MIRACLES OF

SROGANT

The Flood Chronicles

Ryhomir Day

A tale from the Western Reaches

Aodhàn Mac-Talla



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About this tale

The Western Reaches is a world written week by week by the players of *The Flood Chronicles*, a strategy game played by letter. Each player rules a realm that survived a great Flood. Once a week they write what their ruler does, and a Game Master reads every letter and answers with what the world did in return.

Ryhomir Day grew out of that play. Its people are the ones the season's decisions and disasters landed on.

Reading time: about 1 hour 40 minutes.

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Ryhomir Day

Aodhàn Mac-Talla

Late spring, 2 After the Flood. Ryhomir, the Western Reaches.

I

Count What Comes Back

Fourteen boats crossed the bar that morning.

Idony Ormrod counted each one as it lifted on the swell and slid out beyond the river mouth. On a good morning in Thurstan's day there had been forty, sometimes more when the timber boats came down from the wood-harbours and the quays were black with people before sunrise. Fourteen was not a disaster. It was merely poor, and she wrote it in the day-book without improving it.

The watch-room smelled of old paper and salt. Windows on three sides, ledgers along the eastern wall, Thurstan's harita hung where the damp could not reach them. His last ledger stood at the end of the shelf, a thick book that he had not lived to finish; the back third of it was still blank. He had built the room so that a merchant could see his ships coming home without leaving his own house. Idony had never decided whether that was foresight or reluctance to pay for a clerk.

Hild had opened the shutters before going down to the kitchen. As she bent over the last latch, a little flame amulet had slipped out from beneath her dress. It was new. Idony had noticed it and said nothing, and Hild had tucked it away with the elaborate care of a woman who knew perfectly well that she had been seen.

Below, the children were arguing over something. Tobin's voice rose, Hesper's rose above it, and a door shut with more force than any door required.

Idony added the date beside the number. She had made such marks every morning since she was a bride, give or take the days when childbirth, illness or Thurstan's absences had interfered. Retirement had changed very little, though she still mentioned it whenever Kester left papers for her to read.

His step on the stairs was slower than it used to be. He came in with two cups and the *Edö Messenger* folded under his arm, ink on his fingers and the grey beginnings of stubble on his cheeks.

'Fourteen,' he said, looking past her at the bar.

'You counted?'

'I listened to you not swearing.'

She took the cup he offered. It was too hot, but holding it was better than going downstairs for another. 'Then your education hasn't been entirely wasted.'

Kester set the newspaper on the map chest. For a moment he only stood there, rubbing his thumb along its edge, and she recognised the gesture. Thurstan had done the same thing with letters he did not want to open.

'Well?' she said.

'The Burning's still happened, if you were hoping they'd made a mistake.'

The news was a fortnight old. Vethara and Calderis had been driven into one another by flood and earthquake, though no two accounts agreed on the order of it. There was a mountain where no mountain had been, a place of fire with dragons reportedly flying over it. The *Messenger* had reached the dragons by its fourth paragraph, which made Idony trust the fourth paragraph rather less than the first.

A lake lay where farmland had been. Pyrran was gone. Pellan was gone.

Her eyes went to the harita despite herself. Vethara and Calderis still lay apart on the western sheet, with empty country between them, and Thurstan's neat hand had marked a route all the way to the harbour at Pellan. The distances were in his handwriting too, carefully entered beside each road. Adjagard was under the sea, but the harita had not thought fit to mention it.

'The Scaurbridge fell,' Kester said. 'Queen Isolt was on it.'

Idony looked down at her cup. 'That much is certain?'

'As certain as anything in there.' He turned the newspaper over. 'Amethysia and Wraymoor have joined under Queen Feirie. They're calling it the Sunder Realm.'

'That was quick.'

'Grief can be quick, when there's money in being quick.'

Not an especially generous remark, but Kester had slept badly. She could see that now he was standing in the light.

He told her the rest at breakfast speed, though they were three floors above breakfast. The Council had asked Aesylon for protection. Aesylon had sent instructions, a set of forms and the promise of a coast-watch. There was no guarantee of soldiers, no treaty and no one coming to take charge of Ryhomir's difficulties.

'A coast-watch,' Idony said.

'They'll watch the coast.'

'Very useful for the coast.'

Kester almost smiled. 'There may be a ship involved.'

'Aesylon sent you forms? Then fill them in.'

'I did. Three copies.'

This time he did smile. It was the smile that frightened her, because she had seen his father make jokes in just that way when the empire began to wobble. Fear, in both men, became efficiency. There were suddenly copies of everything.

Kester went to the largest harita and stood before it with his cup held against his chest. 'The Council talks as though someone will come back and put all this right.'

'And you don't?'

'I think a town needs someone who answers when it calls. Law that means something beyond the river. Credit. Ships, if it comes to that.' He shrugged. 'Habit isn't enough, Mother. It only feels like enough because we've had it for so long.'

'People here have managed a great deal on habit.'

'Yes. While Adjagard held the roads.'

She could have argued with that. Instead she watched him touch the route to Pellan with one inky finger, stopping just short of the paper.

'Every road on Father's maps is reckoned from Adjagard,' he said. 'I'm drawing new ones, Mother. In ink.'

'To whom will you write?'

'Everyone.'

Below them, Tobin shouted that something was unfair, which at nine seemed to be his principal conclusion about the world. Hild called the children to breakfast. After a while Kester went down too, taking his cup and leaving the newspaper behind.

Beyond the roofs, the nearest beacon stood cold in the morning light. Idony finished her drink and set the cup beside the day-book.

Count what comes back. That had been Thurstan's rule.

At dusk she would climb the stairs again and count the boats home. She always did.



⁂

Gordion Grimshaw arrived in the middle of the afternoon, when the sun had warmed the parlour and Hild had time to complain about unexpected visitors. Idony put him in the good chair and brought out Thurstan's second-best wine. The best could stay where it was until Gordion said something worth drinking to.

He lowered himself carefully, broad-kneed and heavy in the shoulders, with the seal ring of an imperial office still on his right hand. The office had gone down with Adjagard. Gordion turned the ring whenever he was thinking, as though some clerk beneath the sea might still require his signature.

'You look well, Idony.'

'You needn't sound so surprised.'

'At our age, being surprised is a reasonable precaution.' He accepted the wine and sniffed it. 'Your husband once told me this came from a vineyard with a southern slope.'

'Thurstan told everyone that. The carter said it came off a barge.'

Gordion laughed. For a little while they spoke of the harbour commission, where he and Thurstan had argued over dredging accounts, and of a mutual acquaintance whose funeral had been spoiled by rain. He had called every few weeks since Thurstan died. At first it had been old courtesy. Now, admittedly, it was habit, and habits were harder to refuse than courtesies.

Only when Hild had refilled their cups and left the room did he mention the Council.

'Aesylon has made an offer. The Common Shield.'

'More forms?'

'Some. But there's a beacon line with them, and a calling keel.'

He explained it without haste. Fires along the coast, each one visible to the next, so that warning could travel faster than a rider. A vessel held ready to answer a call, within the limits of weather and Aesylon's other obligations. Ryhomir would have duties as well as promises. Its beacon would have to be kept.

'Warning and rescue,' Idony said.

'Yes.'

'Not defence.'

'No.' Gordion turned his ring. 'Aesylon will pull us out of the water once we've drowned.'

'You sound as though you mean to refuse.'

'On the contrary. The Council will take it, if I have to sit on three of them until they do.' He drank. 'A fire on the coast is a prayer the whole coast can read. There's sense in that. More sense than in most proclamations.'

There it was: the warmth that came into his voice whenever he spoke of fire. He had found the faith after the Waters, though he had not gone shouting into the streets with it. Gordion seldom raised his voice when he could make himself heard over wine.

'The dreams stopped,' he said. 'That's what nobody wants to admit. God doesn't speak that way any more.'

'Mine haven't stopped.'

'Perhaps yours are only dreams.'

Not cruelly said. That made it worse.

'The Waters came,' he went on. 'Then the Burning. Two warnings, and still this town behaves as if nothing has been asked of it. Dwarven banks, foreign factors, whatever money can be brought over the bar. Now the preachers say sea-breathers came up with the Waters, and half the quay thinks it would make an interesting cargo.'

'Thurstan's foreign partners paid their debts.'

'Some of them did.'

'On time, which is more than I could say for the harbour commission.'

He inclined his head, granting her the point. He had always been able to do that without moving an inch from his position.

'My lower fields are salt,' he said. 'You know that. Three harvests wouldn't make them sweet again, even if I had three harvests to spare. The Guild's money floats, Idony. Mine drowned.'

Kester could move credit with a letter, he explained. A fishing boat could be replaced, if someone would advance the price. A field could not be picked up and taken somewhere kinder. Idony thought of the day-book upstairs and the fourteen boats, and did not tell him that the Guild's money seemed to be doing a good deal of sinking too.

'Life is a dream,' she said. 'The soul is a traveller. I don't remember anything about God requiring it to travel among its own kind.'

'No. You wouldn't.' He looked into his wine. 'You always took the gentlest meaning from a hard saying.'

'And you take the hardest.'

'Someone has to.'

He spoke then of the Order of Faldris. They rebuilt houses. They fed pilgrims on the roads. They did not bargain with the foreign or pretend that every disaster was an accident of weather. He might have been speaking of a son who had done well despite everyone's expectations.

'Aesylon sends forms,' he said. 'Faldris sends men.'

Idony set down her cup. 'And what do their men want in return?'

'Order. Faith. A town that knows what it is.'

'Ryhomir is a town that sells fish.'

'Yes. That may be the difficulty.'

For a moment there was only the sound of the street below and Hild moving something in the kitchen. Gordion did not look triumphant. He looked tired, which she found considerably harder to dismiss.

At the door he paused.

'Kester writes a great many letters.'

'He's a merchant.'

'He's more than that now.'

'He's trying to keep his house alive.'

'I know what he thinks he's doing.' Gordion's hand closed briefly over hers, an old man's dry, careful grip. 'Tell him to be careful who reads them.'

Tobin had come out of the kitchen to see whether a visitor meant cakes. Gordion smiled at him and made the flame sign above his head, two fingers lifted, a small blessing given as naturally as a pat on the shoulder.

At the kitchen window, Hild made the sign too.

When the door had shut, she came into the parlour to collect the cups. 'He's a good man, Lady.'

Idony didn't answer.

* * *

They met at the merchant's hour, an hour after the last lamp was lit in the counting-room and long past the time when decent people were thought to be asleep. Idony had never cared much for the phrase. Decent people had kept the books in her house, and the books did not close at sunset.

Ryhomir had joined the Shield that week. Gordion had his beacon; a boy from the harbour office had been found to tend it, and the Council had voted itself a small sum for oil. Nobody had asked the Guild.

Aveline Holcroft arrived first, broad and unsmiling, with a waxed satchel that had seen better years. Godwin Ashe came after, glancing up and down the lane though no one who wished him well would have been out in it. Kester had asked his mother to sit in.

'Mother knows the old chancery forms,' he said. 'If this is to be a letter to a foreign power, let it not begin with a mistake in Adjagard.'

'If Aesylon can be called a foreign power,' Aveline said, taking the chair opposite him. 'Half this quay was built on their credit.'

Idony poured three cups and sat a little back from the table. She was not, strictly speaking, a member of the Guild. She had been asked to listen because she could still parse the old imperial phrasing and because, as Thurstan used to say, she remembered every tariff the Guild had ever argued itself hoarse about.

Aveline laid out her case the way she laid out a cargo: by weight. Aesylon had courts that sat, and judges who could be made to read a contract. It had coin that was worth what it said on it. It had ships, actual ships with actual men in them, which was more than could be said for the Council's militia. Under that flag a ledger meant something again.

'The Shield gives us a beacon,' Kester said. 'A beacon sends warnings. It doesn't send soldiers. The Council couldn't protect a fish market from a

dog, and the preachers gain ground every week. I want somebody who answers when we call.'

'Then write to Aesylon as what we are,' Aveline said. 'A town that wants to come in under the roof.'

Godwin, who had been studying the back of his hand, looked up. 'The Council will call it treason. I don't need to remind either of you how short a step that is. They already call our existence a kind of foreign influence, because we bank with Dwarves and buy from Aesylon.'

'They call it that now,' Aveline said. 'They'll call it worse later.'

He spread his hands, the gesture of a man who preferred to agree with whoever had spoken last. 'I'm only saying it will be called treason. I'm not saying I won't sign it in the best chancery hand I can manage.'

'Nobody signs in chancery hand, Godwin,' Idony said. 'You sign in your own hand, or the court will say you were never in the room.'

He blinked at her and nodded, as if she had told him something new, which she had not.

Kester read the draft aloud. The phrasing followed the old forms, in which a town requested to be received under the protection and law of a sovereign power because it sought to order its affairs. Idony corrected the first sentence, not for sense but for the old imperial construction. They revised a clause. Aveline wanted the words *the Council having failed in its duty* and Kester drew a line through them.

'Let Aesylon decide what we mean. Not the Council's friends in the port office.'

'That is a cautious letter,' Aveline said.

'It is an honest one,' Kester replied, which was not the same thing, and they knew it.

It was Idony who asked the question. She had been turning it over since the first draft, the way she had once turned over a doubtful bill of lading, looking for the place where the weight sat.

'Who gave the Guild the right to give the town away?'

Kester looked up. There was no surprise in him. He had known the question had been waiting.

'Who gave the Council the right to let it sink?'

'Nobody gives anyone rights any more, Idony.' Aveline set her seal on the table, small and hard beside the papers. 'The Emperor's at the bottom of the sea.'

'And Aesylon isn't,' Godwin said.

'Not yet.' She turned the seal so that the device faced her. 'The Guilds keep the ships moving in every port on this coast. The law we answer to is the law of solvent men, and solvent men want a flag behind a promise before they'll trust it. Somebody has to ask for the flag.'

'The Council would rather have a torch,' Kester said.

'Then I prefer a flag. Even a foreign one. I'll take a flag over a fire in the street that answers to nobody but the man holding it.' She looked at Idony. 'So I sign in the Guild's name and not the town's, because the town didn't ask. Is that treason? To them, I suppose it is. To me it's the only offer of a future this town is likely to get from anyone with soldiers to spare.'

'And if Aesylon has none to spare?'

'There are other flags.'

'One at a time,' Kester said.

Aveline dipped her seal and pressed it to the page. For a moment the room held the small rich smell of wax.

Godwin signed with a hand that was not quite steady. Kester copied the letter into the Guild's letter-book in his clear hand, the one that had made his schoolmasters speak of him with pride. Idony watched the ink take. It was the same hand with which he had once written out the names of every ship that crossed the bar in a single season, to settle an argument with the harbour office. He blotted it, and the copy was there in the book, where anyone who opened the book could read it.

The letter was sealed and the book put away, and Aveline took the satchel with the fair copy inside. Godwin left first, making the smallest possible noise in the lane.

A week later, Aesylon had not accepted.

Silence, Idony thought, kept its own set of forms.

II

A Witness, Not a Line

The crier rang his bell just as Hild was asking whether yesterday's fish had become younger overnight.

Idony waited beside her, with Hesper holding the basket. The girl had wanted to carry it. She would presumably lose interest once there was something in it, but for now she stood very straight.

Around them, the market fell quiet. The crier unfolded a sheet and held it away from his face. His sight had been failing for years, though the Council seemed satisfied that he could still shout.

'By order of the Council of Ryhomir.'

Hild let go of the fish.

The proclamation concerned the Merchant Guild's approach to a foreign power. An offer of the town's allegiance, made without authority or the consent of its lawful rulers, constituted treason. The Council would open an inquiry. All persons with knowledge of the correspondence were required to present themselves.

Idony listened to the end. No names. That was something, perhaps, although the people nearest her seemed to know them well enough.

'Grandmother?' Hesper said.

'Stay here.'

A preacher from the fire chapel stepped forward before the crier had folded his sheet. A thin man with reddened eyelids, he rested one hand on the other man's shoulder while he addressed the square.

'You've heard what they've done.'

The crier bent to put away his bell. The hand slipped off.

'The Waters took our homes. The Burning took our kin. And the merchants? They write to their foreign friends and ask what price they'll give for what remains.'

A few men shouted agreement.

He spoke of Dwarven gold, of Elves and Orcs, of the creatures that breathed beneath the water. Idony had heard most of it before, usually reported by Hild with the worst parts left out. Now Hild watched him, her mouth slightly open.

'Must we lose our town as well?'

The cheering was louder this time. Idony counted the raised faces as best she could. Thirty, perhaps forty. Several hundred people stood in the square, but most were looking at their purchases or their feet. One woman continued choosing onions, very carefully.

Near the preacher stood Col Fenn, Marit's brother, with two men whose boats had gone down in the Waters. Col saw Idony. For a moment she thought he might come over. Then he turned towards the preacher again.

The crier remained beside them with the Council's seal hanging from his sheet.

'Four of those,' Idony said.

The fishwife looked at her.

They had done business for thirty years. There had been arguments about weight, freshness and, once, a coin which each insisted the other had supplied. None had prevented the next purchase.

'They're promised.'

'You were selling them to Hild.'

The woman glanced past Idony's shoulder. 'I said they're promised.'

Idony followed the glance. Two men were watching from beside the next stall. The fishwife drew her hands beneath her apron and waited.

There was no point asking about the rest of the fish.

Someone spat beside Idony's shoe. She looked round too late to see who. Hild moved half a pace away, then stopped. Her face reddened. She reached for the basket, but Hesper shifted it to her other arm.

'We can go now,' Idony said.

They had reached the lane uphill when Aveline caught up with them. She was breathing hard, more from haste than the slope.

'Ashe has been to the Council. Swears he never saw the letter.'

'He signed it.'

'Yes. I remember.'

Aveline looked at Hesper and left whatever else she had meant to say unsaid. She went on towards the quay.

Idony climbed slowly. Her knees hurt, and she resented having to think about them.

'The Waters didn't come for nothing, Lady,' Hild said behind her.

Idony stopped. 'Thurstan's ships didn't bring the sea.'

'I never said they did.'

'That man came fairly close.'

Hild rubbed the basket mark on her palm, though she had hardly carried it. 'They fed people at the chapel. When there was nothing. I saw that.'

'So did we.'

'Yes, Lady. I know.'

Hesper waited a few steps above them. Idony could have gone on arguing, but the girl was listening and Hild was close to tears. Neither prospect pleased her.

At the door, Hild held out her hand for the basket again.

This time Hesper gave it to her.

* * *

Two days later there was paper over the quay.

Idony saw it from the watch-room before she understood it: white scraps lifting and turning above the Guild offices like gulls over a gutting-table, only the gulls were going the wrong way, inland on the breeze, and some of them were coming down on the mud. Below them a few dozen people stood about the Guild door with torches. Torches, in the middle of the morning, with the sun on the water.

She was on the stairs before she had decided anything.

Hild caught her in the hall with a dishcloth still in her hand. 'Lady. Not now. Not down there.'

'Kester is down there.'

'Then he'll come up. Lady –'

Idony took her shawl from the peg and went out, and after a moment she heard Hild's step behind her, which she had expected. Hild had never yet let her go anywhere alone that she disapproved of.

By the time they reached the quay the crowd had thinned to those who wanted to be seen looking. The Guild's shutters were split from their hinges and lay on the stones. The door stood open on its one remaining strap. Inside, somebody had emptied every shelf onto the floor, and then somebody else had walked over what was there, so that the boards were a wet grey paste of ledger-leaf and boot-mud. The strongbox was gone from its corner. The marks of its feet were still in the dust.

Kester stood in the middle of it with a split lip and his sleeves pushed up. Aveline was on her knees by the back wall, sorting what she could lift into piles, counting under her breath.

'The letter-books,' Idony said.

'Gone.' Kester touched his lip and looked at his fingers. 'Not burned. Carried off. Four men, in a sack, like fish.'

'Then the Council has them.'

'Or will have by dinner. They'll have the copy in my own hand.' He said it quite flatly, as though reading a tally. 'Clear hand, too. The schoolmaster always said so.'

Outside, the tide was low and the mud lay bare between the quay wall and the channel. Paper was everywhere on it, pages and half-pages and torn strips, settling into the wet and darkening as they settled. Further out, a few sheets had reached the water and were drifting towards the bar, very slowly, like boats that had forgotten the way.

Idony went down the fish-steps with one hand on the rail and bent over the nearest page.

It was Thurstan's writing.

She knew it before she had read a word: the long tails, the way he closed his figures. An account with the Dwarven house in Amethysia, twelve years old, columns of sums received and sums placed, his initials at the foot. The mud had taken the bottom corner. The rest was legible.

'They waved that one about,' Kester said from the quay. 'Foreign gold. Proof.'

'It's a bank account.'

'Yes. With Dwarves. In Amethysia.' He shrugged, and winced, because the shrug had pulled at his lip. 'The man waving it couldn't read it. He didn't need to.'

Idony lifted the page clear of the mud and let it drip. Hild stood on the steps above her with the dishcloth and said nothing at all.

On the Guild door, at the height of a man's face, somebody had cut a flame into the oak with a knife. The cuts were fresh and the wood inside them was pale. It was neatly done, three strokes, a thing the hand knew how to make.

Aveline came out onto the quay wiping her palms on her skirts. 'I make it eleven ledgers gone and four spoiled. The strongbox. The letter-books.

The seal's still here, which tells you how much they understand about seals.'

'Or how little they need it,' Idony said.

'So.' Kester looked at the paper on the mud. 'We write again.'

'To Aesylon,' Aveline said. It was not a question.

'To Aesylon again. To Solmar. And to the new queen in the east.'

Aveline nodded slowly, like a woman who had already done the sum and only wanted to see whether he arrived at the same answer. 'I have a draft for the east. I began it last week.'

'Of course you did.'

Idony climbed the steps with the wet page held away from her shawl. 'You'll prove the treason by repeating it.'

'They've proved it already, Mother. They have it in my hand, in a book, with a seal. Repeating it changes nothing for the Council.' He looked past her, over the bar, where the last of the paper was going out on the ebb. 'Now I need someone to answer.'

There was no reply to that which she could make on a quay, with the fishwives watching. She said that he should come home and have his lip seen to, which he did not. She said that Hild would bring food down, which Hild, to her credit, did.

She carried the page up the hill herself. At the top of the house she opened Thurstan's last ledger, the thick one with the unused leaves at the back, and laid the muddy sheet flat between two of the blank pages, and closed the book on it, and set it back on the shelf.

It would dry crooked. That could not be helped.

* * *

Hesper brought Tobin home at midday.

He had a handkerchief pressed to his nose, already spoiled red. Her knuckles were split across both hands, which meant she had done whatever

she intended to do. At the door she took the handkerchief away, looked at it and put it back. He followed her inside with his eyes fixed on the floor.

Three boys from the chapel families had set on them behind the school. Traitor's brats. Their father had sold the town. Then the newer names the preachers used for the creatures that breathed beneath the water, which the boys seemed to think lived in the Ormrod house and arrived at school each morning by boat.

The other children had watched. None of them had joined in, Hesper said, with some pride. None of them had said anything either.

The schoolmaster had separated the Ormrod children from the rest. For their own safety. Idony heard how carefully Hesper repeated the phrase, like a poem she had not been given a meaning for.

Hild heated water and brought towels. When she saw Tobin's face she began to cry, then stopped, because Hesper was watching her and not crying.

'I know their mothers,' Hild said.

'So do I,' said Idony.

One of the boys had grown up on fish from the kitchen door. She could have named his mother's father. She cleaned Tobin's nose gently and asked whether he could breathe through it. He nodded, then shook his head, then nodded again.

'Are the sea-breathers real?'

Hild went still with the cloth in her hand.

'I've never seen one,' Idony said.

'The preacher has.'

'The preacher may have seen one. Or he may have seen a fish. I wasn't there.'

'Did they bring the Waters?'

'No.'

She said it before she could think better of it. Hild bent over the water again.

Hesper asked, without looking up from her knuckles, whether Father had sold the town.

'Your father wrote letters to keep the town standing. That is what he told you, and it's true.'

'The boys said he signed it.'

'He did.'

Hesper looked at her then. Idony held the look until the girl went back to her knuckles. There was no clean answer, so Idony gave her the honest one. Some people in Ryhomir believed the letters were wrong, and some believed worse things than wrong, and none of that made a boy's fist into the truth.

Marit came home before they had finished. Col had caught her at the fish-steps, quietly, in front of people who would not have heard him. Tell Kester to stop writing. That was all. Then he had walked away like a man who had said one word too many.

Marit wanted the children inland with her cousins until whatever was coming had come.

Kester refused. Running looked like guilt. The house was all they had. He said both of these things more than once and in both orders, and Marit watched him with her hands pressed together until Idony sent the children to find dry clothes.

'They are right to be afraid,' Marit said.

'They are right to stay,' Kester said.

'The children stay here,' Idony said. 'And they don't go out alone.'

Marit opened her mouth and shut it again. Kester looked as though he wanted the argument he was not getting. The question settled, as most questions in the house eventually did, by being taken out of his hands.

At supper the messenger came from Aesylon.

Kester read it standing, then laughed. It was the same text sent to the Council and to the Guild, word for word. The refusal restated. No measurer. Aesylon would keep its own fires lit and wished Ryhomir the blessing of orderly government.

'They've written to us as if we were one town.'

'Perhaps to them we are,' Idony said.

He gave her the letter. She read it twice. The clerk had made a fair copy for each recipient; the wording was identical even where it did not fit. Aesylon's address to the Council regretted internal disorder. Aesylon's address to the Guild regretted internal disorder. She wondered which of them had been copied from which, and whether the clerk had noticed, or cared.

The Guild would thank Aesylon and ask for nothing more. Kester said so, and Aveline, who had walked the messenger up from the harbour, did not mention the letter that had gone east. She ate what Hild put in front of her, which Idony took as a better sign than anything in Aesylon's hand.

Kester had one more thing, from the harbour office. The Common Shield had sent new instructions round its signatories. Any fire belonging to another signatory was now to be reported and observed, not answered.

'A witness,' Kester said. 'Not a line.'

Idony turned the phrase over while the others went on eating. She thought of the beacon Gordion Grimshaw had been so careful to describe, and of how carefully the word witness had been chosen to stand where a promise would not.

Later, from the watch-room, she saw torches round the Council house and heard the shouting that went with them. A shutter went in somewhere below her, the sound carrying up the hill as clearly as a word spoken in a stairwell.

She counted the torches twice, from different ends, to be sure of them. Then she went downstairs and barred the door.

* * *

The light came up the lane before the voices did.

Idony was awake already. Her knees had kept her from turning easily, and the wind off the water found a draught in the bedroom shutter whenever it backed north. She saw the orange streak move across the ceiling, got out of bed and went to the window.

There were twenty of them in the street, perhaps thirty. They carried pitch torches, though the moon would have served well enough for walking, and they stopped by the mounting-stone outside the door as if someone had told them where to stand.

Across the way, the draper's shutters were barred. So were the cooper's next door. Idony looked along the fronts of the houses and saw not a chink of light in any of them, which meant the street was awake and listening behind its timber.

A man near the wall had a coil of new hemp over his shoulder. He shifted it from one side to the other like a net that had grown heavy.

Idony took her night shawl from the chair.

In the passage she met Kester coming out of his room in his shirt, with his coat in one hand. Marit stood behind him. Her hair was loose, and she had not thought to put shoes on.

'Stay inside,' Kester said.

'You'll stay until you're dressed,' Idony told him, and went down the stairs.

Hild was already in the hall with the kitchen poker, which she held too near the middle to be of use to anyone.

'Take the children into the kitchen,' Idony said. 'Shut the door.'

'Lady –'

'Do it now.'

She lifted the bar and opened the street door wide enough to step out onto the stone. The air smelled of pitch and low water. Behind her, she

heard Hild's skirts on the tiles and Tobin asking a question that was cut short.

The talking in the lane dropped off. It was harder to shout at an old woman in a wool shawl than at a barred door.

She knew most of them. That was the first thing she noticed, and the most useful.

'Davy Pask,' she said. 'Your mother bought her wedding linen from my husband.'

The man in the second row looked down at his boots. He had his father's broad ears and the same trick of standing with his mouth slightly open when he was spoken to sharply.

'And Jory Tull,' she went on, raising her voice a little so that it carried to the edge of the torchlight. 'Thurstan lent your brother the timber for his boat after the winter gale. He paid us back in salted cod for three seasons.'

'That was your husband,' someone called from the back.

'It was this house,' Idony said. 'You know the step you're standing on.'

The man with the rope had not moved. She did not know his name, though she knew his coat; he worked at the lime-kilns beyond the creek. Near him stood two of the men from the chapel door, and behind them, half out of the light, Col Fenn.

Col did not look at her. He was watching the foot of the lane.

'Bring him out,' the kiln-man said. 'We didn't come for you.'

'You came to my door in the night with a rope,' Idony said. 'You'll take what answers it.'

'He sold the town.'

'He wrote a letter.'

'To foreigners. We saw the books.'

A murmur went through them, firmer than before. Speaking to them had slowed them; she could see now that it would not send them home.

Men who had come out with hemp and pitch needed something to show for having left their beds.

The door opened behind her.

Kester had put his coat on. He had not fastened it. He stepped past her before she could put an arm across the frame.

'Here I am,' he said.

For a moment nobody moved. Then the kiln-man reached up, caught him by the lapel and pulled him down the two steps into the lane.

Idony went after him and was pushed back against the doorpost by a shoulder she did not see. Her shawl slipped from one arm. Kester went down on one knee in the dirt. Two men had him by the sleeves; a third struck him behind the ear so that his head jerked forward.

He put his right hand flat on the stones to steady himself.

The kiln-man brought his heel down on it.

The sound was small, like a dry stick under a boot. Kester made a short noise in his throat and rolled against the man's legs. Someone else reached for the rope.

Col Fenn came through the press without shouting. He took the kiln-man by the collar and the belt and threw him sideways against the draper's wall, hard enough to knock the wind out of him.

'Wait,' Col said.

'Get off, Fenn, he's –'

'I said wait.'

He stood over Kester, one hand twisted in the back of Kester's coat to keep him on the ground, the other held out against the men nearest him. He was breathing hard. Kester lay crooked on the cobbles with his right hand drawn up against his chest.

At the foot of the lane, boots came round the corner in step.

Six of the Council's militia walked into the torchlight with staves and a lantern of their own. Their sergeant had a folded paper in his belt. Nobody

ran. Several of the men with torches stepped back to give them room, as if the lane belonged to the Council and they had merely been keeping it warm.

The sergeant looked at Kester, then at Col.

'Kester Ormrod?'

'You know him,' Col said, and let go of the coat.

They hauled Kester up by his sound arm. His face had gone the colour of tallow. The sergeant read the warrant far too quickly for the light he had, though Idony heard the words treason and inquiry and the Council's peace.

She watched the crowd while he read. Twenty or thirty men with a rope, and six with a warrant, in the same quarter of an hour. She could not decide whether that had been arranged or whether the town was simply small enough for two bad intentions to meet in the street.

When they turned Kester towards the hill, she looked up once at the parlour window.

Marit stood behind the glass with both hands flat against it. She was not looking at Kester. She was watching her brother, who wiped his palm on his breeches and went off down the lane towards the harbour without waiting to see the prisoner past the corner.

Inside, Hesper was sitting on the third stair from the bottom with her knees drawn up under her shift. She had seen the whole thing through the open door.

In the kitchen, Hild had her arms round Tobin. A dark wet patch had spread down the front of the boy's nightshirt and onto the flagstones. Neither of them mentioned it.

Idony barred the door, though there was no longer anyone in the street to keep out.

In the morning, when Hild opened it to sweep the step, a round barley loaf lay against the threshold, wrapped in a clean cloth. Nobody had knocked, and the shutters across the lane were still shut.

* * *

Grimshaw's house stood above the harbour, where the hill flattened enough to hold a garden. It had been his wife's idea, the garden, and after she died he had kept it in a way that suggested he did not know what it was for. The shrubs were clipped in straight lines. Idony noticed a single yellow rose trying against the wall.

He received her in the parlour as he always had. Good chair, good wine. He did not pretend to be surprised to see her.

'You've come about Kester.'

'I have.'

He poured for her, then for himself. The wine was Thurstan's favourite, which Idony supposed was meant to soften her, or perhaps was simply what Grimshaw had left. He turned the seal ring once and left it alone.

'I won't waste your courtesy,' she said. 'He wrote letters. Not swords. He's no soldier, and he's a fool in some ways, but he has never drawn a weapon on this town.'

'He drew a pen on it.'

'Then you should fear the clerks, Gordion, not the gallows.'

He almost smiled. 'I do. I fear them both.'

They went over it for an hour, the way two old people argue without any expectation of moving one another. She reminded him of the boy he had held at his naming, years ago, when Grimshaw's own faith had still been the old one and Kester had wailed through the whole ceremony so that the priest had to shout. Grimshaw remembered the priest, not the crying. She spoke of Kester's children, of the boys behind the school, of the

men with the rope, and for a moment something in his face conceded that a mob was not the law.

'I don't hold with mobs,' he said. 'I put men in a cell and ask them questions. That is what a Council is for.'

'And the children?'

'Children learn what their fathers teach them. Yours were taught that the town was for sale.'

'The law,' he went on, before she could answer, 'hangs traitors. I cannot change what a letter to a foreign power is called.'

'You wrote to the Order.'

'They are not foreign. They are the faith.'

'They are an army across the water. What do you call that?'

He set down his glass and looked at her with something close to respect, as though she had finally arrived at the table. 'The Waters, the Burning, the salt in my fields. Do you think I chose this town's patron for the pleasure of it? The empire is gone, Idony. Aesylon sends forms. I sent for men who will not bargain.' He spread his hands. 'I did not want the Guild's letters. I did not ask your son to give this town away.'

'He offered them a harbour, not a surrender.'

'That is the same thing, to the people who will have to live under whoever answers.'

They were both old enough to know when an argument had looped. Grimshaw refilled her glass, a small civility she found she disliked.

'Kester may recant,' he said. 'Before the Council. He names whoever wrote to the Sunder Queen, and he goes home under guard. His hand will mend. His children will keep their father.'

'You know he won't name them.'

'I know. But it is the offer.'

He said the next thing plainly, and with a pride Idony had not expected from a frightened man. The Council had written to the Order of Faldris.

The faithful of Ryhomir had asked for protection, and the faithful would not leave the town to the Guild's buyers. For the first time in the hour Idony understood how far this had already gone, and that her son's letters were the reason a second foreign power had been asked to come.

She rose. Grimshaw rose with her and walked her to the door of the parlour, but no further. In the garden the yellow rose had lost a petal to the wind since she came in.

The cells were under the Council house, and they smelled of low water and old straw. The gaoler knew her. He let her stand at the bars and pushed a stool near for her to sit, which she did, because her knees were what they were.

Kester sat on the bench with his right hand laid across his knee, badly splinted, the fingers the colour of uncooked fish. He had not been given a bed, only a blanket, though the nights were still cold. He looked up at her with the hollowed look of a man who has stopped sleeping in stretches.

She told him of Grimshaw's offer, sparing nothing. He listened to the end, then shook his head once.

'He said I'd not name Aveline.'

'He did. So I am telling you anyway.'

'Naming her wouldn't save me,' Kester said. 'It would only finish the Guild, and they'd take the next name after. The letters are sent, Mother. Someone will come.'

'And until someone comes?'

He looked down at his hand. 'Then I am in here, and it is quiet, and nobody has brought a rope.'

There was no argument to make, so she made none. She asked the gaoler to bring bread, and he did, and she watched Kester eat it with his left hand and hate every mouthful.

'Keep the house's books until this mends,' he said. 'The ledgers, the day-book. You kept his for thirty years.'

'Your father trained me to it,' she said. 'I remember.'

He smiled at that, and it was the first true thing in his face all evening.

The gaoler read her the warrant before she left, because she asked. She had to hold the page to the lantern. The writing was clerkly and small, and near the bottom, beneath the seal, she found a name she knew: Korim Attersal. A careful man. He had bought his daughter's wedding cloth from Thurstan and haggled for an hour over a stain nobody else could see.

She gave the page back and climbed the steps into the last of the light.

The way home went past the fire chapel. The doors stood open for evening prayer, and through them Idony saw the coal basins glowing in a double row along the wall, each one a small red mouth. A few believers knelt near the front. The smell of coal smoke came out into the street, and with it the low sound of voices trying the same words more than once, as if they were not yet certain they believed them.

Idony did not stop. She walked up the hill to her own door and, without lighting more than the one candle, climbed to the watch-room. The boats were coming in. She counted them home over the bar – thirteen, one short of the morning – and wrote the number in the day-book, as she always did.

The number was right. That was all that could be said for it.



III

A Matter of the Fire

The crier had not finished before the singing began.

Hild had gone to the door with her shawl half on, meaning to be first with whatever the news was. She came back up the kitchen without it, and dropped it on the back of a chair.

'They've declared a Matter,' she said. 'The Fire. Ryhomir is a Matter of the Fire.'

Idony set down the basket she was mending. 'Then put the shutters up.'

Outside, the crier's voice went on, thin through the timber. The town's lawful rulers had applied for protection against the evil that had gathered at its shores, and protection was coming, and with it a Fire Church. Idony heard the words evil and protection and coming, and let the rest run under them like water under a bridge.

In the street, a few dozen voices lifted in a hymn. Not the chapel's evening song but something older and harder, a thing made to carry across stone. Hild stood at the window with one hand flat on the frame and did not shut it.

'Which evil forces?' Idony asked.

'Mages,' Hild said. 'And the foreign.'

'There isn't a mage within a week's ride of this town.'

Hild did not know whether to be glad of that. It showed in how she stood, listening to the singing the way she had once listened for her husband's boat. Idony shut the shutter herself, and Hild took its bar and dropped it into place like a thing that had grown heavy.

The rest of the street must have done the same, because by the time the hymn ended there was only the crier, and then no one, and then the sound of the wind off the water.

That night Idony could not settle. She went up to the watch-room by the habit of years, though there would be no boats to count until morning, and stood a long time at the glass.

Below, Aveline's yard lay dark. Then a door opened, and a man came out leading a horse, and mounted at the lane's mouth. He turned east onto the coast road and did not hurry.

Idony did not understand what she was seeing. She noted the hour in the margin of the day-book and left it there, as she had left so many figures that wanted a second look in daylight.

She did not tell Hild.

* * *

The count went wrong at first light on the sixth day.

Idony had the shutters open and the tally ready in her head the way she always had, and the first thing she saw was that the bar was wrong. The hulls were not fishing boats. They sat low in the water, three of them, and did not come up on the tide the way boats come home. Men moved on their decks before the sun was fully up.

Small boats put out from them, steady and in order, and began ferrying men to the quay.

She counted, because counting was what she did. She began before they had all crossed, marking each boat and the men who stepped from it, and when she lost one she went back two and started again, until the number held.

A hundred and fifty, near enough.

They did not mill about the way a crowd does. They came ashore and formed up in quiet lines, men with iron caps and long pikes who moved as

if they had been taught where to put their feet, and the Council's militia was there waiting for them, and so was a part of the town that had come to see. There was cheering. Not very much, to her ear. Perhaps a hundred voices. Enough.

Idony watched the lines and the cheering and thought, not of the soldiers, but of the cells under the Council house, and of who would be set to guard the door of them now, and of whether her son could hear the singing from under the stone.

She stayed at the glass until her knees told her to sit, and then a little longer.

Then she went down and shut the house up.



She barred the street door and the kitchen door and the door of the counting-room, which had not been barred in her lifetime. She filled every bucket she could carry, made sure of the chimney, and brought Hesper and

Tobin up from the cellar where Hild had put them, because the cellar had one way out and that had never seemed a virtue until this morning.

She gave Tobin her own tally-stick to hold, the old one Thurstan had cut when Kester was small, and told him to keep it.

'Are they coming here, Gran?'

'The soldiers are at the quay,' she said. 'You are staying upstairs.'

He did not ask again. Hesper stood very straight by the window in the same way Hild had. They could all three hear the shouting, and the singing, and the sound of many boots on stone that did not belong to a market morning.

Idony climbed back to the watch-room, where the books were.

She did not open the day-book. The count was wrong, and she did not know what to write in it, and it was the first time in all the years since Thurstan had built the room that she had stood at that glass and not known what the numbers meant.

* * *

The road to the east changed colour towards the middle of the morning.

It took a moment for her eyes to sort it out of the light. At first it was only a darkening, as though a cloud had moved off the fields. Then she saw that the road itself was occupied, a long line where no line should be, and that the line was moving west, and had been moving west for some time, because the head of it was past the far field already and the rest came on without thinning.

Spears. A column. Men.

She began to count them the way she counted the boats, a hand's breadth of the line at a time, marked off and carried forward. She had done it a thousand times, and it had never once been wrong.

She stopped at three hundred.

The line went on. She stood with her hand still raised against the glass and let the rest of it come past without a mark on it. There was no sense in it. Afterwards she would hear the number – a thousand, from Wraymoor – and it would mean no more to her then than the road did now.

So that was the rider. The Guild had written east, and east had answered, with men on the road, just as the Council had written across the water and been answered with men on the boats. Aveline had not been surprised. Aveline had probably had the drafts in her satchel the night they wrote to Aesylon.

Below, the Faldris men had come off the quay and into the lanes that ran up from it, in ones and twos, unhurried, the way men take a position they have been told to take. The militia went with them, behind them, knowing the turns. She saw them take the corner by the Council house and the corner by the counting-street, and she picked out Col among the militia by his walk, which was the same walk he had had since he was a boy carrying fish.

She did not call down to him. There was nothing she could think to call.

Out beyond the bar, the Aesylon boat lay where it had lain for days. It had not come in. It did not come in now. It kept its station off the coast, seeing everything and of no use to anybody. A witness, not a line.

She saw it whole for the space of a breath: two letters, two armies, and the stones her grandchildren crossed to buy bread lying between them.

Then the first shouting came up from the quay, thin and far, and she turned from the glass and went down the stairs as fast as her knees would let her, calling for Hild to see to the kitchen door.



* * *

She heard the fighting before she saw any part of it.

At first it was a dry scatter of sound from the lanes below, like laths being dropped in a yard: the flat report of crossbows, answered after a pause by shouting that had no words in it. A horse screamed once, high and thin, and broke off. Then the noise moved up into the streets under the hill and became another thing altogether, the steady iron sound of men in armour

meeting men in armour where there was not room enough for either of them to step aside.

The house stood on the first rise above the harbour. In Thurstan's day that had meant dry cellars and the best of the breeze in August. Today it meant that whatever gave way at the foot of the hill came up their street to do it.

Idony put the rest of them in the back bedroom, where the wall faced the garden and the hill behind. Hesper sat on the chest at the foot of the bed with both arms locked round Tobin's ribs. The boy had stopped asking questions; he held the tally-stick across his knees and stared at the wash-stand as if he had been told to watch it. Beside the wardrobe, Hild was on her knees with her apron pulled up over her thumbs, her lips moving fast and without sound. Marit stood. She had been standing since the first crossbows, at the door and then at the window and then at the door again, and Idony did not like it.

In the front bedroom she drew the heavy shutter to and set the iron hook so that a crack remained, the width of two fingers.

It showed her the mounting-stone, the draper's wall opposite, and forty paces of cobbled slope between the cooper's door and the turn by the bake-house. Nothing else. For the rest of the afternoon the war consisted of what crossed that strip of stone.

For a long time nothing did. A dog came up the gutter at a trot, smelled the cooper's step and went on. Somewhere below, a timber fell into water with a heavy splash.

Then four men came backing up the hill with their shields locked.

Iron caps, pikes levelled towards the turn: the men from the boats. Even Idony, who knew nothing of soldiers beyond what they cost to feed, could see that they had been taught their trade. They kept their boots low on the cobbles and took short steps so as not to trip on the rise. Between the middle two, a fifth man came with them on his back, dragged by the belt.

One of his heels had lost its boot. The wool of his stocking left a dark wet ribbon across the stones as they hauled him past the gap and out of sight towards the upper lane.

Nobody followed them straight away. The ribbon dried at the edges in the wind.

Some time later – she had no clock in the room, and the sun had gone behind the smoke – a horseman came round the bakehouse corner at a trot, looking up at the roofs. A big man on a big horse, with a spear he did not seem to know what to do with in a lane. He had come up the coast road; she knew that without knowing how she knew it.

The bolt took the horse in the chest before it had reached the draper's door.

It did not rear, as Idony would have expected a horse to do. Its forelegs folded under it all at once, and it went down on its side against the draper's timber with a sound like a sack of wet grain striking a deck. The rider's left boot came clear of the stirrup. His right stayed under the saddle. He beat his palm twice on the cobbles, trying to lever himself out, while the horse thrashed with its neck and struck the wall behind him.

Another man came into the strip of view, one of the iron caps, and put a short spear into the rider's throat from above, leaning his weight on the shaft the way a boatman poles off mud. He drew the point out and went on down the hill before the horse had finished dying.

Idony took her forehead from the shutter. After a moment she put it back.



More men came up the slope now, and they were not in order. A knot of the Council's militia had got mixed among the iron caps, seven or eight of them, men from the rope-walk and the salt-pans with leather jacks over their shirts and bills they held too high. They did not know how to give ground without turning to look where they were going. Two of them broke from the rear and ran for the cooper's alley.

Three men came round the turn behind them at a steady trot. They were not shouting. They had the long spears of the column she had watched on the road. One of them caught the hindmost townsman between

the shoulder-blades with a hook and pulled him onto his back, and the man behind finished it. The second townsman reached the cooper's door, found it barred, and turned with his back against the oak and his hands in front of his face. The soldier who reached him took him under the ribs, drew the blade out, and looked up the street for his sergeant.

Neither of them had looked at the dead men's faces. It seemed to Idony that they were not angry with anyone in Ryhomir; they were clearing a lane, because somebody had told them to. She could not have sworn to that. It was only how it looked through two fingers of shutter.

From the harbour a dirty black column had begun to rise, leaning inland on the breeze. Not the whole town. Something on the west quay was burning, stores by the smell when the wind brought it, and the smoke turned the afternoon light the colour of an old kettle. Smuts drifted against the window-frame and settled on the sill.

In the back room Tobin began to cry, a thin tired noise that Hesper hushed by telling him crossly to count his notches again.

When Idony looked through the crack once more, a boy was sitting on the mounting-stone.

She had not seen him arrive. He had sat down very carefully, with his knees together and his boots out in the gutter, as if he were waiting for a cart. His coat had been split from collar to skirt and hung in two greasy halves; he had lost his iron cap. His hair was the pale tow colour common among the families out by the creek, though he was not from the creek, or from anywhere she knew. He was pressing both hands flat against his left side below the ribs and watching the crack in the shutter as if he knew perfectly well that someone was behind it.

Idony left the window and went down the stairs.

Her knees were stiff from standing, and she took the turn by the wall with one hand on the plaster. Hild came off her knees fast enough to catch her by the cuff at the head of the stairs. Her fingers were cold and very

tight. Idony looked at the hand on her wool, then at Hild's face, and after a moment Hild let go.

The street bar was heavy; Thurstan had had it forged of ship's iron after the winter of the starving, when men from the hills had come into the town at night. She got both hands under it, lifted it clear of the staple and laid it along the tiles, then drew the latch and pulled the oak open the breadth of her shoe.

He had slid off the stone and lay against her doorpost with his cheek on the step, the way a child lies who has fallen asleep in the wrong place. He was dead. She had seen enough dead men on the quay after the Waters to know it without touching him, and she touched him anyway, two fingers at the side of his neck, because it was her step.

Beside his hip lay a flat leather water-bottle with its wooden stopper hanging by a string.

Idony hooked the strap with two fingers and drew it inside. Then she shut the door and dropped the bar back into its iron and stood in the dark of the hall with the bottle in her hand. It was half full and still warm from him. She had no notion why she had taken it, unless it was that a thing left on the step of the house had always been brought in before nightfall, and she did not know how to stop doing what belonged to the house.

She set it on the settle by the cellar door. There was nothing to be done about the boy.

Hild was standing at the kitchen door with her apron still in her fists. 'Is he –'

'Yes.'

Hild made the flame sign, small, against her chest. Idony let her.

They were back on the stairs when the next one came down.

She heard him before anything else: a voice in the lane, young and very loud, shouting a name she did not know – Danek, Danek – and then a crossbow, close, from one of the upper windows across the way, and the

voice stopped shouting and started to scream instead. Idony went to the shutter. A boy in a long coat lay on his back below the mounting-stone with a bolt through the meat of his thigh, trying to get up and not managing it. The men he had been with were out of sight up the lane. Nobody came back for him.

'Hild.'

Hild looked at her.

'He is on our step.'

They went down together. Idony lifted the bar for the second time that afternoon and this time opened the door wide, and the two of them took the boy under the arms and dragged him up the two steps and over the threshold, with the bolt scraping once on the stone and the boy making a noise that Idony would have preferred not to remember. He was heavy for a boy. The door went shut; the bar went down.

'Kitchen,' Idony said. 'Floor. Hesper, bring the lamp.'

He was seventeen, perhaps, with a face still waiting for its beard and a coat that had been clean that morning. He spoke with the flat inland vowels she had not heard in Ryhomir since the wool-factors stopped coming down from Wraymoor before the Waters. He thanked them. He kept thanking them, in between the swearing, while Hild cut his breeches away from the bolt and looked at the shaft and decided, out loud, that she would not pull it.

'Mirek,' he said, when Idony asked. 'Royal Guard. Wraymoor.' Then, as if it explained everything: 'We came because you asked.'

'Some of us asked,' Idony said.

He did not understand her, and she had not expected him to.

Hesper held the lamp without being told twice. Her hand was steady, which Idony noted and would mention later, when there was a later. Tobin had come to the kitchen door and been sent away and come back.

The next one fell against the door itself. There was no mistaking the sound, the weight of a body on oak and then the slide. Hild was at the shutter before Idony. She looked, and turned, and her face was a thing Idony had not seen on it in twenty-five years.

'He's of the faith, Lady.'

An iron cap, then. One of the boys from the boats.

'Hild –'

'He's of the faith. He came because we –' She stopped. 'Lady. Please.'

Idony looked at the bar. She looked at Mirek on the kitchen floor with his hands round his own leg. The militia across the lane had a crossbow at an upper window and had already used it twice.

'Quickly, then.'

Hild did it mostly alone. She was a strong woman; she had carried coal and water up this hill for a quarter of a century. The soldier came in on his back with Hild's arms under his, bleeding from the shoulder and the scalp, a boy of nineteen or so with a split lip and a shaking that had nothing to do with cold. His name was Tavin. He told it to Hild, not to Idony, and Hild said it back to him as if she had known it already.

So there were two of them on the kitchen flagstones, a hand's breadth of floor apart, bleeding into the same cracks. Mirek had seen the iron cap come in and gone quiet. Tavin had seen the long coat and done the same. Hesper stood between them with the lamp and looked from one to the other as though they were a sum she had been set and could not make come out.

They did not speak to each other. Not then and, Idony thought, not for a long while afterwards.

'The faithful of Ryhomir called,' Tavin said once, to the ceiling, through his teeth. 'That's what we were told. The faithful called for help.'

'Some of them did,' Idony said.

It was Marit who went for the door.

Idony heard her on the stairs and knew the step, and was in the hall before her, which she would not have believed possible an hour earlier. Marit had her shawl on and her shoes, this time. Her face was white and perfectly composed.

'Col is down there.'

'Yes.'

'He's with the militia. He's at the quay. I know where he'll be.'

'Marit.'

'Let me by.'

Idony stood in front of the bar. She was a head shorter than her daughter-in-law and thirty years older, and she put her back against the oak and her two hands flat on the wood either side of her and did not move.

'There is a man dead on our step,' she said. 'There is a man in our kitchen who was shot from the draper's window for shouting in the lane. You will not go into that street.'

'He is my brother.'

'And you are their mother.' Idony did not raise her voice. She had never needed to, in this house, and she found she did not need to now. 'If he is alive he does not need you. If he is not, you cannot help him. Go upstairs.'

Marit looked at her for a long moment. Then she turned and went back up the stairs without a word, and Idony heard the back bedroom door shut, not slammed. She stayed where she was until her hands had stopped shaking, and then she went to see whether Hild needed hot water.

Towards the end of the afternoon the sound in the town changed.

The iron noise died out first, then the crossbows. What replaced them was quieter and much worse: single voices calling orders in that flat inland vowel, one lane and then the next. After the voices came the dull measured thump of spear-butts against street doors, house by house, and once a short scream from behind the bakehouse that ended the instant a man's voice told it to end.

That was the sound of an army that had finished fighting and begun to arrange its quarters. Idony had never heard it before. She knew it at once.

She climbed to the watch-room. The glass there looked over the roofs to the harbour and the open space before the fish-market, where two lanes met by the public well.

Someone had overturned a fish-cart across the mouth of the lower lane and piled baskets and salt-barrels in the gap. The men who had stood behind it were not standing now. The soldiers from the road were pulling the cart aside so that their horses could pass, and the ground round the well was the way ground is after such things.

Seven or eight men lay on the cobbles. Some were moving. Two sat with their hands on their heads while a soldier gathered their bills into a bundle like faggots for an oven.

Three were not moving at all.

One of them lay on his side by the well-kerb with one arm out across the gutter, in the short blue kersey coat Marit had patched at both elbows before the winter.

Idony knew the coat, and she knew the lie of his shoulders, even at that distance and under the kettle-coloured smoke. She did not take the spy-glass from its peg. The glass was for strangers' hulls beyond the bar; she did not need it to know Col Fenn, and using it seemed to her an indecency, like looking into a neighbour's parlour.

She stood with both hands on the sill until the soldiers had dragged the three bodies out of the cart-way and laid them against the well-house wall. Col's boot caught on a cobble as they shifted him, and his leg straightened and fell slack again.

When she was quite certain, she turned from that window to the one that faced the river.

Lanterns were moving down there, fast, three or four of them bobbing towards the water at a pace no fisherman used, and behind them other

lights that did not bob, that came on steadily. Then all of them went behind the warehouses and she lost them. She did not know what she had seen. She would not know until morning.

In the back room the lamp had not been lit. Tobin had fallen asleep at last with his cheek against Hesper's collarbone and the tally-stick in his fist. Marit sat on the edge of the bed with her shoes still on.

'Is it done?' she asked.

Idony looked at Tobin's face, and at the thin line of grey afternoon round the edge of the garden shutter. There was an hour of daylight left, perhaps a little more.

'The fighting in our lane is done,' she said. 'Hild will want help with the broth. There are two of them to feed.'

Marit nodded and did not get up.

Idony sat down on the upright chair by the chest and laid her hands in her lap, and kept what she knew to herself until the dark should come to help her with it.

Outside, in the street, the wounded had begun to call out. They went on all night.



* * *

By morning Hild had found a spoon Tavin could manage with his left hand.

He had taken three mouthfuls when the soldiers knocked. She left the bowl beside him and looked at Idony, who put down her cup. They had heard the doors opening along the street. There had been no reason to suppose their own would be passed over.

Three men came in. The oldest had a torn ear and the patient manner of someone who had already been shouted at in several kitchens. He left one man in the hall and sent the other upstairs.

'Two wounded,' Idony said. 'We brought them in yesterday.'

'Ours?'

'One of each.'

He looked down at Mirek, who gave his name and company, then at Tavin. The iron cap lay beneath the table where Hild had pushed it with her foot.

'Can you stand?'

Tavin put his spoon down.

'He's hurt,' Hild said.

'I can see that. Can he stand?'

'I don't know.'

The man crouched beside him and drew the blanket back. Tavin watched his hands. He had stopped shaking during the night, though Idony was not sure that meant he was better.

'You'll have to help me,' he said.

Hild bent to lift him, but the soldier held up a hand.

'Leave it. We'll do that.'

'Where are you taking him?' Idony asked.

'Down to the others.'

'Where?'

'The quay.'

Mirek raised himself on an elbow. 'He didn't hurt anyone here.'

'Lie down, lad.'

'We were here all night. He didn't –'

'I heard you.'

The man returning from upstairs shook his head. Between them they got Tavin onto his feet, supporting him beneath his good arm and by the belt. He made a small sound and waited for it to pass.

Hild picked up the bowl.

'He hasn't finished.'

For a moment nobody moved. Then Tavin looked at her.

'I've had enough.'

He had eaten almost nothing. Still, he was standing, and the men were waiting, and Hild stepped aside with the bowl held in both hands.

At the door the older soldier turned back to Mirek.

'Stay there. Someone will come for that leg.'

'When?' Idony asked.

'When they can.'

She followed them into the hall. Tavin caught his heel on the threshold and apologised to the man holding him. Outside, the mounting-stone was empty. Someone had taken the dead boy away while they slept, if what they had done could be called sleeping.

Idony shut the door without putting up the bar.

'There'll be somebody here,' she told Hild. 'For Mirek. I'm going to find Kester.'

Hild nodded. She was still holding the bowl.

By the time Idony reached the square, the flag was up.

It hung above the Council house in stiff folds, with the creases still showing where it had lain in a chest. The breeze lifted one corner and let it drop. Beneath it stood a herald with a sheet of paper and two soldiers who watched the people gathering rather than the man they guarded.

Idony had come without breakfast. Halfway across the square she regretted it. Her knees were unreliable after the night on a chair, and there was nowhere to sit that did not require asking a soldier to move.

Aveline stood at the front with the Guild.

She wore her best gown, the one Idony had last seen at a wedding, and had fastened it properly at the throat. She had had it ready, then. Through yesterday's fighting, perhaps even before it began.

Beside her, the commander was trying to ease his bandaged arm without appearing to do so. He had the grey face of a man who needed sleep and was being offered speeches.

Aveline saw Idony and came towards her.

'They're opening the cells.'

'Have you seen him?'

'Not yet. I've given his name.'

'They know his name.'

'Now they know who's waiting for him.'

The herald began. He spoke clearly enough until he reached Ryhomir, stumbled over it, and started the sentence again. Somebody near Idony supplied the name, quietly.

Under the authority of Queen Feirie, Ryhomir was annexed to the Sunder Realm.

The words carried across the square. Aveline went back to the commander and welcomed him on behalf of the Merchant Guild. There was some cheering, though Idony could not see who had begun it. She watched the side entrance to the Council house.

The prisoners came from the other direction.

A soldier asked people to make room, and the Council walked through the gap under guard. Korim Attersal held his hands together at his waist. Behind him, Gordion Grimshaw limped in stockings and breeches wet to the knees.

'Caught them by the river,' someone said.

The lanterns, then.

Gordion saw her. His right thumb moved against the place where his seal ring had been.

'Idony.'

She stepped nearer. A guard watched her, but let her come.

'We asked help of people who believe what we believe,' Gordion said. 'Your son asked help of people who would pay for the town.'

His voice was hoarse. He paused to swallow.

'We'll see which was the treason.'

She had no answer ready, and none came. The guard touched his sleeve and Gordion went on towards the door.

Idony stood where he had left her until she heard Kester's name.

He came up from the cells with his bound hand held against his chest. He was filthy. His coat hung loose at the neck, and for a moment he stood blinking in the light, unable to find whoever had called him.

She reached him before Aveline did.

'Mother.'

His sound arm went round her. She held him carefully at first, then less carefully, pressing her cheek against the dirty cloth while he bent his head against hers.

'The children?' he asked.

'At home. Marit too.'

He nodded without letting go.

Then his head lifted. She felt him look past her, up at the Council house and the new flag hanging above it.

'It's done, then.'

Idony drew his sound arm through hers and turned him towards home.

* * *

In the afternoon she went down to the quay with Marit.

Kester had wanted to come, though he could hardly sit upright while Hild washed the cellar dirt from his face and bound fresh linen over his splint. Idony had told him to stay in his chair, and because his legs were shaking under him he had stayed.

She had said nothing to either of them about the well-house wall. All the way down the hill Marit walked a half-step ahead, her shawl pinned tight under her chin and her eyes going to every fisherman's back along the wall. Idony kept pace behind her and wished, for the first time since Thurstan died, that someone else had the care of the house.

They had laid the Sunder dead between the net-sheds and the harbour office.

The rows ran straight from the quay wall to the gutter, boots towards the water, coats drawn down over the belts where the coats would reach. Men were still carrying hurdles out of the lanes behind the market and setting them down at the far end to lengthen the outer line.

Idony began to count from the corner nearest the crane. She reached forty-two along the first row, saw three rows behind it and the hurdles still coming, and stopped.

A Sunder clerk was walking the space between the lines with a narrow ledger propped open on his forearm and an inkhorn hanging from his coat-button. Two sergeants went with him, stopping at each pair of boots while soldiers from the companies leaned over to look at a face or a buckle. When someone spoke a name, the clerk wrote it down and sanded the line with his thumb.

The town's dead lay apart, past the fish-steps where the stones were greasy with weed.

Nobody had put them in rows. They lay where the carters had lifted them down, fifteen or twenty paces from the soldiers' boots, with a strip of wet cobble left bare between the two. A few women and older men moved among them, stooping to lift the edge of a sailcloth or a coat.

Idony stepped across the gutter as the clerk came to the end of his line.

'Who is writing these down?' she asked, looking towards the fish-steps.

The clerk glanced where she pointed, holding his pen upright so the ink would not drop on his cuff. 'Not my list, mother.'

He turned back to his sergeant and dipped the nib.

Marit was already past the steps. Idony followed her across the stones.

She saw the blue kersey coat before Marit did. Someone had brought him down from the well-house in the morning and laid him fourth from the wall, with his hands crossed over his belt and the patched elbows stiff with dried mud. One of his boots still had the scrape across the toe where the cobble had caught it.

Marit stopped.

For a moment she only stood looking down at the sleeve, as if she had come to see how her winter stitching had held. Then her breath caught in her throat and her knees went under her.

Idony had her by both arms before she struck the stone. She pulled Marit back against her own chest and held her there, her hands locked round her daughter-in-law's wrists. Marit did not cry out. She bent her head over her arms and breathed in hard, dry pulls that shook them both, while Idony braced her feet on the wet flags and took the weight.

Over Marit's shoulder, two places further along, lay Davy Pask. His coat was open at the neck and his mouth was slightly parted, the way he had stood in the torchlight when she named his mother from the step. Beyond him, near the edge of the slip where the water lapped at low tide, lay Jory Tull. Someone had closed his eyes and laid his bill-hook beside his knee, though the shaft was broken in two.

Two of the Fenn cousins came down from the rope-walk with a hand-barrow and a clean piece of sailcloth. When Marit could stand alone, she let go of Idony's wrists and knelt beside her brother to fold his coat straight before they lifted him. She did not look towards the net-sheds.

Idony walked over to the stone trough by the quay wall to wet her handkerchief.

Along the outer wall, where the salt-barrels stood in good seasons, the Faldris prisoners sat on the cobbles with their knees drawn up. Idony coun-

ted them before she thought not to: thirty-eight, perhaps forty, most of them tied up in torn shirt-linen or strips of sacking. Soldiers with long spears stood at intervals along the line.

From the end nearest the trough, a voice called to her.

'Mistress.'

It was Tavin. He was sitting with his back against a mooring-post and his bad arm tucked inside his split coat. The rag Hild had bound round his scalp had slipped over one ear, dark and stiff at the edge.

The nearest guard looked at Idony, then at the tin dipper chained to the trough, and did not lower his spear. Idony filled the dipper and carried it across.

Tavin took it in his left hand. He drank it down in three swallows, let the last drops run into his collar, and held the tin out to her without getting up.

'The faithful called us,' he said. His voice was scraped thin, and he looked past her towards the roofs round the square, where a corner of the new flag showed above the chimneys. 'They told us Ryhomir had asked for the Fire. You'd sold the town before our boats crossed the bar.'

Idony took the dipper from him. She did not argue. She walked back to the trough and hung the tin on its hook.

As she turned towards the fish-steps, Aveline Holcroft came down from the harbour office with a roll of paper under her arm. She had changed out of her best gown into her counting-house wool, and her skirts were pinned up an inch to clear the mud on the stones. She saw the Fenn cousins lifting the barrow, paused beside Idony, and looked once at the sailcloth.

'I'm sorry about Fenn's boy,' she said.

Idony wrung out the handkerchief over the gutter.

'The commander sent a rider east an hour ago,' Aveline said, lower. 'He's asked Wraymoor for another thousand men.'

Idony looked from the forty bandaged men against the wall to the long rows between the net-sheds, where the clerk was still turning his pages.

'So they're staying.'

'Of course they're staying, Idony. That was the point.'

Aveline went on up the lane towards the square. Idony waited until the cousins had got the barrow clear of the steps, then tucked the damp handkerchief into her sleeve, took Marit by the elbow, and walked beside her up the hill.

IV

One Realm, One People

The house was quiet for the first time in a fortnight, and Idony did not trust it.

Broth on the hob. Linen in the copper. A pair of soldier's boots by the back-room door, cleaned and set together, with the laces tucked inside the way some tidy mother had taught him. The street door stood open by day now, and nobody had yet knocked on it with a spear-butt, which Hild put down to prayer and Idony to the fact that the house had already given the army a bed.

A surgeon's mate had come for the bolt on the second morning, a hairy man who smelled of spirits and talked throughout. Mirek had made less noise than Idony expected and had thanked him afterwards, which seemed to her excessive. Since then he had lain in the back room with his leg propped on Thurstan's old travelling-case and done his best to be no trouble. He called Hild 'mother' and Idony 'mistress'. He asked before he took bread. He was homesick, which he admitted, and grieving, which he did not, though the name Danek came up often enough to make the point for him. Danek Orlic had marched beside him from Wraymoor and was somewhere in the rows between the net-sheds, and Mirek wanted somebody in the house to be glad with him that he was not.

'You're liberated now,' he told Tobin. 'You know that?'

Tobin, who had taken to the back room as other boys take to a dog, nodded without knowing what he was agreeing to. 'Are you a Sunderian?'

'Everyone under the Crown is. One Realm, one people.'

Tobin said it back, trying the shape of it in his mouth. Hesper stood in the doorway and said nothing, which was becoming her habit.

Marit put his food on the chair by the door and left before he could thank her. Mirek watched the door after her.

'Have I done something?'

'No,' Idony said.

That was the trouble, more or less. She did not see how to explain it to a boy with a hole in his leg, and so she did not try.

The news came as news came now, in pieces: from the crier, from Kester, from what the soldiers said to one another at the well. Faldris had called the annexation an act of war. The crier read this out as if it were a compliment. The prisoners were to be moved to a place called Navy Island, and nobody could tell Idony where that was. Hild asked whether Tavin would go with them. Idony said she supposed so. Hild went on turning the linen in the copper and asked nothing more, which was her way of saying a great deal. The coast was proclaimed the Crown's, and the coast road with it, and a second thousand men were on their way from Wraymoor to hold what the first thousand had taken.

They buried Col Fenn on the fourth day, on the slope above the town where the Fenns had always gone.

It was a small burial. Marit and the cousins, a dozen from the chapel and a priest with a coal basin on an iron stand, which he had to shield with his sleeve from the wind. Idony was the only Ormrod there apart from Marit. Kester was on the quays, and Marit had not asked him to come, and he had not asked whether he should; Idony thought that the worst thing she had seen all week, and it was not hers to mend.

Two soldiers watched from the corner of the wall. They did not come nearer. They leaned on their spears and talked quietly about something else, and Idony found she minded that more than if they had stared.

The priest spoke of fire and of warning. Hild said the new words with him, aloud, and did not look at Idony while she said them. Idony said the old ones under her breath. *The soul is a traveller.* Some faces she had expected were missing – the thin preacher from the square, for one, and two of the men who had stood with Col that morning. Some of those who had come stood with their backs to the soldiers throughout, as if a back could be an argument.

Marit threw the first earth. Her hands were steady. It was her face that was not.

Coming down again, Idony found Kester on the quay with Aveline and two Sunder officers. He had his right arm in a sling and was pointing with his left at the quay wall, talking about the depth of water at the spring tides. His coat was clean. He looked, admittedly, better than he had any right to.

'The road will reach Wraymoor by winter,' he said when he saw her. 'Their engineer says so. Mother, this is –'

'And Wraymoor will reach us.'

He heard it. He chose not to. One of the officers smiled politely, the way men smile at old women who have said something they have not followed. Aveline had followed it. She looked at Idony for a moment and then back at the wall.

Hild came home late from the chapel that evening, with her shawl pulled tight and her face set.

'They shout, Lady.'

'Who does?'

'All of them. Half want the soldiers gone by any means at all. The other half want to be left alone to pray.' She put the kettle on, though nobody had asked for anything. 'The priests stand between and get shouted at from both sides.'

'And which half are you?'

Hild thought about it longer than Idony had expected.

'The tired half.'

The next evening the priests sent a boy with word, and Hild came up from the door with her hands in her apron and sat down without being told, which she had never done in twenty-five years.

The Crown would pay for ten of Ryhomir's faithful to travel to Amethysia for the Festival of Fire. The priests had chosen. Hild was one of the ten.

'To the capital,' she said. 'Lady, I've never been past the wood-harbours.'

'Then it's time.'

'They're calling us the Queen's candles already. The other sort are. Mattie Pask said it to my face at the chapel door.'

'Mattie Pask buried a son on Thursday,' Idony said. 'Let her say what she likes.'

Hild nodded, and then, in the same breath, asked what a woman wore in a capital, and whether one curtsied to a Dwarf. She was frightened and she was delighted, and she could not keep either off her face for long enough to be mistaken for the other. Idony told her that one wore what one had and did not curtsey to anybody who had not earned it, and thought that this was probably the first good news the house had heard since the Burning.

Kester came up to the counting-room after supper. He shut the door behind him, which he rarely did, and sat across from her with his bound hand on the table between them like a third party to the conversation.

'I can't hold a pen,' he said. 'Watch.'

She watched. The fingers moved, two of them. The others did not.

'It may mend.'

'It may. Not this month.' He looked at the hand rather than at her. 'The strongbox is gone. The Guild's books are with the Crown now, and I shan't see them until some clerk decides I may. What this house holds,

Mother – what it truly holds – is written down in one place only, and that is the Dwarven house in Amethysia where Father kept the reserve.'

'I know where your father banked.'

'Then you know I need someone there whom they will deal with. I can't leave the quays. If I leave the quays for a fortnight, Aveline will have the harbour office in her pocket before I'm back on the hill.'

'That is probably true.'

'It is certainly true.' He almost smiled. 'They dealt with Father for twenty years. They'll remember his wife. You kept the letters. You know the forms.'

She was turning this over – the road, the lake she had read about and not believed in, her knees – when Marit spoke from the doorway. Neither of them had heard her come up.

'Take the children.'

Kester turned in his chair. 'Marit –'

'Take them.' Her voice was perfectly level. 'Take them anywhere. I don't care where. Not here.'

She did not come into the room. She stood with one hand on the frame and looked at neither of them, and after a moment she went back down the stairs. Kester put his good hand over his face and left it there.

'The boy in the back room is being sent home to mend,' he said through his fingers. 'There's a wagon going east for the believers. He can ride with you. He knows the road.'

Idony looked at the day-book on the shelf, and at Thurstan's last ledger beside it with the muddy page drying crooked inside.

'Yes,' she said.

She told Kester it was for the books, and he was glad enough to believe her. She told herself it was for Hild, who had never seen a capital and would need somebody to tell her when she was being cheated. The truth, or as much of it as she would admit to lying awake that night, was simpler

and less creditable. She wanted to see with her own eyes who owned Ryhomir now.

In the morning she went into the back room, asked Mirek to lift his leg, and took Thurstan's travelling-case out from under it.

* * *

The Crown's wagon was in the lane before first light, its boards still dark with the damp off the water.

Hild stood beside it in a new shawl of unbleached wool. She had put it on as though it were borrowed, smoothing the fringe with both hands, and the flame amulet hung beneath it where the cloth could not betray her. Nine others from the chapel waited with her, singing nothing, speaking only to the horses or to one another's boots. The driver, a Sunderian with a face like a closed gate, sat counting them with the butt of his whip.

Behind the wagon, the hired carriage Idony had arranged waited with its door open. Kester had provided the carriage. His name still meant something on the quays, though he could not drive a bargain with his hand in a sling, and the carter had not asked for payment until after the road was done.

Marit came no further than the step.

She kissed Hesper on both cheeks and Tobin on the crown of his head, straightened his collar, and then held his shoulders for longer than was strictly needed. Hesper stood very straight and let the kiss happen without leaning into it.

'Be good on the lake,' Marit said. It was not quite the right instruction, but it was what she could manage with her voice so carefully held, and Idony did not correct her.

'We'll write from Wraymoor,' Idony said.

Marit nodded. She did not look at the carriage. She looked past it, along the lane, and then she went back inside and shut the door without a word of

farewell to the wagon or to Hild or to the dawn. Idony heard the bolt go. That, too, was a kind of answer.

Mirek was already inside with his leg on a bolster of folded sacking. He had insisted on walking from the house to the carriage, which had cost him a good deal of colour in the face, and now he sat with his head back and his eyes half shut, holding the door strap with one hand as though the road might begin before they did.

Tobin climbed in and sat opposite him, the tally-stick across his knees. Hesper took the corner by Idony and turned her face to the window before they had moved.

The wagon started with a lurch. Hild waved once from the tailboard, high and quick, and then the lane turned and Idony could not see her, or only the pale shape of the shawl moving away behind the roofs.

The coast road ran east between the dunes and the sea.

It had been a merchant's road in Thurstan's day, wide enough for two carts to pass in good weather and scarce enough for patience in bad. Now the verges were scored with survey stakes. Work gangs were out before the heat, men in shirt-sleeves and soldiers with a pace-chain, measuring the ground where the royal road would run. They did not stop when the carriage passed. A few looked up, then back to their pegs.

Beside the road an old Adjagard milestone leaned a little towards the ditch. Idony knew the shape of it without reading. The number on it gave the distance to a city that was under the sea. She had made Thurstan stop at every one on their wedding journey, to copy the figures into a little book that had long since been lost. Milestones had seemed to her then like proof that the world went on in all directions.

Beside it, new and pale as a tooth, stood a stone that counted from Wraymoor.

Tobin had his face against the glass. 'Gran, what's that stone for?'

'To tell travellers how far they are from somewhere they no longer wish to be, or from somewhere they wish to be. It depends on the traveller.'

He considered this and looked at the old milestone again, but he did not ask about the city under the sea, and Idony was glad.

They met the second thousand before noon.

The road widened at the far field, and the driver pulled onto the verge without being told, for there was no room to pass and no wish to try. The column came west at the pace of men who have marched for days and know exactly how far the next halt lies. Pikes over shoulders, dust on every face, no drums. They filled the road from edge to edge and went on filling it.

Mirek leaned across Idony to the window and watched.

'That's Salle's company,' he said. 'He owed me three coppers at the winter camp. I'll not see them again.' He peered, naming others under his breath, then raised a hand to the carriage window, though the men were too far down the column to mark him. A few looked up from the dust and did not mark him either.

Idony did not count them. She sat with her hands folded and her eyes on the milestone across the road, and after a while she closed the window curtain with two fingers and left it closed until the road was quiet again. Tobin tried to count their boots from where he sat and gave up. Hesper said nothing at all.

Wraymoor was a real city.

Idony had known it would be. She had seen drawings, read the Wool Factors' circulars, and handled coin minted there before the Waters. But a drawing did not prepare you for the weight of houses, stone and brick and timber leaned together over streets too narrow for the sun to reach, or for the number of windows with something black nailed above them.

Mourning cloth hung on the doors. Not a few. Street after street of it, some bleached at the edges by weather already, some so new the dye had run in the last rain. It hung from the better houses and the poorer ones

alike, and where there was no door it hung from a shutter or a window-frame. The whole city wore its dead at the shoulder.

Mirek's street had four.

The driver turned into a lane where the cobbles were laid in a pattern Idony might have admired under other circumstances. He stopped before a narrow house with a step worn to a hollow and a pot of something green on a sill.

Mirek tried to climb down himself and failed halfway, and Idony sent the driver to help him with a look she had not used in years. The driver went. So did Tobin, small and firm, offering a shoulder that came up to the soldier's elbow.

The door opened before they reached it.

Vesna was a short woman with Mirek's colouring and none of his softness about the mouth. She came down the step in her house-slippers and took her son by the arms. For a long moment there were no words. She held him against her with his crutch still in his hand and the pot of something green forgotten behind her.

Then she looked over his shoulder at Idony.

'You're from there.'

The carriage stood in the lane behind her, the door swinging, Tobin holding the tally-stick against his leg.

'Yes,' Idony said.

'Danek from three doors down didn't come back.' Vesna's thumb moved once, very small, against Mirek's coat. 'They sent a letter. We got a letter before you'd even put your wounded on the quay.'

Idony did not say that the wounded had been on the quay before the dead were counted. She did not say that the letters had been faster than the news.

'Danek Orlic,' she said, quite clearly.

'Danek Orlic. Yes.' Vesna looked at her as though she were spelling a name she had been asked to keep.

Idony said it once, under her breath. Danek Orlic. A name to keep, the way she had kept the names from the quay.

They left Mirek with his mother.

Tobin cried. He did it quietly, his face turned to the carriage window and the tally-stick forgotten across his knees. Hesper looked at him once and then out the other window, where the mourning cloth moved a little in the wind. She did not cry, and she did not tell him not to.

Idony thought of the letter Vesna had received, and of the clerk on the quay sanding his ledger with his thumb.

The ferry was a new thing, lake-built.

The planks of the deck still wept sap in the seams, and the hull rose at the bow with the raw look of timber that had been standing forest when the world changed. Along the gangway hung a board, newly painted:

Seven in the hundred to the Crown.

Idony counted the fares in her head before the clerk had opened his mouth. She named the sum, allowing for the children and for Mirek's empty seat, and the clerk, who had been drawing breath to say the same, shut it again and wrote the amount in his book with a pen that scratched.

Tamsin Rook was a woman of about fifty, with arms like a wharfman and a way of standing on her deck as though the deck had an opinion and she happened to agree with it. She saw the family aboard, glanced at the children, and then at Idony.

'We've sacks for your heads if the spray comes hard,' she said. 'But there'll be no spray. The lake's too new to know how to make any.'

The falls roared behind them as they left the stone quay. A wall of water, far off and grey with distance, the sound of it coming through the boards like a summer storm that never moved. Then the ferry caught the current and the sound began to fade, and after a while Idony could hear

the water under the hull, and the creak of the new timbers, and the small noises of the other passengers settling to the crossing.

The lake was two months old.

That was what the *Edö Messenger* had said, and Idony had read it twice. Two months. And yet the shallows near the bank were already full of trees, not fallen but standing, their branches green under the surface and their hedgerows running away into the brown water like the lines of some drowned field. A roof ridge showed above the surface for a dozen paces, the tiles still bright in the sun, then dipped and did not rise again.

Hild stood at the rail with the other nine from Ryhomir. She had put her hood up against the wind, though there was little wind now, and she had her hands folded at her waist. She was praying. Idony could see the movement of her lips, and the way the nine around her stood a little apart from the other passengers, as though the Crown had paid for them to be seen as well as to see.

Tobin came to stand beside Idony at the rail. The tally-stick was in his belt, where he had put it after climbing aboard.

'What lives in the lake, Gran?'

Tamsin Rook answered from the wheel, where she could hear everything and missed nothing.

'Whatever was in the fields when the water came, lad. And those that could not leave in time found it out. The ones that could, they're on the banks now, and they remember the shape of the lanes they used to walk with their heads above water.' She turned the wheel a little. 'Some say the sea-breathers came up with the water, but I've not seen them. Only the ones that came later, to mend the bridge at Amethysia, and they keep under the surface, where no toll-man can ask them for the seven in the hundred.'

Tobin looked into the water for a long time.

A patrol hull of the Lake Navy came past them on the starboard side, low and fast, with soldiers at the rail and a pennant that Idony did not watch long enough to see. Tamsin lifted a hand; someone on the hull lifted a hand back. Then it was gone behind the drowned trees.

The sun sank. The water turned the colour of good pewter, and the roof ridge disappeared.

Hild came away from the rail at last and stood beside Idony, her face still and somehow lighter, the way it went after the chapel.

'Are you afraid, Lady?' she asked.

'Of the water? No. I've counted too many boats over too many bars to be afraid of water I'm not expected to swim in myself.' Idony kept her eyes on the horizon. 'Of the city, perhaps a little. But I'm an old woman, and it's supposed to be the other way round, so let's not tell anyone.'

Hild almost smiled. She went back to the other nine, and they opened a basket of bread and salt fish, and ate standing, like people who had been told to be ready to move again at any hour.

The light went out of the west.

And then, far along the darkening water, lights began to show ahead. First one, then a scatter, then a whole shoreline of them, strung like lanterns along a wall that was not a wall but a city, hanging its lights out over the lake.

Idony thought of the beacon that would be cold in Ryhomir tonight, and of the fourteen boats, and of the numbers she had not been able to count.

She did not try to count the lights of Amethysia.

She only watched them come nearer, one by one, until the ferry master called for lines and the deck under her feet became a different country.

* * *

Stone stairs, porters with covered baskets, clerks carrying papers against their chests. Carriages in the wider streets and soldiers at the corners, more soldiers by the public stairs, and above them paper lanterns hanging slack in the morning air, waiting for dark. Amethysia was bigger than Tobin had decided a city could be, and considerably less interested in him.

A crier stood below the steps of the nearest court with a proclamation and four soldiers behind him. Queen Feirie had named the Order of Faldris as director of the Chalk Hand. All travel to and from Faldris was forbidden. Those who gave aid to the Queen's enemies would be treated as enemies themselves.

Idony had never seen the Chalk Hand. The crier gave it the weight of an institution with offices and a salary, which was one of the things proclamations were for.

'What does it direct?' Tobin asked.

'Nothing you need trouble about before breakfast.'

They had already had breakfast, but he accepted this as the sort of answer adults kept ready for cities.

A noble's carriage came through the street behind them. People moved aside without appearing to hurry, and Idony moved with them, drawing Hesper out of the way by the sleeve. A footman looked down from the back.

'Mind yourself, mother.'

In Ryhomir, men who had known her for forty years touched their caps when she crossed the market. Here there was salt at her hem from the ferry, and a footman called her mother. It was not a great injury. It was, all the same, an instructive one.

They came to the Sunderbridge before she had properly understood that it was there.

Great arches crossed the canyon on piers so enormous that the mason's sheds at their feet looked like children's blocks. The causeway ran on above them, crowded with carts and people, and the people on the further arches were specks against the stone. Tobin gave a small incredulous laugh and ran ahead until Hesper caught him by the back of his coat.

A toll-man was enjoying the question before Tobin had finished asking it.

'Sea-breathers?' he said. 'Real enough when there's work beneath the water. They mended the piers after the Burning, down where no man can work. Didn't charge any less for it, if that's what you're wondering.'

Tobin stared over the parapet. 'So they're real.'

'And they mend bridges,' Hesper said.

Idony thought of the boys behind the school, and of the careful way Tobin had asked whether the sea-breathers had brought the Waters. He leaned out again, looking for movement in the canyon shadows. There was nothing to see but stone and water far below, which seemed to disappoint him less than it might have done yesterday.

The Dwarven banking house stood square and unornamented at the end of a narrow court. No fire over its door, no dream sign, no display of wealth beyond the excellent condition of its hinges. There were guards outside, and two more at the inner doors to the ledger rooms.

Nadintu Ishme-Ea received them in a room containing one table, four chairs and a great deal of silence. The Dwarf wore a scarf folded with exact symmetry and looked at Idony's travel-stained clothes without troubling to conceal the assessment.

'Thurstan Ormrod's widow,' Idony said. 'Of Ryhomir. I have come for the state of his house's reserve.'

Nadintu did not ask the year. A clerk was sent away, returned with two ledgers, and found the account while Hesper was still looking at the locks on the inner door.

The reserve was intact to the coin. The sums placed there, the interest credited, the transfers authorised under Thurstan's hand: all of it stood in columns that no sack carried through a Ryhomir street could have reached. Idony read the last balance twice. Kester had been right to send her, which did not make the journey feel any less strange.

'We heard about Ryhomir,' Nadintu said.

'From whom?'

Nadintu turned a page, smoothed it flat, and did not answer.

One of Faldris's preachers had told his congregation that Dwarves defiled the Festival of Fire. Hild had repeated this on the road with considerable embarrassment, and then had needed to be reassured that nobody would require her to worship beside a banker.

Idony looked at the extra guards by the ledger rooms. 'You seem untroubled by the festival.'

'We don't worship fire, Mistress Ormrod. We sell the Crown its coal.'

Nadintu sanded a note, sealed it, and passed it across the table. It bore the house's name and the bank's mark. Idony put it inside her bodice, where no pickpocket with ordinary standards was likely to look for it.

At noon she found a Dreamer sleeping-chapel and left the children with Hild outside.

It was full. Old people on the narrow couches, a clerk asleep with his boots neatly paired beneath him, two market women sharing a blanket, a young man snoring with his mouth open. An attendant showed Idony to a place without asking her business or her town.

She slept the customary hour among strangers and dreamed nothing.

When she woke, somebody had covered her knees with a cloth. The sleeping-chapel in Ryhomir grew emptier every month. Here the attendant was trying to find room for three more people and doing it without fuss. Idony folded the cloth and left a coin in the dish. Her faith, at least, was at home in Amethysia.

By evening the city smelled of woodsmoke, tallow and roast meat.

Bonfires burned along the shore. Braziers had been set along the Sunderbridge, and the paper lanterns above the streets had been lit one by one until the crowds walked beneath a second, unsteady ceiling. Fire-dancers turned their brands in the open spaces while musicians competed from opposite corners. Somewhere a pickpocket was being pursued through the spectators, to general approval and very little assistance.

Idony had seen perhaps three Elves in her life. Here she saw them in the crowd before she had finished her first cup of hot wine, and Dwarves beyond them, eating roast pork and arguing about the dancing. Tobin stared until Hesper told him not to, after which she stared herself.

A priest of the moderate fire preached from a platform above the shore. He spoke of hearths, of light carried from one house to another, of a flame tended so that it warmed rather than consumed. There was nobody to blame in the whole sermon. A few of his listeners seemed almost disappointed.

Hild listened with both hands folded over her amulet.

'No warnings,' she said when he had finished.

'Not unless you count leaving a fire unattended.'

'No, Lady.' Hild smiled faintly. 'I don't suppose he does.'

She looked like someone who had been making payments on a debt and had suddenly been told the principal was forgiven. Idony did not ask whether the relief would survive the journey home. For that evening, it was enough to see Hild eat a honey cake without looking over her shoulder.

Later, officials brought the ten from Ryhomir onto a platform.

Each had been given a candle. Hild held hers with both hands beneath the flame, though there was hardly any wind. The nine beside her stood in a line, some stiff with fright, some visibly enjoying themselves. The hardliners at home had called them the Queen's candles. Here, admittedly, the name fitted rather too well.

A herald read from his sheet.

'The faithful of Rhy – Ryhomir.'

He got it right the second time. The crowd cheered them for being freed, and then cheered the two hundred and fifty who had died to free them. The number passed through the people nearest the platform and came back from further away. Two hundred and fifty. It was spoken easily now. It had acquired a place in the ceremony.

Hild wept. She did not make a sound, and she did not lower her candle.

It was theatre, of course. The Crown had paid for the wagon, the candles and the shawls, and had got excellent value from all three. Hild's tears were none the less honest for that. She stood above the cheering crowd with her face wet and her shoulders shaking, and Idony could not find it in herself to begrudge her a single moment of it.

Far out on the lake, the Queen's barge moved among the other lights.

Hesper stood on tiptoe, then climbed onto the base of a bollard.

'Can you see her?'

'No,' Idony said.

'Which part is the barge?'

'The part everyone else is pointing at.'

Hesper pointed too, though she had no better idea than Idony which light she was indicating. After a while she got down. She had wanted to see the Queen, and she never did.

Near the water's edge, people were setting lanterns afloat for their dead.

A woman beside them held hers against her skirt while she lit the candle inside it. She had the flat inland vowels Idony had heard from Mirek.

'Wraymoor?' Hild asked gently.

The woman nodded. 'My son. He died at Ryhomir.'

Hild looked at Idony, but the woman was already bending to the water. She set the lantern down, gave it a push with two fingers, and watched until it had cleared the reflections below the steps.

Idony tried to count the lights on the lake. She began with those nearest the shore, carried the number out to the next scatter, and then discovered that she had counted one lantern and its reflection as two. She started again. Further out, the Queen's barge had moved into her line of sight, and beyond it the whole water seemed to be alight.

She gave up.

Danek Orlic of Wraymoor had a name, at least. She had kept that. Col Fenn lay in the earth above Ryhomir, and Davy Pask and Jory Tull with their own people, and nobody had given them lanterns here. Nobody had given them a number either.

Tobin leaned against her arm, tired now and too old to admit it. Hild made the flame sign towards the water. The woman from Wraymoor straightened, wiped her hands on her skirt, and stayed watching her lantern.

Idony took Tobin's hand and stood beside her until the current carried it beyond counting.

* * *

Ryhomir had shrunk while she was away.

That was nonsense, of course. Towns did not shrink in ten days, and this one had the same quays, the same gulls quarrelling over the gutting-tables, the same smell of tar and low water coming up the lane. The draper's shutters had been mended. Somebody had plugged the bolt-holes in her own front shutter with pale new wood, Kester presumably, or someone Kester had paid. The mounting-stone had been scrubbed. Only the flag over the Council house was new, and even that had lost some of its creases.

Marit met them on the step. She held Tobin against her skirts and looked over his head at Idony.

'Did they eat?'

'Constantly.'

Marit nodded, and took them in, and that was the whole of the homecoming.

Kester told her the rest at supper, between mouthfuls he managed left-handed with more skill than he had a week ago. While the ten were in Amethysia, the chapel had held meetings. Not prayers. Meetings, at night, in houses nobody would name.

'I've asked,' he said. 'Nobody I know can see into them. Which means either nobody I know goes, or everybody I know has learned to lie.'

'And the Crown?'

'The Crown has put soldiers on the chapel door.'

She saw them the next morning, on the way to the Council house with the books under her arm and Hild beside her. Two soldiers, spears grounded, one on each side of the flame over the door. They looked bored, which Idony thought was probably the intention.

Morning prayer was ending. Idony stopped by the well, because her knees wanted a rest and because she counted things.

Two priests. Then the congregation, coming out in ones and twos, about a hundred. Before the battle the chapel had not been able to hold its crowd on a rest day; people had stood in the street with their heads bowed towards the open door. Now there was room on the step to spare. Half of them would not look at the soldiers. They walked past the spears with their eyes fixed somewhere above the roofs, as Col's friends had stood with their backs turned at his burial.

Hild had gone ahead to speak to a woman she knew. As she turned away, somebody in the press behind her said it, not loudly.

'Candle.'

Hild did not turn round. Idony looked, and could not tell who had spoken; a dozen faces, none of them guilty, all of them busy.

'Let them,' Hild said when she came back.

'You're very calm about it.'

'They're not wrong, Lady.' She settled her shawl. 'I held one.'

The Council house had been rearranged rather than changed. A soldier at the door asking business, clerks on the stairs with papers held against their chests, a smell of new ink over the old smell of damp. The Council's long table had been sawn in half and pushed against two walls, and men sat at both halves writing. Nobody sat at the head of either.

They sent her to a small room at the back, the old record room. The clerk behind the desk stood when she came in.

Korim Attersal had lost weight. His collar sat loose, and he had the careful, apologetic manner of a man who had spent a night in a cell and another night working out how to behave when he came out of it. He offered her the chair. She took it, for her knees and for no other reason.

On the shelf behind him stood the Guild's letter-books. She knew them by their spines; Kester had labelled them himself, years ago, in the clear hand. Crown files now, with a slip of paper tucked into each one.

'Mistress Ormrod.' He cleared his throat. 'You'll have heard the order.'

She had, but he read it to her anyway, because that was what the paper was for. Ryhomir was approved as a port of call for Coromar's weekly lines. The Guild and the harbour officers were to ready the quays. Every house was to register its boats and its quay-space with the civil administration.

She laid the books on his desk, and Nadintu's note on top of them.

He read the note twice. His eyebrows went up the second time, a little. 'Amethysia.'

'My husband banked there for twenty years.'

'Yes. I remember the business with the page on the mud.' He wrote something, sanded it, and did not look up. 'This will do very well.'

'Your name was on my son's warrant.'

He put the pen down.

'Yes,' he said. 'I voted for an inquiry, Mistress. Not an army.'

'You voted with the man who sent for one.'

He did not deny it. That was something, she supposed; at least he did not insult her. He looked at the letter-books on the shelf behind him as though they had been put there to remind him, which perhaps they had.

'They're fair, you know,' he said. 'The Sunderians. Tidy. They want to know how many boats, how deep the water, who owns which stretch of wall.' He turned the note square on the desk. 'They haven't counted us yet. They're counting the boats first.'

Idony thought of the day-book on the watch-room shelf, forty years of boats, and said nothing.

Then, with an odd pride, as if it were the one thing he had done that he could stand to mention, he told her about the beacon. He and the other two had explained to the Queen's people that Ryhomir had a duty under the Shield, to keep the fires burning. The Queen had offered to keep the beacons herself.

'Who will light them?'

'Whoever's paid to.'

'And Aesylon?'

'Has not answered.' He seemed almost pleased that somebody, somewhere, had still not committed themselves.

She rose. At the door she stopped, with her hand on the frame.

'They say there is still a man below.'

'One remains.'

She did not ask his name. She found she did not want to carry it up the hill.

The market was fuller than she had expected. Soldiers bought bread and paid for it, which was being much remarked upon. The fishwife who had once had nothing for her sold Hild four mackerel without a word, and without looking at the next stall first.

At the end of the row stood two Halae salt-sellers from Aesylon, with good baskets and a good awning. They were asking more than they sold. People stopped, looked, touched the salt, and moved on.

Idony bought a measure. She said little, and they said less, and both parties seemed satisfied with the arrangement.

The crier rang his bell as she was tying the bag.

Ryhomir Day was proclaimed for the end of the week. The schools would close. There would be festivities, for the liberation of the town and in memory of the two hundred and fifty.

Around her the market went on buying fish.

Hild took the salt from her. 'Hesper will be glad about the school.'

'Yes,' Idony said. 'I doubt she'll say so.'

* * *

The schools stayed shut, and by breakfast Tobin had been told twice that a holiday was no reason to put his elbows on the table.

Kester had gone down to the square early. Marit said she would stay and see to the dinner, though Hild had done most of it the night before, and there was little left that required seeing to. Idony did not press her. Marit kissed the children at the door, straightened Hesper's collar, and went back to the kitchen before anyone could ask whether she might change her mind.

Free flags were being handed out at the foot of the Council hill. They came straight from the bale, still creased into stiff squares, and the boys distributing them had more flags than system. Tobin took one and held it upright with great seriousness. Hesper accepted hers, looked at the creases, and folded it once more so that it would fit beneath her arm.

'Aren't you going to wave it?' Tobin asked.

'Later.'

The Guild's platform stood below the Council house. Kester was on it with Aveline and the harbour officers, his right arm in its sling and his left hand resting on the rail. He had shaved, and his coat was good. Prosperity, or the beginnings of it, sat well enough on his shoulders; sleep was another matter. Idony could see the hollows beneath his eyes from the back of the square.

Aveline said something to him and he answered without turning his head. Neither of them smiled.

Hild had gone to stand with the chapel's tired half, as she called them, near the rear of the crowd. There were perhaps fifty, gathered loosely enough not to look like a party. A few of the other sort watched them from a corner of the square. Hild kept her back to the corner and her amulet inside her dress.

The herald mounted the steps below the flag. He was the same man who had stumbled over Ryhomir on the morning of the annexation. He had practised since then. The town's name came out cleanly, and Idony was unreasonably pleased to hear it.

The proclamation concerned the liberation of Ryhomir, its reception into the Sunder Realm, and the deliverance of its people from the enemies of the Crown. It named Queen Feirie. It named the Guild's loyalty. Then it came to the two hundred and fifty soldiers who had died.

The herald said the number slowly.

Some of the crowd cheered. Others took off their hats and waited for him to go on. He went over the liberation again, and the dead again, so that the number returned without anyone needing to ask for it. Two hundred and fifty. There was no second number.

Near Idony, a woman shifted her baby from one arm to the other. Two fishermen behind her began arguing in whispers about whether the quay registration would apply to boats kept above the creek. Ordinary concerns, admittedly, had a way of surviving even when read over by a herald.

Tobin had been waiting for the cheering to come round again. When it did, he lifted his flag and shouted, 'One Realm, one people!'

Several people near him laughed. A soldier at the edge of the square looked round and smiled.

Hesper held her flag beneath her arm and kept her mouth shut.

On the platform, Kester searched the crowd until he found his son. His face changed when he saw him. Then the herald began another passage, and Kester turned back to listen, as a man on a platform was expected to do.

Idony stayed until the herald reached the festivities. There would be music, apparently, and tables in the square, and something for the children at the harbour office after noon. She left before he had finished. Hild saw her go but did not follow, for which Idony was grateful.

The climb hurt her knees. She took it slowly, with one hand on the wall where the lane steepened, and by the time she reached the house the herald's voice had become only another sound below the roofs.

Marit was not in the hall. Idony did not call for her.

In the watch-room she took Thurstan's last ledger from the shelf. The muddy page from the quay had dried crooked where she had pressed it, and one corner broke away when she lifted it out. She laid the page on the map chest, opened the ledger again at the blank leaves, and sat down with the pen.

She wrote *Col Fenn, fisherman.*

The ink was pale at first. She dipped the pen again.

Davy Pask, carter's son.

Jory Tull, the chandler's boy.

She stopped there and looked out at the bar. A cart was moving along the quay, too small at that distance to tell whose it was. Somebody below the house shut a door.

Then she wrote *a young soldier of Faldris who died against our door*, because she had never learned his name. The line took more room than the others.

Last of all she wrote *Danek Orlic of Wraymoor, Royal Guard.*

She did not divide the names into columns, and she put no total beneath them. Tomorrow she would go from door to door and ask. Some people would not want to answer, and some would give her names she did not know what to do with. She would ask anyway.

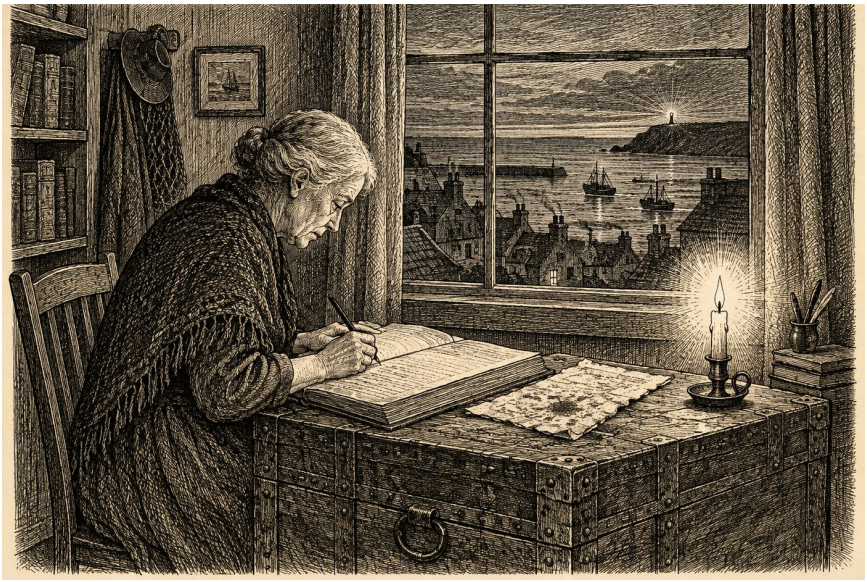
When she looked up again, it was dusk.

Beyond the roofs, the beacon was lit. The flame was small from the watch-room, no larger than a spark held against the darkening coast, but it held. She could not see the man tending it. Attersal had said whoever was paid to, though the harbour boy might simply have gone on with his work. She did not know whose hand had lit it, or for whom.

The boats were coming home.

Idony counted them over the bar, one at a time, as each hull lifted and passed into the river mouth. Twelve before the light went.

She wrote *twelve* beneath the names, where Thurstan had always entered the day's takings under the day's costs, and left the page open to dry.



The next world

Armidion

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