looked at Eryth.

“What do you propose to tell him?”

“What would you tell him if I weren't here?”

“That the papers are evidence. That the people who left may decide whether to return. That a threat doesn't become an agreement because he writes a promise beneath it.”

“Tell him that.”

“Under your name?”

“Under the names of the people who mean it.”

Elen shifted his leg off the folded sack.

“Mine, then.”

Maren brought the support back under his ankle before he could make the effort into proof.

The reviewer would not sign beyond the scope of the hearing. She said so plainly. She could certify that the records had been entered, copied, and retained under witnessed review. She could not speak for everyone on the road. The captain could refuse withdrawal of her present watch. The kiln master could refuse to deliver charged waste into his yard.

The answer grew in several hands.

Eryth watched it happen with an attention he had once reserved for ancient writing. No single hand made the others less necessary.

Outside, the ferry chain creaked.

He stepped into the yard and found Tavin beside the three isolated washworks fragments. The completed staff lay on a folded cloth across Eryth's knees when he sat down. Tavin's maintenance plate rested between them, its broken compartment still empty.

“You could take a reading from his order,” Tavin said.

“The hand that wrote it was probably the quartermaster's.”

“The working on the seal may be his.”

“What would it prove?”

Tavin considered.

“What he wants us to think he can hold.”

They brought the order into the light. Its impressed mark carried a small remnant of Darklight, enough to distinguish an original from a careless copy. Eryth placed the staff near it without touching.

He asked one question.

Where had this working last been made steady?

The answer came as pressure against his palm. Stone. A low casing around an older heart. A mouth above a shallow basin. The impression tried to widen into a room, into a figure sitting beneath a pillar, into a face he wanted and feared to see.

He withdrew before the face arrived.

“Vaelin's position marks agree,” he said.

“Anything else?”

“A strong return toward the core. No proof of what it will carry.”

His right hand trembled. The recently healed split across his palm had opened during the rescue. Maren had dressed it that morning. Blood showed through the clean cloth now.

Tavin took the paper away.

“One checked thing,” he said. “Enough.”

That afternoon the captain's guards carried the three fragments back to the empty washworks shed in separate covered vessels. A paid observer would watch them there until morning. The captain had wanted a guard. Eryth had asked for someone who would report a faint sound without deciding it was beneath a soldier's notice. They had settled on the ferry carpenter and given him a clear path out.

Now Eryth went with Vaelin to inspect that path.

They walked slowly. Neither of them commented on the pace.

At the bend above the landing, the Tower rose beyond a line of bare poplars. From here its unfinished upper walls could be mistaken for a crown themselves. Below them, black stone enclosed the original pillar without concealing its broken companion. Scaffolding projected along one side like the ribs of an animal that had not decided whether to live.

“He let you leave,” Eryth said.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“I don't know.”

“He thought he could call you back.”

“Perhaps. He may also have thought knowing his limits wouldn't let me alter them. He may have wanted the workers to see someone walk out and believe they could do the same.”

“Can they?”

“Some can. Some owe food. Some have family waiting on wages he hasn't paid. Some have been told their tools won't work outside the scar. Freedom needs more than an open gate.”

They reached the broken railing. The washworks had lost its impossible water. It smelled of mud and lime and the sharp ordinary sweat of the people cleaning it.

Vaelin looked toward the glassed patch of sand where they had tested the residue.

“If you close the mouth, he'll still be there.”

“Yes.”

“And what he did will still be done.”

“Yes.”

“Don't turn keeping him alive into something the rest of us owe you.”

Eryth set the staff upright.

“I won't.”

She studied him, measuring the promise rather than its sound.

Behind them, the carpenter called from the shed.

A low hum had begun in the sealed waste.

It rose from all three fragments at once.

PART 3 OF 5

The Making

Kael

The first joining broke two of my teeth.

Not from heat or impact. I had clenched my jaw when the opposed natures found one another, and the shock took the shortest path my body offered.

I spat white fragments onto the stone and did not try the same joining again.

The error lay in asking the metal to become a whole before its contents possessed separate places. A crown could look complete while its inner relations remained murderous. I had known that in drawing. Knowing a thing on a page is unlike hearing it strike the bone inside your face.

I opened the frame.

The captive light entered first, a slow thread drawn chiefly from the stolen road ward's covered reserve, supplemented by the lamp portions I had reclaimed. I laid it through the upper channel, under each empty shard bed, around the low inner band where the crown would touch the head.

The shadow followed beneath it.

It was mine in the sense that a wound is yours. I had chosen its opening and learned its pressure. I did not blame it for what I intended to make.

Light defined the spaces. Shadow kept the spaces apart.

At the place where the two passed nearest, a hard line formed along the metal. It was neither gold nor black. Its pale edge seemed to cut a strip of night from the air.

I placed the first shard.

The cold flake settled into its bed, and a white line climbed from the table toward my wrist. I answered with the heat cinder opposite it. The frost halted against the first ridge of scar tissue.

The motion lamina came next. A cup rolled along the table's edge without falling. Quiet took the facing bed, and the cup stopped. Between them, the seals maintained the separate relations that would allow each nature to continue without invading its neighbor.

I did not pour them together. I did not make a bright soup and call it harmony. Each remained itself, pressed into a relationship that could be maintained only while the whole continued to answer.

The core's upper indicator dimmed.

I had used more than I meant to.

At the scaffold, somebody shouted. I heard a hammer strike a wooden brace. The Tower shifted a little as charge left the collars and ordinary timber accepted what magic had been carrying.

“Hold,” Darel called.

He was speaking to the men.

I could have used another share of the lifting reserve. The line lay within reach. For a moment I watched it pulse beside my hand, imagined the clean additional strength, and thought how quickly men could come down if warned.

Then a stone struck the yard outside. Someone swore. They were not down yet.

I left the line alone because the falling scaffold would reach my table.

Let no one improve that reason for me.

The inner band remained open at the repaired rib. Light traveled around it and stopped. Shadow pressed toward the gap. The opposed natures began choosing incompatible centers.

I felt the hunger of four incompatible natures.

The narrow bypass brightened.

I chose cold first. Heat waited. Motion followed only after quiet had passed. The seal beds maintained the arrangement while the intervening channels prevented each answer from becoming every answer.

The sequence held for three breaths.

On the fourth, I chose wrongly.

Heat struck the waiting motion. The cup on the table shattered. A blade of pale fire cut through the air where my throat had been before I fell sideways.

The bypass remained intact.

So did the crown.

I lay with my cheek against the stone and laughed once, without pleasure. Failure had changed. Earlier failures had left pieces. This one had left a thing capable of killing me in its own shape.

I got up.

Around the scar, the old blood boundary burned through the dust. It denied the working's attempt to draw more from the living world beyond it. I had written that law. I could feel it holding against the hunger I had arranged inside.

The reserve was finite. My strength was finite. There would be no excuse in pretending otherwise.

I lowered the next demand.

Instead of forcing the ring to answer every possible relation at once, I gave it one. Hold the opposing shards in a common circuit. Bear a measured pulse. Release it along a chosen path.

Creation reduced to an instruction small enough to survive.

I fed the final thread of captured gold across the repaired rib.

The metal closed.

No sound marked the joining. The circle simply ceased to be a sequence of pieces.

I lifted it with both hands.

The Darklight Halo was cold against my burned fingers. A low crown, solid and physical, its outer band dark enough to make the stone behind it seem pale. Within that darkness, fine channels of light traveled beneath the surface. The shards sat deep in their separate beds, visible only when their natures answered and a color without a familiar name moved through the rim.

I turned it over.

It remained a crown.

No vision could account for its weight. No name could pretend to have made it sooner. I had made it now, with stolen light, chosen shadow, fragments taken from places whose losses I had not asked permission to measure, and the work of people who had not agreed to the whole purpose of their labor.

I set it on my head.

For a moment the Tower possessed too many distances.

I saw the inner wall completed and fallen. I saw the receiving basin empty and full of a pale force that bent the sky. I saw a man wearing a crown on a seat I had not built. His face was mine until the angle changed, and then it was only a possible face beneath a possible light.

I nearly reached for certainty.

The Halo punished the reach. Pain spread behind my eyes. Three visions contradicted one another within the same breath.

Possibilities, then.

A crown that could show roads did not guarantee the one its wearer would walk.

I turned away from the visions and chose something I could verify.

On the far side of the court, a fallen block rested against the base of the inner wall. I knew its weight from Darel's furious account. I knew where it belonged. I sent a measured pulse from the core through the Halo and gave motion precedence over quiet.

The block rose.

Men shouted on the scaffolding.

I held it no higher than my knee. The crown pressed into my skull with the intimacy of a second set of bones. Darklight extended beneath the block, carrying the movement back to the one governed center.

I set it down in the place I chose.

The core's reserve fell visibly.

Real. Limited. Mine.

The quartermaster appeared at the edge of the court.

“They've sent an answer.”

I took the paper.

Several signatures refused me in several distinct hands.

My brother's stood among them.

I read the refusal twice. Then I placed it beside the bowl holding the fragments of my teeth.

“Clear the discharge court,” I said.

PART 4 OF 5

The Reach

Eryth

The carpenter was already outside the shed when Eryth reached him.

“I didn't open them.”

“I know.”

“I heard it and came out, like you said.”

“You did well. Go down the road. Tell the captain to keep everyone above the stone wall.”

The man ran.

Inside the shed, the isolated washworks fragments hummed behind their covers. No new light had entered them. The hum belonged to a relation they still remembered, a pressure touching its former routes from elsewhere.

Vaelin stopped in the doorway.

“He's testing the distribution.”

“The core?”

“Something through it.”

Eryth set the staff across the three vessels. He did not connect them. He asked the destination seal to distinguish the pulls.

All led toward the Tower.

The farthest fragment lifted its cover.

A line of dark light crawled across the floor toward the drain.

It was not an opening. Eryth could see the planks beneath it. It advanced over them as frost advanced over a puddle, carrying a rule about movement into matter already here.

“He couldn't do that before,” Vaelin said.

A second line appeared along the road outside. It followed the route taken by the waste wagons, brightening where spilled grit had settled in a wheel rut.

Kael had found a way to use what his careless deliveries left behind.

The light traveled slowly. That made it worse. Eryth could see what it meant to touch next: the runoff ditch, the wet foundation of the lower retaining wall, the landing beyond.

He cut the shed's pull first.

Position fixed each fragment within its vessel. Destination separated the Tower's call from the residue already present. Recurrence closed the pattern against the instruction that had just begun to repeat.

The hum stopped.

Outside, the line in the road kept advancing.

“Those weren't the source,” he said.

“No. They were listening.”

At the Tower, a strip of light rose along the upper wall. A moment later the advancing line thickened.

A stone lifted out of the road.

Then another.

They hung at ankle height, wet beneath, releasing worms and dark soil. Eryth heard shouting from the landing. The pull had reached the ferry chain.

He ran.

His ribs punished every step. Vaelin followed as quickly as her leg allowed, calling for people to leave their carts. The first family obeyed. A man farther down refused to abandon a chest. He dragged it three paces, tripped over a floating stone, and nearly went beneath his own wheel.

Eryth caught the cart shaft with the staff.

For a moment the first seal bore the cart's weight. The man crawled clear. Eryth let the shaft fall before the whole road could become a load he had promised to hold.

At the landing, the captain had cut the ferry free of its mooring rope. The ferry chain still dragged at the bow. People aboard were trying to lower themselves into the shallow water, but the water itself had begun moving in slow ridges toward the Tower.

“Can you release the chain?” Eryth shouted.

“The catch is under the plank.”

The captain lay flat and reached beneath it. The plank lifted, drawing the catch out of reach.

Eryth stepped onto the landing.

The old wood tried to rise under him.

He planted the staff and let its first pattern find only the six boards beneath his feet. The rest of the landing could move if it must. These boards would remain long enough to let a hand reach a fastening.

“Again.”

The captain slid beside him. Her arm vanished beneath the plank.

A sound came from the Tower, too deep to be a bell.

The pressure doubled.

Eryth's staff bent. He could feel the outgoing working's character now: motion made to overcome ordinary weight, destination held under one commanding center, repeated pulses supplied through the same old mouth's governing frame even while the mouth itself stood closed. Kael had changed what the architecture could direct. He had not made another gateway. He was sending force across their own ground, spending stored charge to compel things already here.

The captain freed the catch.

The chain fell into the river.

The ferry drifted clear.

Eryth released the boards and nearly went with them. The captain caught his belt. They staggered onto the road as the end of the landing lifted like a hand offering the Tower a gift.

Vaelin reached them, breathing hard.

“He'll run out if he keeps doing this.”

“Before the wall falls?” the captain demanded.

No one could promise that.

Eryth looked uphill. The stone retaining wall held the crowd above the river. The advancing pressure had found its wet lower course. Fine mortar began to sift from the joints.

He had spent the whole day refusing to make too large a promise.

Now he needed to choose exactly where a small promise could matter.

“Tavin,” he said.

The man stood beside the store steps with a coil of cord over his shoulder.

“Give me the line from the test.”

“It's measured for a basin.”

“We're going to make another.”

They ran to the shallow washout between road and reed bed. It held no house, no cart, no person. Its lowest point lay on the route of the old drainage channel.

Vaelin understood first.

“You can send one pulse there.”

“If I can distinguish it before the next begins.”

“And if you can't?”

“Cut the cord. Get everyone away from the wall. Don't come back for the staff.”

She took the cord without agreeing to the last instruction.

Eryth set the staff in the washout and let the destination pattern reach toward the advancing light.

This time he did not merely cut a remnant from its source.

He met the active working.

The other end of the relation struck him with the weight of a gaze.

Not his brother's thoughts. No voice, no remembered tenderness. An ordering pressure encountered a shape it could neither absorb nor dismiss.

The staff grew cold.

Far away, on the Tower, the strip of light flared white.

PART 5 OF 5

The Missing Agreement

Kael

My brother touched my working, and for one impossible instant the crown ceased hurting.

I knew him by the place of the resistance, not by any gift of knowledge. The outgoing path ended at the ferry. The driver had put Eryth there. The shape meeting my pulse answered the old axial figure more exactly than any line I had drawn.

Place. Destination. Return.

Three agreements that my bypass could only force through in sequence.

The staff gave them a common bearing.

Then the pain came back, worse because I knew the absence was possible.

The Halo's light narrowed into a clear line. Through it I glimpsed a plain wooden length held upright in a ditch. The image carried no more than the contact supplied: a hand around wood, water against stone, the angle at which my force had been refused. I could not see his face. I did not need to.

I understood the diagram in my Doctrine.

The ring had never been intended to answer alone.

The long mark through its center was not merely a measure. It represented a separate bearing, a key whose agreement could not be manufactured by tightening the ring around itself.

I had made the Halo.

He had completed what it lacked.

The thought arrived with a hunger so clean it almost resembled revelation.

I drew harder on the remaining reserve.

The upper indicator dropped. Gold thinned beneath the crown's inner band. At the edge of my sight, a possibility opened: my brother kneeling, the wooden staff laid across my hands. Beside it came another: the staff broken, its agreement lost, the Halo consuming its own wearer before the circle could be removed.

Neither was a promise.

I chose a smaller pressure.

The outgoing pulse held a command to gather what stood in its path. I narrowed the path toward the shape of the wood. A pull that would tighten until his hand opened or the staff moved.

He refused me.

The resistance did not become an attack. That angered me more.

It found the particular pulse I had sent and gave it somewhere else to end.

The core lurched. One of the empty reserve vessels cracked from rim to base. A row of uncharged lamps fell from the rack.

The quartermaster ducked beneath the table.

I caught the crown with both hands as the bypass seared my forehead.

Far down the road, light vanished into a hollow.

The relation broke.

I remained standing.

So did the Tower.

The Halo was whole in my hands, its separate shards still answering beneath the dark band. It had lifted stone. It had sent a working beyond the scar without taking strength from any distant living source. It had shown me roads that might exist and a missing agreement that did.

It had failed to bring me a stick of wood.

For a while, I listened to the cooling metal.

Then I set the crown beside the receiving basin and reached for my Doctrine.

The next alignment would require more charge than I had left.

That was a problem with sources, quantities, and time.

It was not a reason to give up the crown.

Eryth

The pulse entered the washout like a winter river breaking its banks.

Eryth held the place with the first pattern. He held its destination apart from the retaining wall with the second. With the third, he barred the pulse from returning to the earlier instruction that had ordered everything toward the Tower.

The staff did not swallow the force.

Stone bore it. Water carried its spent heat. The empty hollow changed.

Reeds whitened and broke. Gravel rose in a low ring, hung, and fell. A sheet of steam moved over the road. Vaelin dragged the end of the cord clear before its fibers burned through.

Eryth's knees struck the ground.

He kept the staff upright until the third pattern stopped trembling.

Then the wood went dark.

The retaining wall settled with a sound like teeth grinding. People scrambled away from it. On the river, the freed ferry turned broadside in the shallows, and its passengers waded toward a bank that had remembered how to stay beneath them.

The captain reached Eryth first.

“Is it over?”

“This pulse.”

He had to say the words twice before she heard them through the ringing in her own ears.

Vaelin stood beside the washout. Steam drifted around her stick. She examined the marks left in the wet ground, then looked toward the Tower.

“He tried to take it.”

“Yes.”

“Did you let him see what it could do?”

“I stopped what he sent.”

“That wasn't my question.”

Eryth looked down at his hands. The dressing around his palm had blackened. For a moment, when the force had found the staff, he had felt the profound ease of a relation fitting where it belonged. Then the command had tightened around it.

“He knows something he didn't know before.”

“So do we,” Tavin said.

He knelt at the edge of the hollow and pressed a board into the mud, taking an ordinary impression of the three distinct marks the pulse had left. He worked awkwardly, patiently, using his elbow to steady what his damaged hand could not.

“Don't let this dry before we copy it.”

They carried Eryth to the store because walking would have made the work slower, and for once he did not dispute the practical reason.

Maren cleaned his hand. Elen cleared the table. The reviewer called for each witness to describe what they had seen before anyone tried to make their accounts agree.

From the window, Eryth could see the Tower's light thinning.

It had limits. The day had proved them. The limits had still been enough to lift a landing and nearly bring a stone wall down on the people behind it.

Tavin placed the fresh impression beside Vaelin's records.

Here was the position of the single receiving mouth, fixed to the original basin and the old foundations. Here was the true route by which its governing frame returned every outward working to the core. Here, in the interrupted final mark, was the recurrence the Halo used to demand the previous commanding state again.

None of those facts alone would close what Kael had built.

Together they described a task Eryth could at last distinguish from a wish.

He could constrain the mouth to its existing place. Refuse the chosen outward route without destroying every ordinary path across the scar. Close the remembered state against its own repetition.

Doing it at the Tower would require more than the staff and a brave walk toward his brother. The stored forces needed somewhere to settle. People needed ways out. The buried stair could not simply become the place into which everyone agreed to pour a danger they did not understand.

Vaelin watched him read the marks.

“You know what you want to try.”

“Yes.”

“Can it remain when you leave?” the captain asked.

“I don't know the final arrangement yet.”

“And afterward?”

The room became quiet.

Afterward contained Berrin. It contained the witnesses' unfinished hearing, unpaid wages, coerced labor, the people who would want a king and those who would demand a prisoner. It contained a father who had vanished in white fire and whose absence no convincing vision had earned the right to explain.

Eryth did not put all of that inside one answer about his brother.

“First,” he said, “we have to make it possible for people to leave without carrying his reach with them.”

A knock sounded at the yard gate.

Hesta stood outside with her empty cart and a horse sweating beneath its collar. Darel sat beside her, holding a broken brace across his knees. Three other workers crowded the cart bed with their tools. A sixth walked behind, one hand on the tailboard.

The captain went to meet them.

Hesta looked past her toward Vaelin.

“You said to keep the actual measures.”

Darel lifted a packet wrapped in oiled cloth.

“The basin settles east when he draws hard. Less than a finger. Enough to matter.”

Eryth closed his eyes, not in despair but to make room for the new fact.

A place could move within its own foundation. A seal that forgot the movement would hold an empty coordinate while the danger slipped beside it.

“Come in,” Vaelin said.

Hesta did not move at once.

“Some stayed.”

“How many?”

“More than came with us. Some think the crown means he'll pay them. Some are afraid to leave their names in his book.”

The Tower shone briefly above the trees.

On the table, the spent impression answered with one faint tick.

Eryth opened his eyes.

The single mouth was being tested for another opening.

He drew the workers' measurements toward the lamp. Vaelin sat beside him. The captain remained at the gate, looking between the road they had come from and the people still on it.

No boundary had yet been closed around the Tower.

No judgment had yet been made safe by calling it necessary.

Eryth laid his burned hand against the plain wood of the staff and began with the people who were still inside.

CHAPTER 19

A Door for the Living

PART 1 OF 5

The People Inside

Eryth

Darel's measurements left a brown crescent of rainwater on the table.

Nobody moved them to save the wood.

The mason held one end of the broken brace while Vaelin placed the other against a chalk mark. He pushed. The brace shifted along its split, and the small distance that had seemed harmless on the road became visible beneath the lamp.

“That much,” he said. “Sometimes less. Never more while I was there.”

“And after you left?” the captain asked.

“I wasn't there.”

Eryth liked him for the answer.

He sat with his right hand open on a clean cloth. Maren had removed the burned dressing. The skin beneath it looked too thin to belong to a hand that would have to hold anything again.

“You need sleep,” she said.

“Yes.”

“I'm not asking whether you recognize the word.”

He looked up. She stood between him and the table with a cup in each hand.

“Drink the one that tastes worse. Then lie down. They can measure wood without you watching.”

Vaelin reached for the brace.

“We can.”

Eryth drank. The bitterness made his eyes water. He tried to remember when he had last been given an instruction that did not conceal a demand for something greater than he possessed.

Across the room, Hesta was telling the reviewer about the workers who had stayed.

“Some believe him,” she said. “They've heard the promises. A place where the Council can't tell them which door to use. Work that matters. Enough power to keep the winter out.”

“And the others?”

“One has wages owing from before the inner wall went up. Two have their names entered against advances they never received. The quartermaster says the accounts can be settled when the next load arrives.”

“What load?”

“There is always a next load.”

The reviewer wrote that down.

Elen watched her from his chair by the fire. He had grown tired of being the man to whom people brought missing words. Tonight he put his own finger on the receipt impression beneath the lamp.

“This is a different book,” he said.

The reviewer looked at him.

“The number beside Rhydian's request. We've asked for the audience register. That number belongs to correspondence retained before an audience is granted. Vaelin copied what she found in the vault. I should have recognized the filing number sooner.”

“Why would it be separate?”

“Because no audience was granted.”

Maren put down the cups.

“Then someone could answer the request without ever entering the answer in the audience register.”

“Yes.”

For a moment Eryth forgot his hand.

“Can it still be there?”

“The office that withdrew the public account had reason to hide it,” Elen said. “That doesn't mean every clerk knew what they were hiding. We have a number, a date, and a reason to ask for a particular packet. We should ask.”

The reviewer drew a fresh sheet toward her. Her authority did not make an absent paper appear. It let her put a witnessed demand where someone would have to acknowledge receiving it.

She wrote the demand.

Eryth watched until she sanded the ink. Then he stood.

“If it comes while we're gone, keep it with the other records.”

“You don't want to wait?” Elen asked.

He did. The wanting moved through him with a violence almost equal to fear. He wanted a father who could finally explain himself. He wanted the white fire to have a reason that would make his childhood bearable in retrospect.

Outside, a cart rattled over the broken road. Someone was still coming away from the Tower.

“No,” he said. “We can't make them wait for that.”

He slept on two sacks beneath the window. He dreamed of a fishing line drawn taut across a doorway. When Maren woke him, the dream went away without answering anything.

Dawn had begun to lighten the room.

On the table stood three arrangements of common things: the broken brace, a loop of cord, and a wooden latch lifted clear of its catch.

Vaelin tapped the brace.

“The first mark follows the basin's own bearing. We make the movement part of the place we're holding. No fixed point in the court for him to slide past.”

Darel lifted the cord. It had been threaded through two holes in a board.

“The return path comes through here. You can refuse the line without closing the yard.”

“And the last?” Eryth asked.

Vaelin lowered the latch. Then she moved the board beneath it. The latch remained closed.

“Whatever else settles, this act stays done.”

He looked at the three things. The staff had taught him those relations through pain, but it would not do the work by itself. Someone still had to reach the basin. Someone had to open the drains, brace the court, get the people out.

“The excess can't go down the stair,” he said.

“It won't.” Vaelin spread a second drawing. “The discharge court is clear stone over ordinary ground. Darel can cut the lip here. We bed it with broken brick and dry sand, keep the water off until the heat has gone. It will ruin the court.”

“The court can afford it,” Darel said.

“And if he sends more than it can bear?”

“We retreat before it takes us with it. We don't call a small catch bottomless because we need it to be.”

The captain rested both hands on the table.

“My people bring out anyone who wants to leave. We don't make staying a crime.”

“He'll use the ones who stay,” Hesta said.

“Then we tell them what we're closing, what may happen, and where the way out is. We can't replace his ownership with ours.”

Eryth drew the staff across his knees. In the lamplight it looked like an old length of wood somebody had repaired more carefully than it deserved.

“And if he attacks?” the captain asked.

Eryth had no useful promise about his brother.

“We stop him.”

She held his gaze until he understood that she had heard the limit of the answer as well as its courage.

Then she went to wake her four companions.

PART 2 OF 5

What the Crown Kept

Kael

I had spent the night discovering how little power a man could give without ceasing to stand.

The crown rested on the table. Below it, the reserve held a narrow measure of light. I had fed it from my own strength in intervals, waiting between each until the sickness passed. The last usable portion from the shuttered lamps had gone into a separate channel. It was barely enough to hold the inner collar steady.

There would be no grand discharge that morning.

There could still be a blade.

The distinction mattered more than the quartermaster seemed to think.

“They're on the road,” he said.

“How many?”

“The Dawn Monk. The expelled woman. The five in white. Hesta's cart.”

“Soldiers behind them?”

“None that we can see.”

I could hear the hope in that answer. He thought a small company might mean a discussion, perhaps even payment. He had accounts that were becoming difficult to explain to hungry people.

“Open the outer yard,” I said.

He looked surprised.

“Let them see where to enter. Bring the work books to the inner court.”

“Some of the workers want to go.”

“They may ask.”

“They have asked.”

I put down the cup I had not managed to drink from.

“Then they have an answer coming.”

He left with the expression of a man trying to decide whether obedience was still a temporary arrangement.

I took my father's journal from beneath the Doctrine.

The leather had darkened where my hands had carried it. There were pages I knew almost by touch, sentences I had used first as questions and later as permissions. His handwriting had not changed because my use of it had.

I opened to the circle crossed by its narrow stroke.

Once, I had believed every mark concealed a power the temple had withheld from me. Now I had a crown whose workings I could explain and a body that hurt in places I could not. Mystery had not diminished. It had become less obedient.

I closed the journal.

Whatever Rhydian had intended at the river, he had left us there. Whatever the Council had concealed, it had not forced my hand around Berrin's life. I knew the difference. I had grown tired of people imagining that my choices would disappear if they found a more innocent account of my pain.

The core gave one faint knock.

I bent beside it and adjusted the motion channel. The original mineral grain answered within its small bed. It could govern a relation; it could not create the charge that relation required. I kept that limitation exact. A false number was a kind of worship, and I had no more patience for it than I had for the other kinds.

Above the basin, the single receiving mouth stood closed.

My test in the night had opened its rim for less than a breath. There had not been enough reserve to complete another source alignment. Nothing had come through. I had shut it again before the failed reach disturbed the foundations.

This morning I would use what was already here.

I lifted the Riftbrand Blade. Its edge gathered out of the quill's dark spine, solid enough to weigh against my wrist. The crown recognized it and sent a pale line along the fuller.

I did not need to reach the ferry.

My brother was coming to me.

Eryth

The Tower's shadow crossed the road before its walls came into view.

Hesta stopped the cart outside it. Sacks of dry sand lay beneath the blankets, with a load of broken brick gathered from the damaged landing. Darel had brought wedges, a chisel, and two lengths of sound timber.

“That's where the old line begins.”

Eryth could see the blood-written boundary beneath the dust, faint as a scar under weathered skin. Beyond it, the first pillar rose inside the later stonework. Its broken companion had been bound with timbers. Men had built around the wound without making it whole.

Vaelin stood beside the cart, her stick planted between her boots.

“I'll take the lower controls. Darel knows the brace. You follow the basin.”

“And if he calls you back?” the captain asked.

“He knows where I am.”

A worker appeared in the opening of the gate. He carried a mallet in one hand and a wrapped bundle under the other arm. When he saw the guards, he stopped.

“We're not taking your things,” the captain told him.

He looked over his shoulder.

“He says the tool is bound to the works.”

“Put it on the ground.”

“I need it.”

“We'll see what can be done after you're outside.”

The man knelt. As he loosened his fingers, the mallet rose an inch and pulled toward the Tower. He snatched for it.

“Leave it,” Eryth said.

The man froze. Darklight ran along the wooden handle, tightening around the place where his thumb had been.

Eryth touched the staff to the earth beside the mallet. He gave its pull a place that ended at the boundary. The handle dropped. The working continued beneath the wood, but it could no longer follow the hand that had released it.

The man stepped out.

His bundle contained clothes, a whetstone, and half a loaf of bread.

Nothing in it tried to return.

Hesta put a blanket around his shoulders. The captain sent one guard with him toward the bend, then raised her voice to the open gate.

“Anyone who wants to leave may come this way. Put down anything that pulls. Your name in a book is not a rope.”

From inside the Tower, somebody laughed.

Then another person appeared.

PART 3 OF 5

The Unpaid Road

Vaelin

She had once knelt at the foot of the first pillar because she believed she had found a place where no one would ask her to kneel.

The memory did not prevent her from finding the control housing. It made her look longer at the places where her own work remained useful.

A narrow iron lever governed the lower vent. Beside it, the calibration stop she had shortened still bore a bright edge beneath its newer stain. Kael had corrected the reach since her departure. He had not replaced the whole assembly.

Darel came down the service steps behind her. In the yard above, Hesta and two of the workers who had come back with her began carrying the brick and sand into the discharge catch. They followed the path he had marked away from the buried stair.

“Still yours?”

“Enough of it.”

“Can you open it?”

“If the pressure stays within the last measured range.”

“And if it doesn't?”

“I let go before it takes my hand.”

He nodded. That was a promise he could work with.

Above them, the captain called again. Feet moved across the outer yard. Some hurried; others stopped to argue with the quartermaster. Vaelin could not distinguish the words through the stone. She could distinguish the sound of a door being barred.

She looked up.

Darel had heard it too.

“The pay room,” he said.

“Who's in it?”

“The ones who wanted their names struck from the account before they went.”

Vaelin swore.

She climbed the steps faster than her ankle allowed. Pain sharpened under the bandage. At the top she found Eryth turning toward the same sound.

The quartermaster stood outside the pay room, his hand still on the bar.

“Open it,” she said.

“He said the accounts had to remain here.”

“The books can.”

“They won't leave without them.”

From behind the door came a hard blow, followed by a woman's voice.

“We said we wanted a copy!”

The quartermaster looked toward the inner court.

Vaelin stepped between him and the view.

“Did he order you to lock that door?”

“He ordered me to keep the accounts.”

“Then this part is yours.”

The words struck him harder than a threat would have. For an instant he seemed ready to argue that a man's instructions occupied more space than the man himself.

Eryth set one hand on the bar.

A dark thread tightened across it.

The quartermaster recoiled.

“That wasn't there.”

“It is now.”

From the inner court, Kael spoke.

“Bring the staff here, Eryth.”

His voice carried without shouting. Vaelin could not see him, but she could see the thin light entering the bar through the stone beside it.

Eryth looked at the door.

“How many?”

“Six,” the woman inside said. “One fell. She's breathing.”

“Move away from the hinges.”

Kael spoke again.

“You cannot hold everything.”

Eryth drew Aetherium.

The physical blade scraped the throat of its scabbard. He scraped a short mark in the dust with his heel, set the staff against it, and passed the wood to the captain, who had reached them from the yard.

“Keep the end on that mark. Don't follow the light if it moves.”

“Eryth—”

“Only until the hinge comes free.”

He struck the lower hinge. Aetherium bit through iron and into the stone behind it. Darklight lashed from the bar, striking his shoulder. He staggered into the door. Vaelin caught the back of his coat and hauled him clear before the second lash could close around his neck.

“Again,” she said.

“I know.”

He cut the upper hinge.

The door sagged inward. Hands caught it from the other side. The dark bar held to the frame while the planks tore away around it, leaving an opening no larger than a bent person could crawl through.

The first worker came out bleeding from her brow. The second carried the account book.

The quartermaster reached for it.

Vaelin struck his wrist with her stick.

“Find another thing to do.”

For a heartbeat nobody moved. Then he bent to help a third worker through the opening.

Eryth took back the staff. The light on the bar went slack as he closed its short route into the broken frame. He could not do the same for every object in the Tower, one by one, while Kael chose the next thing to bind.

Neither of them pretended otherwise.

“Go to the basin,” Vaelin said.

He looked toward the last two people inside.

“We have them.”

The captain went through the opening on her knees. One guard followed. The injured woman emerged between them a moment later, conscious enough to be angry about the damage to her boot.

Vaelin returned to the service steps.

At the lower housing, Darel had set the broken brace beside its replacement. He had scored three shallow channels in the accessible face of the casing, following the positions they had measured beside the lamp. The grooves could receive the final relations if Eryth managed to hold them steady; until then, they were only cuts in stone. Above, Hesta emptied the last sack into the catch and called that her helpers were clear. He showed her the wedge with a quick movement of his thumb.

“When the basin moves, this follows it. The collar won't have to fight the stone.”

“And when the load comes back?”

“We let it settle into the catch. Not against the buried stair.”

A dull impact sounded overhead. Dust sifted from the joints.

Kael was moving something large.

Vaelin took the lever in both hands. Her burned palm objected immediately. She eased the vent open by the width Darel had marked.

Heat breathed over her knuckles.

“Tell me when,” he said.

She watched the indicator fall, pause, and begin to climb again.

“Not yet.”

Kael

The gate stone rose farther than I intended.

For an instant it hung level with the arch, pale underneath, while everyone in the yard looked up at the place where gravity had ceased to be dependable.

I lowered the demand. The Halo answered a fraction late.

The stone descended across the road and stopped at a height that left a narrow passage beneath it.

There. Let them choose how badly they wanted to leave.

The reserve thinned. I could feel the cost behind my eyes. I would not hold that weight long, but long enough could be a form of obedience.

Eryth entered the court.

He had blood on his sleeve and a sword in his hand. The plain staff struck the paving as he walked. Behind him, one guard helped a laborer carry another toward the gate.

“You brought people into danger,” I said.

“They were already in it.”

“You could have come alone.”

“And asked nicely?”

His anger surprised me. I had prepared for sorrow, for earnestness, for the voice he used when he wanted me to recognize myself inside his account of the world.

“You've been practicing,” I said.

“No. I've been listening.”

He glanced toward the hovering stone.

“Put it down.”

“It is down.”

“On the ground. Beside the road.”

“Come nearer.”

He stopped.

There were perhaps twelve paces between us. Beyond his shoulder, the first woman crouched beneath the gate stone and ran. It trembled as she passed. The laborer carrying his friend hesitated.

My brother did not look away from me.

“If you drop it on them, you won't have brought me nearer.”

I wanted to tell him that he did not know what would bring him nearer until I found it.

Instead I moved the stone half a pace sideways.

It was enough to widen the road. It was also enough to leave me a weapon above it.

Eryth understood both things.

He came one step closer.

PART 4 OF 5

Under the First Pillar

Eryth

Kael looked older beneath the crown.

Not majestic. Not ancient. Simply hurt in ways that would keep hurting when the light went out. Blood had dried at the corner of his mouth. His smallest finger lay crooked against the Riftbrand's grip. The crown's low band held its own darkness, with thin channels of light passing beneath it like weather far below ice.

Eryth could not make the man in front of him into the boy at the river.

He could remember both.

“You know what the staff is,” Kael said.

“I know what I've learned to do with it.”

“It belongs in the crown's working.”

“It can balance what you made. That doesn't make it yours.”

“Nothing becomes mine by permission. I had to learn that.”

“No. You decided to prefer it.”

The words stayed between them.

Behind Kael, the basin trembled on its bearing. Its shallow lip had a fresh line where stone had rubbed against metal. The single receiving mouth above it remained closed, a dim rim against empty air. No stars showed through it. No other world waited visibly beyond.

Eryth watched the actual stone move east.

Kael followed his gaze.

“They told you.”

“They measured it.”

“Darel believes measurement makes him innocent.”

“Darel is helping people leave.”

“And you?”

“The same.”

Eryth took another step. The basin lay to Kael's left; the service channel ran under a low bridge beyond it. He could hear Vaelin's vent opening beneath the floor, a coarse breathing that rose whenever the pressure crossed her mark.

Kael heard it too.

His eyes narrowed.

“You didn't come to take the crown.”

“No.”

“You came to close its road.”

Eryth did not answer. Behind him, someone shouted that the gate stone was sinking.

Kael's attention flickered toward the sound.

Eryth moved.

Aetherium caught the Riftbrand near its guard. The impact traveled through Eryth's wounded shoulder and almost opened his grip. He used the collision to turn rather than press, stepping past Kael toward the basin. The staff struck the stone lip.

The first pattern woke.

For an instant he felt every place the basin wanted to be: its unloaded rest, its eastward settlement, the small tilt permitted by the old foundation beneath it. He did not choose one and call the others errors. He held the bearing through all three.

The basin shifted.

The seal moved with it.

Kael drove an elbow into his jaw.

Eryth hit the low wall. Light tore across his sight. He kept the staff against the basin with the heel of his burned hand, and the price of doing so nearly made him faint.

“Let go,” Kael said.

Eryth drove his knee against Kael's injured leg.

Kael staggered. The gate stone dropped another handspan.

Outside, the captain shouted for everyone to keep moving.

Eryth wedged the staff into the narrow working slot Darel had described, between the basin bearing and the old guide stone. The seal followed the actual load into the wood. It would remain only while that contact held.

His hand came free.

He caught Kael's next cut on Aetherium and backed around the basin.

The crown's light sharpened.

“Every lesson,” Kael said, “you bring back to me as a lock.”

“Every door you make has someone pressed against it.”

Kael struck again.

Eryth turned the blow, slid close, and used his free hand to touch the staff's second pattern. He asked it to distinguish the return path from the people standing on the same ground.

The Tower answered in a rush of pressure.

Not a vision. A burden with a direction.

Here was the lift collar. Here the gate stone. Here the bound bar outside the pay room. Beyond the scar lay the remembered road toward the ferry, ready to carry another command if enough charge entered it.

He refused that outward relation.

He did not refuse the road itself.

At the gate, the hovering stone fell.

The captain had time to shove the last laborer clear. It struck the empty edge of the entrance and burst into three great pieces, showering the yard with chips. A guard fell behind her shield. Another pulled her up.

No one lay beneath it.

Eryth heard the captain call the count. He could not see the gate from where he stood, and he waited for the answer before allowing himself to believe it.

“All through!”

Kael's face changed.

The change was smaller than Eryth expected. No mask fell. No other being looked out. His brother simply understood that something had been taken from his command and decided what to do about it.

He turned the Riftbrand toward the staff.

Eryth stepped between them.

Vaelin

The indicator struck the upper mark hard enough to crack its glass.

Vaelin hauled the lever back.

“Now!”

Darel drove the wedge. The basin's movement passed into the brace instead of wrenching the vent housing from the wall. Above them, magic that had been reaching outward returned toward its own frame.

The court would receive only what the vent could carry.

Everything beyond that would remain inside.

Vaelin felt the limit through the lever. It was a brutal, trembling thing. Her left wrist slipped. Darel caught the shaft below her hands and added his weight.

A pale line appeared in the discharge trench.

“Don't open it farther,” she said.

“Wasn't going to.”

The line reached the dry catch. Broken brick glowed. Sand fused around its edges with a sound like wet grain thrown into a pan.

The ground beneath the buried stair remained dark.

For a moment she could breathe.

Then a voice spoke through the stone at her feet.

It used her name.

Darel looked down.

“Did you hear—”

“Yes.”

“Who was it?”

“Nothing we're opening a door for.”

She put her shoulder against the lever and kept the vent within its mark.

PART 5 OF 5

The Last Way Out

Eryth

The Tower tried to remember itself before he touched it.

Eryth felt the attempt in the staff: the basin settling back, the return path restored, the old outward command inviting the present to become a mistake that could be corrected.

The third pattern had not been set.

Kael knew it.

He drove Eryth away from the wood with three short cuts, each aimed where an injured man would find the movement hardest. Aetherium met the first. The second opened Eryth's coat along the ribs. The third struck the basin's rim and threw sparks across the closed mouth above it.

The rim flickered.

Something immense seemed to move behind the empty air, though no opening had formed.

Eryth did not look long enough to give it a shape.

“Your father taught you to endure,” Kael said.

“Our father.”

“He left me the part you didn't want.”

“He left a book. You wrote the rest.”

The Riftbrand struck hard enough to numb Eryth's sword hand.

Behind Kael, two workers crossed the upper walkway. One carried a rolled mattress. The other held the railing with both hands and would not move.

The scaffold collar flashed.

Kael had not fed it. Eryth could see the indicator above the channel darkening as the reserve went to the crown instead.

“The walk,” he said.

Kael did not turn.

“If they had stayed below as they were told—”

The first brace split.

Eryth ran toward the stair.

Kael's blade struck the wall behind him, taking a strip of stone where his shoulder had been. Eryth reached the lower step as the walkway tilted. The man with the mattress dropped it. The roll struck the floor and burst open, scattering a little tin cup, two shirts, a wooden spoon.

The other worker still clung to the railing.

“Look at me,” Eryth called.

The man shook his head.

“Look at the stair, then. Put one foot toward it.”

“I can't.”

“Yes. One.”

Eryth could not take the staff from the basin without releasing what held the outward path. He could not reach the walkway with the sword. He could only climb into the falling structure and trust the people who had come to help.

The captain appeared below.

She saw the tilting walk, the worker, the plain wood standing beyond Kael.

“Go,” she said.

Eryth climbed.

A beam slipped from its socket. The stairs kicked beneath him. He seized the upper rail with his left hand and felt his shoulder nearly leave its proper place. Pain drove the breath out of him.

The first worker crawled past, white-faced and silent.

The second had shut his eyes.

Eryth reached him.

“You can hold me instead.”

The man opened his eyes. He looked past Eryth toward the drop.

“I'll pull you down.”

“Then we'll move quickly.”

Below them, the captain and a guard dragged the fallen mattress against the stair base. Another guard planted her shield beneath the slipping beam. She could not carry the whole walkway. She could keep the beam from striking the people coming down it for a few breaths.

Eryth put the man's hand on the sound rail.

“Now the other.”

The man moved.

They made three steps before the upper fixing tore free.

Eryth pushed him toward the captain.

The stair fell sideways.

He struck the mattress with his hip, rolled onto stone, and lost Aetherium. The sword slid under the lower rail. He reached for it and felt a boot close over his wrist.

Kael stood above him.

The Halo shone along one side of his face. Blood ran from his nose to his upper lip. His damaged leg trembled under the effort of remaining upright.

Eryth could hear the workers being pulled toward the gate.

“You keep leaving the fight,” Kael said.

Eryth looked up at him.

“You keep putting other people in it.”

The Riftbrand lowered.

A stone struck Kael's shoulder.

Not magic. A piece of broken paving thrown by the worker who had refused to move.

Kael turned his head.

The captain caught the man's arm before he could throw another.

“Out,” she said.

Eryth twisted his wrist, drew his knee beneath him, and drove upward. Kael lost his footing. The blade cut the floor beside Eryth's neck, leaving a black line in the stone.

Aetherium's hilt touched Eryth's fingers.

He closed his hand around it.

At the basin, the third pattern flared and failed to settle. The staff still held the first two, but each repetition of the old command made the wood strain harder against its slot.

He could not finish from here.

The captain backed toward the gate with both workers before her.

“Eryth!”

“Take them.”

“There's no one behind us.”

“Then take them now.”

She hesitated long enough for him to know the price of asking. Then she obeyed the purpose they had all agreed to before dawn.

At the service hatch, Vaelin's head appeared.

“The catch is nearly full.”

“How long?”

“Long enough to choose something. Not long enough to keep choosing.”

Eryth nodded.

Kael rose between him and the staff.

For the first time that morning, no worker stood within reach of either blade. The gate was open. The injured had gone. Beyond the court, Vaelin and Darel held the last of the pressure where it could settle without entering the buried dark.

The Tower had narrowed to two brothers and the distance between them.

Kael lifted the Riftbrand.

“Now,” he said, “look at me.”

Eryth did.

He saw the brother who had pulled him from brambles. The man who had killed a surrendered guard. The boy who had held him while their father vanished. The man who had just tried to drive a blade through his throat.

Love did not make one of those things erase another.

Eryth raised Aetherium.

When the weapons met, the sound ran up the first pillar and out through the unfinished crown of the Tower, bright enough to silence every voice on the road.

CHAPTER 20

What the Dawn Could Keep

PART 1 OF 5

The Space Between Blades

Eryth

The second blow drove Eryth backward across the receiving court.

His heel struck a joint in the paving. He turned the fall into a step, and the Riftbrand Blade passed close enough to burn a line through his sleeve. Beyond Kael's shoulder, the plain wooden staff stood in its prepared slot beside the basin. Two patterns held. The unfinished third trembled against a stone that had not yet learned the difference between what had happened and what must not happen again.

Kael came after him.

There was nothing distant about his brother now. No report carried down a road, no glimpse through a working. His breathing rasped through his broken teeth. Blood had dried beneath the crown. When he turned, his bad knee failed to follow quickly enough, and he corrected with an ugly movement of the hip.

He was still fast.

Eryth caught the next cut on the physical length of Aetherium. Their blades struck with a sound that filled the open Tower. A pale line traveled toward his guard. He broke the contact before it reached his bandaged hand.

“You came to close my doors,” Kael said.

“The ones you used to reach them.”

“All this distinction. Does it make the theft easier?”

He struck at Eryth's left shoulder.

Eryth barely turned it. Pain entered the old injury so sharply that the whole side of the court vanished for a moment. Kael knew where he was hurt. Eryth had once trusted him to know such things.

At the outer passage, the captain called a name.

One of her guards had fallen beneath the end of a crossbeam. The timber had slipped when their first clash shook the scaffold. It pinned his boot against the paving. Another guard pulled at his arm while dust sifted into their hair.

Kael glanced toward them.

Eryth moved before the crown brightened.

He drove his blade upward beneath Kael's, forced the point aside, and took a shallow cut across his ribs for the opening. Then he ran to the fallen timber.

The guard who was pulling looked at the sword in his hand.

“Lift when I say.”

Eryth set Aetherium's flat beneath the beam against a fallen wedge of stone. A sword was a poor lever. It was what he had. He pressed down, his wounded palm opening inside its dressing.

“Now.”

The boot came free.

Behind him, the air whitened.

Eryth let the timber fall and turned on one knee. Kael's strike crossed the court above him, a narrow force drawn from the reserve. It hit the boundary already laid around the basin's governing frame and split along the permitted inward channels. Most vanished into the discharge court, already cleared of people. The last unfilled strip of its catch brightened. One bright tongue followed a metal brace toward the passage.

Eryth cut the brace.

The broken end fell smoking between his feet. The guard stumbled into the captain's arms.

“Get him beyond the wall,” Eryth said.

“You're coming with us.”

“When this stays closed.”

She looked past him at Kael, then made the decision that left both her hands available for the living man beside her.

“All four,” she called. “Out with me.”

The guards withdrew together. Eryth heard their boots and the drag of the injured man's foot. He did not turn until the sound reached the outer stair.

Kael stood between him and the staff.

“They'll tell that part,” his brother said. “How you knelt among them with the light on your sword.”

“He couldn't walk.”

“They'll tell it beautifully.”

Eryth rose. Blood darkened his side. He could take a breath if he kept it small.

Beyond the broken pillar, Vaelin remained at the service control. Her stick lay across her knees; both hands held the setting they had agreed upon. Below her, Darel braced the shaft against its stop. Neither could leave yet. Kael's line to the cleared discharge court shone through the exposed groove beside them. The catch there was nearly full.

“The lower measure's falling,” she called. “There won't be enough for another settling if you waste this one.”

Kael turned toward her.

Eryth struck.

For the first time, his brother had to give ground. Aetherium met the Riftbrand Blade close to its guard. Eryth twisted, pressing toward the fingers that would not close. Kael pulled away, then caught him across the jaw with the heel of his free hand.

They separated, both unsteady.

Kael laughed through blood.

“There you are.”

Eryth spat onto the stone. He had no answer worth the breath.

They fought around the basin while the empty mouth above it remained dark.

Kael used its low rim to shorten Eryth's steps. Eryth used the broken pillar to force turns Kael's knee disliked. Neither place belonged entirely to either of them. A piece of loosened paving tilted beneath Kael; Eryth nearly caught his sword on a hanging chain. The Tower was unfinished, badly wounded, full of work whose makers had escaped it.

The Halo gave Kael moments of terrible advantage. Once his blade moved before Eryth decided where to strike, and only the abrupt failure of his knee spoiled the answering cut. Once the crown lit, Kael turned toward an attack that never came, and Eryth caught him along the forearm.

Possible roads. Some true enough to kill by. Some false enough to die following.

Eryth did not try to read his brother's future. He watched the hand that held the blade.

“Give me the staff,” Kael said. “We can finish this.”

“It is finishing.”

The crown flared.

Kael drove him against the basin. Stone struck the back of Eryth's knees. Above them, the inactive receiving mouth cast its old, circular shadow. For a breath he saw the sky through the unfinished walls and thought of a different opening, a father's sleeve, a hand that had missed its hold.

Kael leaned against their crossed blades.

“He took us there.”

“Yes.”

“He knew more than he told us.”

“Yes.”

“And you still carry what they put in your hands.”

Eryth looked at him across the narrow grinding light.

“You chose Berrin.”

Kael's face changed.

Eryth drove his knee into his brother's failing leg and shoved the locked blades upward. Kael stumbled. Eryth followed, caught the Riftbrand's guard with his own, and twisted with everything his injured shoulder would allow.

The dark blade struck the basin's outer wall.

It fell beyond Kael's reach.

Kael dropped to one knee. His open hand slapped the paving. The other rose toward the Halo, but its light had gone thin; he had spent the immediate pulse in the attempt to break Eryth against the stone.

Aetherium's point stopped beneath his throat.

The court became almost silent.

Outside, the captain called that the passage was clear. Vaelin's hands remained steady on the control; she and Darel had the stone service wall between them and the blades. Everyone who had wanted to leave had reached the road. Eryth could finish the seal. He could also finish this.

He knew the distance. He knew the force required. Kael's unguarded throat rested in the white reflection of his sword, and no last miracle stood between the blade and its work.

His brother looked up at him.

PART 2 OF 5

The Choice That Remained

Kael

I knew he could kill me.

There was no borrowed vision in that knowledge. His sword touched the skin below my jaw. My knee would not take my weight. The crown needed a breath and a measure of strength I could not give it before his hand moved.

I had imagined defeat many times. Usually it contained a final answer. Some revelation that would explain why I had been denied, or a violence large enough to make denial meaningless.

There was only my brother, bleeding onto my floor.

“Do it,” I said.

His hand shook.

“You came this far.”

He looked exhausted. That offended me almost as much as the blade. I wanted judgment to arrive in glory if it must arrive at all. I wanted the face above me to become something I could hate without remembering how it had once looked asleep.

“You won't stop,” he said.

“No.”

I made certain he heard me.

“I will not thank you. I will not become the man you hoped would walk out with you.”

“I know.”

“Then what are you waiting for?”

His eyes moved once toward the passage. Vaelin called that the return channel was holding, that the others were beyond the boundary. He had made his choice about them first. I understood that, even then.

Then he looked at me.

“I don't want to destroy my brother.”

There was no argument in his voice. No bargain for the goodness I might someday show. I had denied him that bargain, and he had believed me.

“Your brother is dead.”

“You don't get to make that true because it would make this easier.”

He lowered the sword.

For a moment I hated him more than I had hated him with the point against my throat.

He had left me alive without agreeing that I was right to live as I had chosen. I could find no place to put that which did not feel like another thing taken from me.

“They'll die for this,” I said.

He stepped toward the staff.

“No,” he said. “You won't use this way to reach them again.”

Eryth

His left hand closed around the wood.

The shoulder nearly gave. He bent his elbow against his body and let his weight carry what the torn muscles could not. Aetherium stayed in his right hand. The blade's tip rested on the paving, ready to rise.

The first two patterns answered.

He felt the basin's small eastward settling, the movement Darel had measured while others had called it still. The first seal followed the actual stone and its seated frame. The second distinguished the outgoing command from the ordinary court, the passage, the road. He did not close the world around his brother. He closed the apparatus his brother had used to make the world obey.

The third pattern met a resistance without a voice.

The frame remembered opening. Beneath every fresh instruction lay an earlier permission, ready to restore itself when the pressure changed. Holding it closed for one moment would accomplish nothing if the next moment belonged to that permission again.

Eryth looked at the narrow cuts they had made in the material casing. Their crossing ended above the known support bed. Below that bed lay old stone, the shored stair, the unknown depth no one had agreed to burden.

He kept his work above it.

“Vaelin. The last setting.”

She and Darel moved the control the width of the marked notch.

“That's the last the catch can take,” Darel called.

The last measured portion of the chosen reserve entered the cleared court. Eryth divided it before it reached the nearly filled catch. One share went toward the shallow cuts in the casing. The rest followed the remaining channel through the broken brick and sand.

Light climbed its walls. Cold made a white skin across the upper stones while heat darkened the lower channel; motion lifted a cloud of grit that quiet lowered again. Each nature had its own permitted bed. Their small, terrible storm spent itself inside the space the workers had cleared.

Eryth held the present closure against the cuts in the casing. That share of the reserve could set the work, but he had to supply the small, exact force that ordered it. He gave what he could still bear. His knees shook. A numbness spread from his burned palm to the wrist, and he could no longer feel the sword's leather through the cloth.

He allowed the pressure to settle inward, into the prepared supports and the frame's own shallow channels. He did not ask stone to refuse every movement. He asked it to bear this one without turning it into a path outward.

The marks brightened.

Behind him, steel scraped stone.

“Eryth,” Vaelin said.

He heard the warning and the footstep together.

Kael's blade came for the arm holding the staff.

Eryth lifted Aetherium. The strike jarred through his ruined grip. His sword turned sideways, slid along the Riftbrand, and carried its edge past the wood. Kael's shoulder struck his chest. They staggered against the basin together.

Eryth did not let go.

The three cuts took the staff's agreements together: the bearing that followed the basin, the route ending within the known frame, the closing being made now. The outgoing command struck the completed material pattern, sought the earlier permission, and found the present closure waiting in that place as well.

The core gave one deep sound.

The remaining light ran down the discharge channels.

Then the cuts in the casing went dark.

Kael drew back his sword for another thrust. Eryth pushed away from the basin, turned the point with Aetherium's guard, and struck the Riftbrand aside. He could not have repeated the movement. He could scarcely lift his arm again.

He did not have to hold the working by lifting it.

The closure remained in the stone.

Eryth loosened one finger from the staff, then another. Nothing pulled after his hand. No line of strength stretched from his ribs toward the core. The finite reserve had paid for the setting; the material relation kept it, as a fired vessel kept its shape after the fire was gone.

He lifted the staff from its slot.

The seal stayed closed.

Vaelin released the control. Its handle remained where the notch held it. Darel checked the seated wedge, took his hands away, and saw that nothing shifted. They left together, Vaelin with her stick and the mason carrying the broken end of his measuring brace.

Kael stood beside the basin. The Halo was whole upon his head. In its dark band a fine light traveled, continuing its separate, difficult circuit. The receiving mouth above him remained inactive.

He pressed a command through the crown.

Dust rose inside the court. At the marked frame the pressure folded inward and spent itself. Beyond the scar, a strip of loose cloth on the road stirred only in the wind.

“You haven't ended me,” Kael said.

“No.”

Eryth backed toward the passage with the staff in one hand and the sword in the other.

“The stone can be changed.”

“Then changing it will cost you what is built into it.”

“There are other ways.”

Eryth could not promise there were none. The seals bound what they knew, the routes they had witnessed, the force this frame could carry. He had made no law that every age and every unknown power must obey.

He had stopped this reach. People were alive on the road because of it.

“There are,” he said. “You could walk out.”

Kael looked past him toward the ordinary opening.

For a moment Eryth saw his brother understand that the path remained. Then Kael raised his chin beneath the crown.

“I will not follow you.”

“I know.”

The words had become easier to say. They had not become painless.

Eryth stepped into the passage. Kael struck once more, a last hard cut at the place where his brother's back would turn. Eryth had expected it. He caught the blade across Aetherium and the upper length of the staff, carried it against the doorway's stone, and stepped beyond its reach.

He could have remained. He could have fought until one of them stopped breathing.

He left because he had chosen to leave.

At the outer stair, Vaelin and Darel waited just long enough to see him coming. Together they went down into the morning.

Behind them, Darklight Tower still stood.

PART 3 OF 5

Names in Ordinary Ink

Eryth

The captain did not salute him.

She counted the people coming through the broken wall, reached five when she included herself and her guards, and asked Eryth whether the channels had closed.

“The ones we marked.”

“Will they stay closed when you sleep?”

“They stayed when I took my hand away.”

Tavin, waiting with the wagons, wrote down those exact words.

Maren cut Eryth's ruined dressing free. He watched her scissors move because watching the Tower would have been easier, and he did not want to give it that ease.

“He lives,” the captain said.

“Yes.”

“You had a chance?”

“Yes.”

She sat beside him on the wagon step.

“Berrin had put his weapon down.”

“I know.”

“I need you to understand that when people ask what happened.”

Eryth met her eyes.

“Tell them. Tell them I could have killed Kael and chose not to. Don't make Berrin part of my reason.”

She looked away first. He could not tell whether the answer gave her anything she could use.

At the ferry, they laid the rescued workers' tools on separate cloths so their owners could identify them. One hammer had belonged to a man who stayed. Hesta set it apart and wrote his name on a scrap tied to its handle.

“He can collect it if he comes,” she said.

There were wages no one could pay. There were burns that needed more care than the landing could provide. One family refused the first room offered because its window faced the northern road. The captain found them another.

Eryth spent the afternoon answering questions from a bed he was too weak to leave.

He did not become less answerable because he had come back wounded.

The hearing resumed after he could sit without fainting. The reviewer entered the evacuation accounts beside the earlier testimony. Workers disagreed about which order they had heard first. A man who had stayed until the fighting began insisted that Kael had meant to protect the court. The guard whose boot had been trapped described the light striking toward the passage.

Neither account was rubbed out to make the other simpler.

The mapped channels, the emptied reserve, the injuries, the released tools, and the marks copied from the material frame remained things other people could examine. The Council received the record. It did not answer with one voice. Some sought a charge that would preserve its dignity; others questioned the captain's authority to enter the Tower at all.

The reviewer refused to withdraw her certification of what the witnesses had actually supplied.

Then the correspondence from Eldra arrived.

It came in a packet carrying the reference from the surviving receipt. The unanswered request had remained outside the audience register, filed with correspondence concerning access to the riverbank. No prophecy had hidden it. Ordinary habits had separated papers that should have been read together.

Maren recognized the concern she had heard Rhydian express: reading the damaged seal without waking what it contained. She made no claim about his private conversation in the closed court.

The reviewer placed the retained request before Eryth, together with the dated office record that explained where it had been kept.

He knew the hand before he read the name.

Rhydian made the descending stroke of one letter too long. As a boy, Eryth had copied that mistake until a tutor asked whether he meant to write like his father or merely write clearly.

The request concerned the relabeled, damaged seal and the route named in its account. Rhydian wanted a reader who could examine the seal without waking what it held. He wanted to compare the account against the actual access at Eldra, from the public bank, and seek closure of the suspect route if the discrepancy proved real.

Near the end, the formal hand loosened.

He had promised the morning to his sons. He believed the exterior observation could be made while keeping that promise. The public bank was safe, he wrote. He would take them there and return before the ordinary day's duties drew him away again.

Eryth read that passage twice.

“He thought he could do both,” he said.

Tavin sat across the table. “The work and the morning.”

“Yes.”

He remembered Rhydian laughing with the lost sandal in his hand. Bread in the grass. Their father's sudden, changed voice when the line tightened.

Rhydian had gone looking for a discrepancy he meant to challenge. He had brought his sons because he had promised them his time and believed the bank safe enough to combine love with unfinished work.

He had been wrong.

The paper did not make the error small. It made it human, and Eryth found that harder to bear than either worship or accusation.

“He didn't take us there to be offered,” he said.

“This gives no evidence that he did,” the reviewer answered. “It gives his stated purpose, before the event.”

“And where he went afterward?”

She did not turn another page to comfort him.

“No.”

The visitor's identity remained uncertain. So did what had become of the Falcon, and where the white fire had carried Rhydian. The retained request did not cross those distances.

Eryth put his hand beside the signature. He did not lay the staff against it.

“May I have an ordinary copy?”

The reviewer drew fresh paper toward her.

Later, beside the ferry store, the captain planted a small upright stone for Berrin. She had his name cut without a title that would make his murder useful to anyone. Those who had known him spoke. Those who had not listened.

Eryth remained at the edge of the gathering.

When it was over, he helped carry the unused water back inside.

Vaelin found him at the door.

“The road crews want someone who can read a failing support before it falls,” she said. “The ferry wants the same thing.”

“Both sound like work you're good at.”

“They are paying.”

He smiled, faintly.

“Good.”

She would help the ordinary rotating crews learn the physical markers at the old boundary. She would leave instructions that did not require everyone to know her. Then she would work where people traveled, where a safe bridge carried someone toward a life they had chosen.

“I won't live waiting for him,” she said.

Eryth leaned the staff against the door and picked up the water bucket with both hands.

“Neither will I.”

PART 4 OF 5

A Room in Duskvale

Eryth

He did not leave the ferry the next morning.

His wounds required patience he had never been good at granting himself. Maren made him eat before answering the reviewer. Elen brought work that could be done sitting down: a

buckle to mend, a torn packet to rewrap, a list to read aloud while Tavin checked its figures against another.

Sometimes Eryth woke with his hand reaching for a sword that was not beside the bed. Then he would hear the ferry chain, a cart arriving, Elen complaining that someone had put a pot where a foot belonged. He learned the room again by its ordinary sounds.

When he could walk the road without reopening the wound at his side, Hesta offered him a place on a southbound cart.

“I can't tell you where you'll finish,” she said. “I can tell you where I'm going.”

He accepted.

There was no ceremony at the landing. Tavin gave him copies of the records that concerned his father. Maren gave him clean cloth and a severe account of what would happen if he used it for anything besides his hand. Elen pressed bread into his pack while pretending it had merely been left over.

The captain stood at the gate.

“If someone asks where you've gone?”

“Tell them when I know.”

She nodded. He had made himself available to the hearing and left his account under his own name. She asked for no further promise.

Vaelin walked beside the cart as far as the turning. She had a new brace around her leg, fitted by a craftswoman who refused to call limping a moral failure.

“I may come and see you,” she said.

“I'd like that.”

“Once you've found a roof.”

He looked up at the clear sky.

“I'll try to remember one.”

She laughed, and he carried the sound farther than the bend.

They traveled through rain that made every canvas seam worth knowing. At an inn yard, he helped a carter untangle a strap and found himself explaining nothing about the wood he carried. In a roadside shelter, he slept while strangers argued over the best way to boil beans. Once a distant storm lit the clouds, and he woke thinking of the Halo. Hesta handed him a cup without asking what he had seen.

By the time they reached Duskvale, the dressing on his palm had become smaller than his hand.

Duskvale received them through a press of wheels, washing, and people with somewhere else to be. Smoke drifted between roofs. In a narrow street, a woman called from an upper window for a basket someone below had forgotten. No one looked at Eryth long enough to decide what he should be.

Hesta had a load to deliver. He helped loosen the cords, thanked her, and followed a lane away from the market.

The lane became an alley. Another crossed it beneath a leaning upper story. Beyond a passage smelling of wet stone and bread crusts, he saw daylight through a broken wall.

There was a courtyard on the other side.

Fallen pillars lay among weeds. Shattered statues watched nothing with their missing faces. The temple beyond had lost much of its roof, and the surviving stones carried no name he could read with confidence.

A woman was gathering dry branches beside one of the pillars.

“Does anyone use this place?” he asked.

“For branches,” she said.

“The room inside.”

She looked at his staff, then his worn boots.

“Rain uses most of it.”

She showed him the chamber that had kept its roof. An arched window admitted a pale strip of afternoon. Water had entered beneath the sill and made a dark fan across the floor, but the back wall was dry. A cracked stone bench stood where some forgotten purpose had left it.

“Ask at the ward office before you mend anything,” she said. “Otherwise they'll discover they own it the moment there's something worth owning.”

He did.

The clerk looked surprised that anyone wanted permission to sleep in the ruin. Eryth agreed to clear the fallen timber without moving the old boundary stones, keep the passage accessible, and bring any legible old tablets to be recorded before choosing where to set them. He received a scrap of paper that he read twice before folding.

The next morning, he bought a broom.

It broke before midday.

He stood among the dust with its two pieces in his hands and laughed until his ribs made him stop.

The branch-gatherer, passing the courtyard, looked in.

“You bought the cheap one.”

“It seemed equal to the work.”

“It wasn't.”

She fetched cord. He shaped a peg. Between them they made the broom less elegant and more useful.

Her name was Neris. She mended baskets in a room off the next alley and possessed strong views about what could still be repaired. When she had gone, Eryth swept the sheltered chamber to its farthest corner.

The work took days. He learned which paving stones moved underfoot and left the dangerous ones clearly marked until a mason could help reset them. He cleared the window's drainage groove. A potter exchanged a chipped brazier for help reading a delivery account. Neris found two reed mats, one good enough to sleep on and the other good enough to keep feet from the cold floor.

The ruined exterior remained. He did not raise the fallen pillars or give the shattered statues faces of his own choosing. The broken wall still opened onto the courtyard. Birds nested where the temple roof had been.

Inside, a lamp could burn without rain putting it out.

He stored Aetherium in its wrapping along the dry wall. The staff rested where his hand could find it beside the mat. His father's copied request went into a wooden box with his own account of the Tower.

The first night the brazier held its heat until dawn, he woke because he was warm.

For a while he could not understand what had woken him.

Then someone in the alley began arguing with a reluctant donkey. A pot clattered. Neris told both parties they were blocking the way.

Eryth sat up, rubbed his eyes, and put water on to heat.

PART 5 OF 5

The Long Quiet

Kael

I built the seat from stone that had been meant for a stair.

The stair would have led to an upper room I no longer needed anyone else to reach. I used its broadest slab for the back and its two narrower blocks for the arms. The first arrangement leaned. I took it apart and began again.

There was power left to me, and there were limits. The crown could move a weight inside the court if I paid what it asked. The old core could accept what I gave it. What I could no longer do was send the court's command through the routes my brother had closed.

I tested them.

They remained closed.

I studied the material frame until I understood enough to hate the care in it. Tearing the marks away would mean breaking the relations that supported the very reach I meant to recover. My brother had left no convenient ribbon I could cut while preserving the gift beneath it.

There would be other work. I had not reached the end of knowledge because he had reached the end of his willingness to follow me.

The quartermaster left before the seat was finished.

He carried a bag small enough to insult everything I had promised. I could have stopped him with the blade. He looked at it when he told me he was going.

“Your wages remain in the account,” I said.

“They've remained there a long time.”

“You'll hear what becomes of this place.”

He looked up at the unfinished walls.

“Perhaps.”

I let him go because I wanted him alive to hear.

Others went by ones and twos. The ordinary way out stayed open. Those who had mistaken a crown for payment learned that a ruler could possess both gold and nothing to give them.

I kept the crown.

I kept the Tower, the Doctrine, the root-heart in its old stone, and the unopened depth beneath the shored stair. I did not need to wake everything I owned in order to own it.

When the seat finally bore my weight without shifting, I placed the Riftbrand Blade across its arms and sat beneath the broken circle of the upper wall.

Dark lord. There was no one present to dispute the title.

The Halo remained whole. Its light moved through the separate beds, patient with a patience I had fashioned from things that had never consented to wait for me. At times it showed a figure in the passage. A blade raised. The wood I still lacked.

I did not mistake every glimpse for a promise.

I chose which promise to live by myself.

My brother had walked away. One day there would be another battle, and the place he had refused would need to be entered. I would be here when that day came.

Above the receiving basin, the single mouth remained dark.

Eryth

The quiet did not arrive all at once.

It came in the time Eryth spent patching a mat without thinking of a crown. It came when he heard someone run in the alley and waited to learn whether they needed help before reaching for his staff. It came when he could remember his father's laughter without immediately following it into white fire.

Neris grew accustomed to leaving her door open while he read beside the courtyard. Vaelin visited with mud on her boots and accounts of bridges whose builders had finally agreed that water would continue to flow beneath them. They argued about a drainage cut, shared bread, and left the Tower out of the conversation because other things had happened worth telling.

Messages from the ferry became less frequent without becoming unwelcome. Elen learned to walk farther. Maren sent news of people Eryth remembered and people he had never met. Tavin's careful figures appeared in manuals whose readers did not know which hand had first struggled to write them.

Eryth answered when there was something to answer. He had no wish to return to Darklight Tower, and none to fight his brother again. He no longer measured a peaceful day by how well it prepared him for that meeting.

The world changed unevenly.

The hearing's records survived in more than one place. Disputed rulings gathered around them. A later clerk copied Berrin's name correctly because the captain had refused to let anyone shorten it into a number. The stories told by the survivors did not all agree, but the tools had been returned, the passages had stayed open, and no new command came down the old road.

Trade found easier routes. The supply tracks narrowed to paths, then to marks that people crossed without following. Timber from an abandoned way station went into a barn. A turning disappeared beneath thorn.

The first crews who inspected the physical boundary knew why each marker stood there. Those who came after read the instructions. Later still, the district ceased sending traffic that way, and the remaining notices warned of unstable works beyond the scar without trying to tell the whole story of two brothers.

The Tower did not vanish. It became difficult to reach, then unnecessary to mention. Maps kept its outline longer than travelers kept its name. Records waited in dry rooms for readers who had reasons to open other shelves.

Memory thinned by such ordinary means.

In Duskvale, new voices replaced familiar ones in the alleys. Repairs acquired repairs. The young who had once passed the broken wall without looking inside grew old enough to direct newcomers toward the monk who lived there.

Elder Monk, they began to call him.

The name settled without a ceremony. He had become older than many people who needed him, and he had learned not to make that the most important thing he knew about them.

He read difficult letters. He sat with the grieving. When something dangerous required his knowledge, he used it with care and came home afterward. He accepted bread, work, silence, and the occasional foolish argument over what should grow beside the courtyard wall.

There were nights when sorrow still entered uninvited.

It no longer found the house empty of everything else.

One mild evening, after rain, Eryth carried his cup into the courtyard. Water shone in the hollows of a fallen pillar. Above the broken wall, laundry stirred between two buildings, and someone beyond them was singing a tune with an ending more certain than its beginning.

He set a second cup beside the first from old habit.

He looked at it for a while.

Then Neris's grown nephew came through the opening with a basket that needed its handle bound. Eryth poured the spare tea, and they sat together while the young man worked the cord.

“Should I pull it tighter?”

Eryth tested the join with his thumb.

“It needs room to bear what you put in it.”

They finished before the light went. The nephew took the basket home, leaving Eryth the last piece of bread from inside it.

For a moment he remembered another piece of bread, grass beneath his feet, Kael beside him before either of them had believed the whole world must answer their hurt. He could remember that brother without mistaking the memory for a man he could bring back.

He ate slowly.

In the sheltered room, the plain staff leaned beside the mat. The lamp waited beneath the arched window. His father's words rested in their box, incomplete in all the ways a life could remain incomplete after it had ended or gone beyond finding.

Eryth did not turn toward the north.

He took the cups inside. He banked the brazier, left water ready for morning, and lay down while the sounds of Duskvale gathered around the ruined walls.

Far away, a crowned man waited for the battle that would justify his waiting.

Eryth slept.

When dawn entered through the arched window, he woke without reaching for a sword.

Vocabulary

100 words and terms from Warlock

abutment. A solid support at the end of a bridge or crossing that carries its weight.

Aetherium. Eryth's sword, forged to hold light and separate hostile force from the person wielding it.

Akasha. The underlying source of magic that practitioners draw upon and the temple consults through the Records.

Akashic elemental atoms. The smallest seeds of a magical working's nature, such as weight, heat, or motion.

alignment. An arrangement that brings objects or magical forces into the positions needed to act together.

aperture. An opening through which light, force, or material can pass.

archive. A collection of preserved records, or the place where those records are kept.

Ashrend Bolt. A spell that releases a narrow burst of black-and-silver heat capable of breaking and weakening its target.

authority. The recognized power to give orders, make decisions, or act on behalf of an institution.

axial. Running along or relating to a central line around which something is arranged.

bearing. A direction or supporting relation used to locate and steady a route or structure.

boundary. A dividing limit that determines where a place, influence, or magical working begins or ends.

brazier. A container designed to hold burning fuel and provide heat or light.

catacombs. Underground passages and chambers associated with burials or the keeping of the dead.

causeway. A raised road or path built across wet, low, or difficult ground.

celestial. Relating to the sky, stars, or heavenly bodies.

chisel. A sharp-edged tool struck or pushed against stone, wood, or metal to cut and shape it.

cistern. A tank or enclosed basin used to collect and store water.

cloister. A sheltered passage or courtyard within a religious community, often used for quiet reflection.

crescent. A curved shape that narrows to a point at each end, like a thin moon.

crypt. An underground chamber associated with burial or the preservation of ancient remains.

custody. The responsibility or authority to keep a person or object under care or control.

Darklight. A black-and-silver magical force that Kael uses to cross boundaries and contain or direct other powers.

Darklight Halo. Kael’s physical crown, whose separate elemental seats and inner channels let him direct stored magical power.

Dawnfire. The luminous magic Eryth channels to support weight, read traces, and form protective workings.

discharge. A release of accumulated energy, heat, or magical force.

divination. The reading of traces preserved in an object to seek knowledge that ordinary observation cannot reveal.

Doctrine of the Rift. Kael’s written account of his ideas, experiments, and principles concerning the Rift and its power.

dominion. Control or ruling power over a place, people, or force.

elemental. Relating to a fundamental nature or force, such as heat, weight, or motion.

fissure. A narrow crack or split in a solid surface.

Flamebind. The flame-shaped mark that forms around Kael’s wrist after he touches the Tablet and channels power through him.

fracture. A break or split in something previously whole.

glyph. A written or carved sign that represents a meaning, instruction, or magical function.

Golden Cloud Cape. A golden weave of the Crystal Caves’ magical currents, used to carry people across a broken passage.

guardian. A being entrusted with protecting a place, object, or body of knowledge.

hearth. The floor or enclosed area where a fire burns in a fireplace or furnace.

hilt. The handle of a sword, including the parts that protect and steady the hand.

inert. Inactive and showing no movement, response, or working power.

infirmary. A room or building where sick or injured people receive care.

inscription. Words or symbols written, carved, or engraved on a surface.

invocation. Words, gestures, or ritual actions used to call upon a power.

Labyrinth of Time. The place kept by Tempus where recurring events and the workings of time can be examined.

lattice. A network of crossing lines or strips that forms a supporting or detecting pattern.

ledger. A book used to keep organized accounts or other continuing records.

lintel. The horizontal support across the top of a doorway or other opening.

Lucen. The term for light in the ancient triangular diagram Kael studies.

Lumiran. An ancient script that combines features of Monk’s Script and Nocturne Glyph.

Luxumbris. The ancient term for Darklight, described in Kael’s source text as a force of rebellion and change.

mantle. An inherited role or responsibility, often represented by a robe or cloak.

masonry. Stone or brick construction, especially the walls and structures made from it.

mortar. The binding material placed between stones or bricks to hold them together.

Nocturne Glyph. A script whose signs Kael learns partly by comparing their changing reflections in a mirror.

novice. A beginner undergoing instruction, especially within a religious order.

obsidian. Dark volcanic glass formed when molten rock cools rapidly.

orientation. The position or direction of something in relation to its surroundings.

parchment. Prepared animal skin used as a writing surface.

perimeter. The outer edge or boundary surrounding an area.

portal. A magical opening through which material or force can pass between separated places.

postern. A small secondary entrance or gate, often less visible than the main entrance.

quartermaster. The person responsible for organizing supplies, equipment, and their distribution.

quartz. A hard crystalline mineral that often appears in clear, pale, or glasslike forms.

radiance. A bright glow or light spreading outward from a source.

recurrence. The return or repetition of an event or pattern that has happened before.

regulator. A mechanism that controls the amount or timing of a flow, including stored magical power.

relic. An object surviving from an earlier time and valued for its history, sacred meaning, or power.

repository. A place where records, objects, or knowledge are stored and preserved.

reservoir. A store or holding space from which water, energy, or another resource can be drawn.

restraint. A limit or binding that holds movement, action, or power in check.

rift. A split or opening, especially one that breaches the boundary between places or realms.

Riftbrand. The weapon formed from Kael’s written words, first appearing as a floating crescent of translucent Darklight.

rigging. The arrangement of ropes and supporting equipment used to lift or secure a load.

runes. Written or carved characters used to carry symbolic or magical meaning.

sacrifice. The giving up of something deeply valued, sometimes a life, for a purpose believed to matter more.

salvage. The recovery of useful materials or objects from damage, danger, or abandonment.

scaffold. A temporary raised framework that supports workers and materials during construction or repair.

scribe. A person whose work is to write, copy, or preserve records.

seal. A mark, device, or magical pattern that secures a boundary or governs access and passage.

severing. Cutting or breaking a connection, including a channel through which magical power is drawn.

shard. A broken fragment of a hard substance, sometimes carrying a concentrated magical nature.

sheath. A protective covering into which a blade is placed when it is not in use.

sigil. A sign or mark that carries a particular magical identity or function.

Sky Falcon. The immense winged creature of thunder and flame whose arrival at Eldra accompanies Rhydian's disappearance.

sluice. A channel or gate built to direct or control flowing water.

spectral. Ghostlike in appearance or associated with an insubstantial supernatural presence.

Staff of the Akasha. Eryth's ancient staff, completed with three governing patterns for a threshold's place, destination, and permitted continuation.

Star Compass. A device of wood and celestial matter that reveals viable routes and the destinations a magical working actually reaches.

star-wolf. The luminous wolf that travels with Lyria and can separate into lights before gathering its shape again.

starborn. Describing the luminous river creature whose movements disturb the ordinary flow of time.

Tenebris. The term for darkness in the ancient triangular diagram Kael studies.

testimony. A person's account of what they have witnessed or know, offered as evidence.

tether. A cord, bond, or connection that limits how far something can move or act.

threshold. The entrance to a place or the boundary that must be crossed to enter it.

torrent. A strong, rapidly rushing flow of water.

translucent. Allowing light to pass through without being completely clear.

tunic. A simple garment covering the torso and extending below the waist.

vault. A secure chamber used to protect valuable objects, records, or forbidden knowledge.

ward. A protective magical pattern set to guard a place, person, or boundary.

warrant. An official written order granting authority to carry out a specified action.

weighhouse. A building where goods are weighed, usually for trade or transport.

Until next time

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