MIRACLES OF
SROGANT

The Flood Chronicles

Tales from the Western Reaches

Five stories from The Flood Chronicles

Aodhàn Mac-Talla



thefloodchronicles.net · Xin Publishing

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About these tales

The Flood Chronicles is a strategy game played by letter. Each player rules a realm that survived a great Flood, and once a week writes what their ruler does: orders, schemes, letters to rival courts, the small business of a court. A Game Master reads every letter, weighs them all together, and answers with what the world did in return. Week by week, between the players, a history is written that nobody planned.

The game is older than it looks. It began more than thirty years ago as a play-by-mail game run by hand in a German grammar school, and its players' letters became the world of Isrogant. The Flood Chronicles is that same game, matured and moved to email. A person still reads every letter and makes every ruling. AI keeps the records and drafts the paperwork: the apprentice, never the author.

The Western Reaches is the world the current players are writing. In its thirteenth week a holy mountain failed, the land broke open, and a lake appeared where farmland had been. Courts then decided what came next: whom to protect, whom to expel, whom to trust, and what to do about dragons. These five tales grew out of that season. They are not reports of turns. They follow the people the turns landed on.

They can be read in any order. If they make you want to write the next chapter of a world yourself, the last page says how.

— the Keeper of the Chronicle

Tales from the Western Reaches

The Far Side of the Pass

A tale from the Western Reaches



Reading time: about 35 minutes

The noise had been weather for two days before it became something else.

Kharai had followed it the way a thirsty animal follows the smell of water: without deciding to, and then without being able to stop. It came up through the broken passes as a sound without a shape—a low, grinding surf that never turned to breakers, never rolled away. Sometimes the wind carried screaming in it. Sometimes the screaming carried the wind.

He had told himself the usual things. That the bare ones were old stories, warnings folded into the den-songs when the fires burned low. That no orc with any sense walked towards a sound like that. That he was hungry, and hunger made the ears lie.

He kept walking anyway.

Now he lay flat behind a slab of stone that had not been there six weeks ago—the raw side of it still shedding dust, the cracks unweathered, the whole great block tipped against its neighbour like a headstone for something no one had buried. The noise was no longer weather. It was a valley. It was a valley full of the bare ones, and he had run out of mountains to pretend he was not looking at them.

He parted the dead grass with two fingers, slowly, the way One-Ear had taught him: *never disturb the picture, only open the eye.* The grass was brown and brittle and it cracked under his touch, but the sound below ate the smaller sound whole.

There were more of them than his den had ever held.

More than every orc he had ever seen, and every orc he had heard of beyond the passes, all standing in the same churned earth at the same moment. His mind tried to count them the way it counted herds—a Raude of forty, a gathering of two hundred—and gave up somewhere before the first rank ended.

It was not that there were too many. It was that they kept *coming*: streaming from the valley's far mouth, gathering at its narrow end, break-

ing against a line of grey like weather against a cliff. Kharai watched the surf and the cliff and felt his stomach drop, and he flattened himself lower into the stone, and the sound came up through the rock and into the hollow of his chest.

The fur along his spine had risen. He could feel it where the old chevrons had gone soft, grown out over six weeks of walking—the pattern blurring, the edges of him losing their shape. He pressed himself down until the stone ground against his ribs and listened.

Every story he had ever heard said to run.

He settled behind the rock instead.

The noise was terrible. He could not stop listening to it.

And because the listening was unbearable, and because he had been six weeks alone and the silence behind him was worse, his mind went back—the way it always did, these days, between one breath and the next—to the cave, and the mountain, and the day the world had begun to breathe.

* * *

The mountain had been breathing for weeks before the day it blew up.

Small breaths, at first. Dust sifting down in air that had been still for a hundred years. Water standing black in passages dry for ten generations. At night, far under the den, a sound like something enormous turning in its sleep.

The old ones read the signs and argued. One-Ear said the mountains had walked before—the songs were full of it—and that a den of forty-odd souls was only ever a guest in the rock. He had been whelped over the passes himself, in a den long gone, and he had the walking in him like weather in old bones. It was One-Ear who had answered, once, when Kharai was young and asked where the herd lived—meaning the great herd of the songs, the lost one, the herd that had once been all herds. *A herd is not a place,* One-Ear had said. *A herd is the walking.*

The den's high door looked out over the place where the mountains gave up. Beyond it the grass began and did not stop: a dry ocean of it, pale, moving under the wind, running out past anywhere the eye could hold. The young ones were taken up to see it in their first spring. Nobody had ever gone into it. It was the edge of the world, and the songs had nothing more to say about it than that.

Kharai had other things to think about that season. He had come to his cutting. His dam had shaved the ladder of chevrons into him, nape to hip, and given him the knife with it—orcbone, den-marked, her own. Days later, the breathing stopped being small.

He kept the day itself in pieces, the way a fall is kept: flashes, and the order of them gone.

A crack like the world's biggest knuckle, felt through the soles of his feet before it reached his ears. The floor of the upper gallery shearing sideways—stone that had been one thing becoming two things, with a step between them as tall as an orc. Dust falling upward. Of all of it, that was the thing his mind refused longest: the floor's dust rising in sheets and drifting up past his face, as if the world had turned quietly over and not told anyone.

One-Ear had gathered the young ones and taken them down the long gallery, the old way to the lower door. It was the one mistake Kharai ever knew him make. The young went in front and the grown behind—that was the rule—and Kharai, new-cut, walked last of all, which was what saved him. The gallery came apart ahead of him, and the two den-kin of his year were simply elsewhere, on the far side of new stone. For a while he could hear them calling, and One-Ear's voice under theirs, steady, giving orders to the mountain. Then the mountain moved again, and he could not.

He went back up to find the others.

He found a hand.

It lay under the edge of the fallen roof in the den-hall, fingers curled around nothing. It was hers—he knew it by the cutting-callus on the thumb, the old burn—and there was no more of her to reach. He sat with it a while. He did not say her name. His people did not keep the names of the dead in their mouths; the dead had gone on ahead, and the herd does not wait for the fallen. A dead orc became a new orc, somewhere. Grief was logistics: so many mouths fewer, so much carrying to redistribute. The teaching had a file for the dying, and no file at all for the left-behind.

A den was a body—that was the other teaching. Forty souls were one animal that happened to live in forty skins, and a piece cut off a body does not die at once. It twitches. It crawls about. It does not understand yet what has happened to it.

He was the piece.

The days after were dark and tasted of stone; he never counted them. He followed air. He followed the taste of moving water. He slept in cracks with the knife in his fist. When he climbed out at last, the light was wrong, on wrong mountains: a peak gone that had stood over the den all his life; a raw ridge where no ridge had been; and below, where a hanging valley had held its trees, water—still and shining in a bowl of new scree, no river running in, none running out.

Everything he knew of the world beyond the Accursed Mountains came from the songs, and the songs were warnings. The bare ones lived that way: the skin-showing people, who killed from far off and never stopped multiplying. How many of them there were, the songs did not say. No one had ever thought to count.

So when the sound came up through the passes—the grinding surf, the screaming—he had walked towards it, because it was the only thing left in the world that was many.

He had told himself all of it many times now. It did not get smaller. A body carried a thing like that, and the carrying wore a groove, and the groove went deeper, and nothing got lighter.

Under his ribs, the rock hummed with the noise. The dead grass ticked against his knuckles. Kharai opened his eyes, parted the grass again with two fingers, and made himself look.



* * *

The nearer tribe came to him first as a smell.

The wind was moving up the valley and over his rock, and it brought them with it: ash, old and cold, the kind that lives in cloth long after the fire is out; tallow; sweat that had dried and been sweated through again, days of it, layered like bark. Under that, thinner, iron. He knew iron. It was the smell of a kill before you reached it.

He made himself look at the ones the smell belonged to.

They filled the valley's wide end and poured towards its narrow one, and they were loud in a way he had no rule for. Everything he knew of hunting said: silence until the moment, and then the moment. These ones

screamed from the start. All of them, not just the leaders—a single flat roar that rose and fell without ever stopping, as if the noise itself were a thing they were throwing at the grey line. Above them swayed poles topped with shapes he could not read at first, and then could: flame, cut in metal, tongues of it catching the low sun. They carried fire on sticks into a fight. He turned that over and put it down again.

At the back of them, where a Raude would keep its old and its young and its carrying, there was no carrying. There were figures with shaven heads and long robes, walking slowly along the rear ranks with their arms raised, and when their voices lifted—he could pick the pitch of it out of the roar, higher, chopped into pieces like a chant—the ranks in front went at the grey line harder. Not braver. Harder, the way something in a snare goes at the snare: the same place, again, with the strength that should have been spent on anything else.

He watched a rush break against the grey and come back. Those who fell stayed where they fell. Those who could crawl crawled, dragging themselves out of the trampling by their elbows, and nobody came for them. Nobody turned. The living stepped over the wounded to get forward, and stepped on them coming back, and the shaven-heads walked on behind with their arms up as if the ground were only ground.

That was the first thing that made his skin move on his bones. A pack keeps its wounded. Even a bad pack—even the sour ones in the songs, the dens that ate their own name—dragged their hurt back to the fire, because a Raude with a gap in it is a Raude with a wound, and a wound is where the world gets in. These ones did not seem to know they had gaps. Or knew, and did not count it.

Their horses were thin. He saw that before he saw the men were thin, because he read horses first and always had: the hollow behind the shoulder, the hip-bones standing up like tent-poles under the hide, the way they stood when they were not being made to move—heads low, not graz-

ing, because there was nothing there to graze. Then he looked at the men the same way and found the same shape. Wrists too big for the arms. Faces cut close to the bone.

When a knot of them dragged down one of the grey ones—a lucky spear, a foot slipped in the mud—they were on the body before it had finished moving. Not to kill it. To open it. Straps, boots, a pouch at the belt, the shirt from under the mail, six pairs of hands working fast and without looking at each other, and the dead one still kicking under them while they did it. A fallen horse further back drew a crowd the same way, and the crowd fought over it, and two of them were left in the mud when the rest moved on.

He knew hunger. He had six weeks of it in his belly. But he had never seen it worn as a shape by a thousand bodies at once.

Some of them were whelps. He was slow to believe that, too—the bare ones were hard to age, all that skin, no cutting to read—but there was no mistaking it in the end: the necks too thin for the helmets, the way they held their spears too high and ran a step behind the grown ones, the way one of them stopped dead in the open with his mouth working and had to be shoved forward from behind. Whelps in the front rank. His people would not have believed it if he had sung it to them.

And at the edges, where the valley sent side-gullies up into the new scree, the mass was not quite whole. Small groups were coming loose from it—five here, a dozen there—with packs on their backs and their heads down, walking uphill into the broken ground, not looking back. No one called after them. The roar did not change. The herd did not notice it was shedding.

He made his judgement the way he had been taught to make it about any herd: not on what it looked like, but on what it did. These were not a pack. A pack keeps its wounded, keeps its young at the back, keeps its eyes on the ones who walk away. This was a thing being eaten from the inside and run-

ning at the nearest wall to make the eating stop. The mad ones, the songs would have called them. He had a place to put that.

What he had no place for was the rest.

Because they were keen. He watched them go at the grey again, screaming, thin as winter deer, stepping over their own dying, and he felt something in his chest that was not fear and was not disgust and was very nearly respect. They had chosen this. Every one of them, every rush, all the way in with nothing held back—no half-measures, no watching from behind a rock. Whatever was wrong with them, and everything was, they meant it with their whole bodies.

It was the only thing about them that was almost orcish.

* * *

The far tribe he found by the hole it made in the noise.

There was no silence anywhere in that valley. But at the narrow end the roar came up against something and did not get in, and the shape of the not-getting-in held steady. Whatever stood there was making almost nothing, and making it without pause. It was worse to listen to than the screaming.

The slopes pinched together where they stood, steepening into cliffs on both sides, and someone long dead had seen the use of it. Stone lay across the gap: blocks cut and set so close that at half a mile the joins were guesswork, older than the new scree, older than anything he had a song for. Dwarf-work, perhaps. Or the leavings of some herd that had stopped walking and built instead. Whoever had laid it was gone, and the holes they had left in it had been stuffed and braced with raw timber, pale at the cuts, felled inside the week. Old bone, new sinew.

What stood behind the timber was a wall that walked.

They did not scream. That was the first thing, and he could not put it down: men going into a killing with their mouths shut. They worked to a

beat instead, a slow one, and he found it in his own chest before he found it with his eyes. Shields down. Step. Weight. Back.

When a man in the front took a wound, or simply emptied, the rank turned over. The hurt one went backwards through the line and a fresh one came forward into his place, and the line did not thin while it happened, and nothing was dropped. It was the way a body draws breath. It was the way a den empties a flooded gallery, hand to hand, nobody shouting.

They kept their wounded. A lane opened for one of them and closed behind him, and the fur went down along Kharai's spine for the first time since dawn.

They answered signals he could not hear. Something went along the line and the line did something, and the two were not far enough apart in time to have been shouting. They killed the way a man splits wood he has split all his life: no anger in it, no waste, the same stroke and the same stroke and the same stroke.

The mad ones came at that, and came apart on it.

He watched the arithmetic of it. Spear and shield, weight and balance, and under the balance the ground doing half the work: the uphill, the pinch, the timber. A rush went in and shortened and stopped, and was pushed back down the slope by men walking forward at the speed of men walking.

Then the fire ones got through. A gap opened where the new timber met the old stone, three or four spears wide, and Kharai's belly pulled tight, because he knew what a gap in a body was.

Before the mad ones could pour into it, the grey did something he had seen before.

Not with his eyes. In the low gallery under the den, slowly, with One-Ear's hand on his hip correcting the turn.

It was Arte Pankration, or the nearest the bare ones had ever come to it. The rank at the shoulder of the gap did not push. It turned from its centre

and let the weight coming at it keep coming, and went with it, and folded, and the gap was behind them and full of grey again, and the men who had poured in were inside a closed mouth. It took less time than it took him to understand it. He hissed through his teeth before he knew he had.

At the worst of it stood one of their alphas, a strip of red cloth tied round his arm.

He did not stand behind and shout. He was in the crush, where the line bent furthest, and Kharai watched the ranks steady wherever he came, the way a herd steadies when the lead mare puts her head up. That was pack. He had not expected to find pack down there, and finding it did not make him easier.

Then he did what One-Ear would have cuffed him for not doing sooner. He stopped watching the teeth and looked at the whole beast.

Behind the wall, where the next rank should have been standing and waiting to be needed, there was nobody. Ground, churned and empty, with cook-fires on it that had gone cold, and the emptiness ran back a long way. Every den keeps something behind. You do not send all your souls at a thing and leave a hole where the rest of you should be. The grey had put everything they had into the wall, and everything they had did not fill the space they had cut for it.

Further back were the wagons, and the wagons were wrong. Men were working at them and carrying nothing to the line. They stood over what was inside—and there was not much inside—with their arms going, in the middle of a fight, arguing about which of them was going to have it.

Ground and no meat. He filed that, and it sat no better than the rest.

Behind the wagons, in under the gate-works where the alphas were, two runners came in at a dead sprint. Whatever they brought started a noise that reached him with edges still on it. Arms went out. A finger went into a chest. Then hands went down to hilts, and stayed there.

In the middle of their own fight. Inside their own wall.

Kharai became aware that his hands hurt. He had been gripping the slab hard enough to flake the edges of his claws, and had not noticed doing it, and there was grit under the quick.

Neither of these herds knew he existed. Two great animals in one valley, and he was a stone on the hill above them. And watching them—the mad ones bleeding themselves out against the timber, the grey rotting quietly behind their own wall—something went cold and certain in his stomach and stayed there.

Both of them were already losing. Not to each other.

* * *

He tried to prove it, because a reading that made no sense was usually a track read wrong. So he read it again, the way One-Ear had taught him to read a herd: numbers, ground, meat, and the mind over it all.

The mad ones had the numbers—three for one, and the wide end still filling. The grey had the ground: the gate, the uphill, the walls. Either should have settled it by midday, and neither had. Neither had meat, and a herd with no meat moves or dies; that was the oldest rule there was, and both of these were breaking it by standing still. And over neither of them was there a mind. Two herds in one valley, and no herd-mind over either. His people did not have a word for that. They had never needed one, because it could not be.

On every count he could run, one tribe or the other should have been running by now.

Neither ran. That was the wrongest thing in a morning full of wrong things.

None of it was orcish. But by the walking, they went at it.

The sound changed first.

He had listened to the roar so long he had stopped hearing it, the way an ear stops hearing a river. What reached him now was a thinning—a

stutter, like surf catching on a new rock. Then the shadow crossed the valley.

He was flat against the stone before he knew he had moved, pressed down into the dead grass, some part of him older than the songs deciding for him: *be small, be stone.* Above the valley went a shape with wings wider than the gate-works, unhurried, the slowest thing in the sky that morning. It made no sound. A thing that size should have made a sound. It turned one slow circle over the battlefield—not looking down, the way a hunter does not look at ground it has already judged—and then it slid over the far ridge, and beyond the ridge he saw the long line of it fold and drop, the way a hawk folds over a vole, onto something deer-sized that had been minding its own business.

It had passed over more meat than the world should hold, and had not wanted any of it.

Below him, two armies had flinched as one animal. He saw it whole, from above: the roar cut off at the root, the churned ground gone still, thousands of bare faces turned up to the sky. For one breath they were not fire and not grey, not the mad ones and not the wall. They were meat that had looked up.

The old songs said the sky had had masters once, before the herds, and that the first herd had eaten their eggs. He had always taken that for a boasting-song—the kind the old ones told to explain why the sky was empty. Nobody alive had seen one awake.

The sky had not been empty. It had been asleep. He thought of the sound far under the den, in the last weeks: something enormous, turning in its sleep.

The roar came back up the valley—the chanting of the shaven-heads first, rising to seize the omen and make it theirs—and the two tribes went back to their killing as if the sky had not just told them what they were. Kharai lay behind his rock with his heart hammering, and found, under-

neath the hammering, that he was steadier than he had been all morning. The bare ones killed from far off and never stopped multiplying, and they had flattened like rabbits under a hawk, every one of them, red cloth and shaven-head alike.

They were not the masters of this world either. He did not know why that helped. It did.



It was some time after—his heart had only just come down out of his ears—that he saw the thing at the grey's rear.

Behind the gate-line, in the trampled ground where the wagons stood, a line of the fire ones knelt in the mud: stripped and bound, grey spears around them. Twelve—small enough to count, so he counted. And two of the twelve were whelps. There was no mistaking it, now that he had learned to read them: the thin necks, the heads too big for the shoulders, the way they tried to make themselves small and did not know how.

Over them stood a grey one who was old—old past mistaking, even among the bare ones. There was white in the hair on his face, and a stillness in him that the spear-men stood careful of, the way pack members

stand careful of an elder whose teeth are still good. And in front of the old one, another grey was shouting. This one had red cloth at his arm—not the one from the line; that one was still where the fighting bent worst. A lesser one, then, with the same mark. His blade was out, and the shouting came up the slope to Kharai as sound with edges in it. No words. None were needed; the intent of it was plain at half a mile.

The old one did not move.

That was all, and it was everything. He stood over the kneeling meat and did not move, and the shouting beat against his stillness the way the fire rushes had beaten against the wall, and wore itself out the same way. The blade went back into its place. The lesser one went with it. The twelve were not killed. He watched a water-skin go down the line of them, watched the whelps drink with their bound hands shaking, watched them left breathing.

Kharai lay behind his rock and tried to file it.

Madness. It had to be madness: meat that had tried to kill you, caught and bound and paid for in grey blood—and you gave it water. The mad ones, for all their screaming, at least made the sense a snared thing makes. This made no sense at all.

It would not stay filed.

That was the trouble. He had watched frenzy all morning, and he had watched arithmetic, and he knew both when he saw them—and this was neither. The old one had stood against his own pack's teeth for meat that could not fight back. There was no profit in it anywhere that Kharai could find, and a thing done without profit was madness, or it was meant.

He looked one last time at the two of them—the mad ones and the wall, the valley churned to mud and meat between them—and found that something had gone out of him, somewhere between the shadow and the water-skin. He was not afraid of them any more. He could not have said when

that had happened. They were terrible, both of them, and he was one orc with a bone knife; none of that had changed.

But what had come in place of the fear was worse.

They reminded him of nothing so much as a den with the scent gone wrong, turning on itself in the dark.

* * *

He left while the noise was still at its height.

It was not a decision, or not the kind he knew how to make. One moment he lay behind the slab, cataloguing the scent of old ash and iron; the next his body was already leaving, moving backwards down the scree with the slow patience of a stone that had been growing there all morning. He did not let himself think about it. Thinking was for dens and councils; a lone orc with a bone knife did things the way a body does: because the body had had enough.

The going took him an hour on his belly. The scree was unreliable—new rock, not yet ridden down by weather—and every shift of his weight wanted to send a stone skipping down into the valley where the battle roared. He learned its language inch by inch, testing each hold the way One-Ear had taught him to test a trail: put no more than half your weight where the stone has not already promised. Behind him, the noise fell away by degrees. First it was battle again, with edges—a voice rising separate, the crack of something heavy on something hollow. Then it was weather, a long surf that no longer had screams in it. Then wind. Then nothing.

He reached the far ridge as the light began to shear long and gold across the raw scarps. Below and behind him, the valley still held its two tribes, but he did not turn around. He had seen enough of them to know the rest. The mad ones would go on shedding at the back, and it would not be a rout. It would be a wasting. And at the narrow end the grey line would still be standing, thinner than it had stood at dawn, but standing. That was all

he needed to know. The wall would hold a little longer. The mad ones would be fewer by dark. Neither fact belonged to him.

On the far ridge he stopped, and could not remember which direction the noise had been.

The silence was enormous. It came up out of the broken ground and pressed against the inside of his ears, and for the first time since the mountain broke he was alone without the sound of others anywhere in it. There was wind. There was the tick of loose stone somewhere below. There was his breath.

None of it was enough.

A pack that tears at itself is the opposite of the thing his people had lost. He had known that all day. Watching it did not make him less alone; it made him more, by the exact measure of every grey rank closing shoulder to shoulder, every fire whelp shoved forward into the arithmetic. He was the only piece of his den left upright in the world, and the world went on killing without him.

He walked into the silence. It did not get smaller.

* * *

The week after was hunger, and he let it be hunger.

He found water by the old rules. At first light he watched the insects: where they hovered low and crossed and recrossed a patch of ground, there was water under the stone, and he dug for it with his hands. He ate roots the colour of old blood, the ones that gave no taste but filled the belly the way clay fills a crack. He stalked a marmot for half a day across a slope of loose slide, moving only when the wind moved, and missed it by the width of a hand; he sat with the miss while the sun climbed, then got up and went looking for beetles under the bark of the blown-down pines. The beetles were small and bitter and alive, and he ate them anyway.

A raven-crowded carcass gave him a meal on the third evening. It was a mountain goat, or what was left of one, and the birds rose up at his coming like a black cloth shaken out. He took the ribs they had not split and the soft part under the shoulder, and he ate it standing, watching the ravens watch him from the rocks. They understood. A carcass was not a place; it was a dispute, and the dispute was only ever about who was still hungry.

The breath-work was the only thing that kept his centre from going. He did it while he walked, the old pattern: three steps to the breath in, three to the breath out, then the long hold where the blood moved without him. Arte Pankration was called truth in movement, but it was also truth in stillness, and the stillness was what he needed. He was not a fighter—had known that since his first cut—but he had been taught the first forms as every den-cub was: how to find the middle of the body and not lose it. The hungry week tested that teaching more than any sparring ever had. The middle held. Just.

He searched for orc-sign everywhere and found none.

No cairns. No trail-marks cut into the new soft stone. No shaved-fur offerings at the high places, left for the dead-who-are-coming-back. In country that should have held orcs, the land was empty of them. It was the wrongest kind of empty, worse than the absence of game. If there were orcs left anywhere, they were gone ahead, or gone aside, or gone under the moving mountains—and he could not tell which.

The Burning was everywhere. Scarp-lines still bright where the rock had torn, shedding pebbles at a touch. A whole slope of forest combed flat in one direction, tree after tree laid over like wet fur, the white splinters of their trunks aimed all one way. Once, following a new shoreline that had not been there when old songs were made, he came to a place where the water stood cloudy over cut stones—walls, a doorway, a step going down into green murk. Hands had built it. The water had not finished taking it. He stood above the drowned steps for a long time, trying to remember

what the songs said about the ones who built in stone. They had not been orcs. They had been before.

He crossed the signs of the bare ones too, always going the same way, over the passes. A dropped wooden toy, too small for a man's hand and too shaped for a stone. Cold dung-fires, the ash not yet scattered. Footprints, bare human feet, too many to count, and once a dead old woman covered over with stones by the trail. Someone had stopped and used their hands. It was the only thing he saw them leave that meant anything. He read it the way he read all sign, and filed it badly: a prey-herd moving, frightened, with children. He did not understand why that made him uneasy.

The fur pattern was the first thing he lost, and the sixth day was the day he took it back.

It had been blurring for weeks, the chevrons gone soft at the edges, the lines of them crossing the muscle in ways he had to remember rather than see. His dam had cut it. There was no one left to re-cut it. The fact had been waiting under every other fact, and on the sixth evening, in a hollow out of the wind, he took out the knife.

He did not speak over it. His people did not speak to the dead; the dead were busy, being new somewhere, and the knife was only bone. He folded the edge against the meat of his shoulder where the old first chevron had been, and cut. The blade was sharp; his hand was not steady. The new chevron came up crooked, a little too high, and the cut stung as it met the cold air.

It was the best thing he had felt in weeks.

He did not say his dam's name. He said nothing at all. But when he put the knife away, the pattern was no longer only a thing she had done. It was a thing he was doing.

On the seventh day, the trail changed under him.

Horse-sign. Fresh dung, still whole, the smell of it rising in the sun. And under the horse-smell, a people-smell he had no category for: milk-

smoke, felt, fat, the smoked old smell of animals kept close. Not ash and tallow, not iron. Not the bare ones he had watched. Something else.

He stood on the trail with the smell in his nose and let it settle.

Then he left the trail, and climbed to where he could see what made it.

* * *

He found them at first light from a crag above the pass road.

They came up out of the east, moving through the grey stone as if the pass were a thing they owned and not a wound in the mountains. Forty to sixty riders, maybe more, the column strung out in the old way: outriders thrown fore and aft, the flanks covered by pairs working the higher ground, the remounts herded inside the line, and in the middle the children and the pack-animals and the old women with their braids done up in cloth. Felt and fur and bone toggles. Short bows, unstrung or strung under hide. There was bone-work in their harness that looked almost like orc-bone, but not quite, as if someone had come to the same answer from a different direction. The horses were rough-coated and small and sure-footed, and they moved with their heads up, smelling the same wind he smelled.

For one clean moment, his chest went warm.

They moved like a Raude moved. Not as the grey wall had moved, not as the screaming fire herd had moved—but as a thing alive in all its parts, each rider a finger of the same body. They had the walking in them. He had heard it in the songs; he had not seen it in anything alive since the mountain took his den.

It was the first time in seven weeks that loneliness had loosened its teeth.

He sat very still on the crag and let them pass below him. They were low-built, weathered, practical, with the earth in their clothes and the wind in their faces. Not bare ones the way the valley had been full of bare ones. These ones looked—the thought came strange and uninvited—or-

cish. The way they sat their horses, easy and patient. The way their gear was made of the same world they moved through, not bolted onto it.

He liked them immediately.

He did not trust that liking at all.

For two days he shadowed the column at a distance he measured by the reach of a bow. It was not hard. They left a road behind them plain enough for a cub to follow—not careless, but not hiding; this was their country, and they moved through it with the confidence of a pack that had made its peace with being seen. He read their camp-discipline from the ridgelines above: the dung buried, the sentries changed in darkness, no fires after dusk. People who expected bad news.

At night he watched their fires from beyond the warm radius, counted the sentries, listened to the sound of their voices carrying across rock—no words, only sound with shape, the same sound a den makes at the end of a long day. It was the first time he had heard people-sound that did not make the fur on his neck rise. He wanted, more than he had wanted food, to go down to it.

He did not. Riders with bows were death, and he was not a fool. The wanting was not a map.

On the second afternoon, the rearguard rider half-turned in the saddle.

He was a low, wide man on a stolid horse, and he looked straight at the scree where Kharai lay for three long breaths. Not searchingly. Not with alarm. The way a hunter looks at a slope and notes that the wind has changed. Then he turned back to the road and rode on.

Kharai let out a breath he had not known he was holding.

The pass had been full of war before the riders came: abandoned carts with their wheels broken, a horse left dead and already wrong-looking, the traffic-scars of an army that had gone through fast. There was blood on the stone in places, black now, and the smell of old fire under the clean wind. The riders moved through it without stopping, the way water moves

through a field of rocks. They watched the south-east. The outriders kept turning their heads that way, over their shoulders, as if whatever they expected was behind them and gaining.

Kharai watched the south-east too, and saw nothing.

On the third day, the pass began to climb. The air thinned and the stone went grey and the riders ahead of him slowed to let the horses breathe. He kept to the high ground, moving when they moved, stopping when they stopped, until he noticed that the light beyond the crest was wrong.

It was too wide. Too flat. Too shining, as if the world fell away there into a place made of more light than ground.

He left the riders' trail and climbed, hand over hand, up the last scarp to where he could see what they were riding into.

* * *

The world opened.

He lay on the crest with his hands on the cold stone and looked out, and for a long time he did not understand what he was seeing.

It was not the world he had crossed. It was the world the Burning had made when it broke the mountains. Below him the land fell away in fresh scarps, one after another, raw as butcher's cuts, their edges still sharp and white with new breakage. The ground was a country of displaced ridges, whole slopes flung down and left where they had landed, the grass still pale with shock. And beyond them, in a bowl of new stone that had no business holding anything, lay a lake. It was still. It did not shine like water fed by a river; it gleamed like water that had nowhere to go, no stream in and no stream out, the light lying on it flat and wrong. The world had broken here, and the water had come up out of the broken places and stayed.

He had seen that water before. From the cave mouth, the day he climbed out, on the other side of the mountains, with every step he had taken since lying between. It could not be this water. It was the same water:

the same flat shine, the same stillness, the same refusal to move. Either the Burning had made the same thing twice, or the world had fewer places in it than he had been taught. It had followed him, or he had been walking towards it all along.

Then his eyes went past it, and found the steppe.

It stood beyond the lake country, north and away, stretching to a horizon the mountains had never allowed. A dry grass ocean, pale and moving under the wind. The same grass ocean he had left on the far side of the Accursed Mountains, seven weeks and a world ago. He stared at it and the shape of things moved inside him. Steppe behind; steppe ahead. As if the world had been one country all along, and nobody had told the mountains.

He was not looking at the far side of the pass. He was looking at the far side of the old wall that had held his den in its shadow.

And at the edge of that grass, where the broken ground gave way to open country, something stood.

It was two miles off, perhaps three; the clear air made the distance lie. But there was no lying about the stillness. Ten, perhaps twenty, heavily armed, standing quiet at the steppe's edge with their backs to him, facing north. They did not shift. They did not look back. Patience came off them the way heat comes off a stone in the sun—the stillness of creatures that were not hiding, but waiting.

The shoulders. He saw them from two miles away, and the shoulders were enough.

The shaved patterns caught the low light in lines too straight for fur grown wild. Orcs.

They were not his den. He could see the cuts were wrong even at this distance: different chevrons, different spacing, the marks of another Raude, a strange one. Their gear was foreign. Their waiting was aimed at something he could not see. None of it mattered.

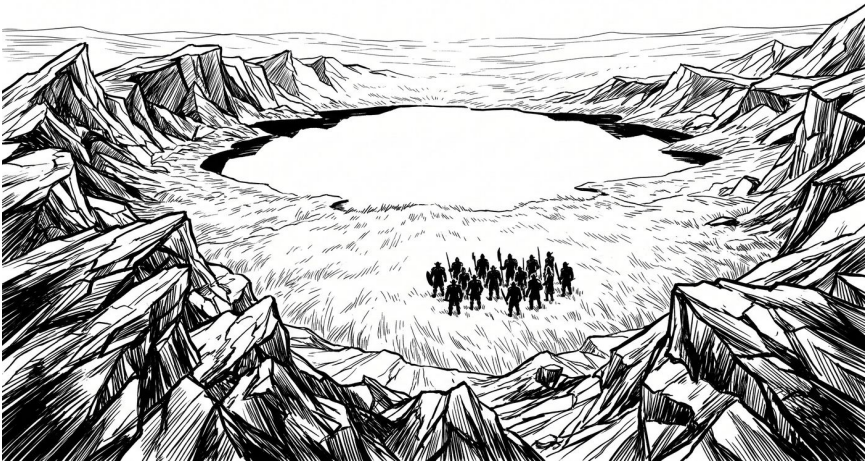
He was moving before he had decided.

Down off the rock, feet finding holds the body had seen before the mind; out of the scree, onto the long slope, through the scrub and the broken new stone, and then the grass opened under him. He crossed the open ground for the first time in seven weeks. The wind came at him out of the north, over the lake, over the troop, and it smelled of dry grass and horse and orc.

He did not call out. They had not turned. If he called, they would be real, and he was not ready for anything to be real. All he had was the walking.

One-Ear had given him the words, once, under a mountain that was not ashamed of its age: *A herd is not a place. A herd is the walking.*

Kharai walked.



Tales from the Western Reaches

A Gift, Not a Kill

A tale from the Western Reaches



Reading time: about 40 minutes

I

Uzkul crouched where the track forked and laid two fingers in the ash.

'Yesterday,' he said. 'Before the ash.'

Foss wrote it down before he knew what it meant. He was the ranking officer of the joint party, and he wrote it down first.

The old orc brushed the grey aside. Underneath, the print stood sharp-edged in a darker layer, and the night's fall lay over it like flour on a board. Under the fall, so older than the fall. Simple, once it had been shown. Most things were.

Foss kept the field book the way his father had kept the House's accounts: what he had seen on the left, what he had been told on the right. His father had never once confused the two. He entered 'made yesterday' on the right. Then he cleared a second print with his own fingers, found the same sharp edges under the same grey, and moved the entry across. Nobody remarked on it.

They had been walking since before light, five of them, a day ahead of the main camp. The other twenty-five waited where the ashfields began, counted out head by head, Castell and Coromar, so that afterwards neither realm could be said to have brought more. The counting had taken longer than the breakfast.

Four of the five answered to Castell.

The fifth had the rank.

They kept the order they had kept since the camp: Uzkul ahead, Rethka and Tav behind him, then Foss, and Serjeant Kell last with the crossbow, where he could see all three orcs at once. A man could draw conclusions from an order of march. Foss drew none, yet.

The ash lay shin-deep in the drifts and rose at every step in a fine grey smoke that worked its way into the orcs' pelts and the men's boot-seams. They wore wet cloths over their mouths and had grit between their teeth anyway. The air smelled of struck matches. Ahead, the mountain filled the east, where four weeks ago there had been no mountain at all; Foss's maps still said so. They had come in from the west so the wind would carry the summit's steam away from them, and the westerly was cold on one side of his face. Now and then something deep in the mountain gave way, and the news came up through the soles of his boots before it reached his ears.

He had begun counting his own glances at it, to shame himself out of them. It had not worked. The count stood at forty-one.

The orcs had not looked up once.

The dead orc lay at the side of the track, some days dead, half under the ash. Uzkul turned it with his foot and looked first at the left shoulder. His own people wore three lines shaved through the fur there: Tav's so new the skin showed green through the stubble, Uzkul's gone wide and ragged with years of the knife. The dead one had nothing. Uzkul looked at the rest of the body for longer.

'Not ours,' he said. 'Not theirs.'

'Theirs?' said Foss.

Uzkul tipped his chin towards the mountain without looking at it. 'Hunted.'

Kell's face did the small arithmetic of a man finding one figure fewer in a column. Foss had kept books for twenty years. He knew subtraction when he saw it.

He wrote 'hunted' on the right-hand side, and nothing else.

Tav stared too long. His hand had gone to his own shoulder. Uzkul said a word in their tongue, short and not unkind, and Tav came away.

The track tipped over a lip of black new rock and the valley opened below them.

It had been forest. The trees still stood, grey trunks without bark or needles, and the ash lay between them in drifts. At the valley's head, where it ran up under the mountain, the ground fell away into a hollow: out of the wind, a stream along one side, dead wood for a month of fires.

'There,' Kell said.

He was a hill man, and he had it worked out: shelter, water, wood. Cold nights on high ground were Castell knowledge too.

'No,' said Uzkul.

'No?'

Uzkul pointed with his chin. Below the hollow's lip, small grey shapes lay on grey ash as if set down by hand. Foss counted eleven birds. A fox lay curled at the stream's edge. None of them had a mark on it.

'Bad air lies low,' Uzkul said.

'Air is air,' said Kell.

Uzkul did not answer that. He went down onto the valley floor, crouched, and did the thing with two fingers. Then in three other places. Then he came back up.

'This is a road,' he said. 'Many have used it. Some this morning.'

'Whose road?'

Uzkul looked at the mountain then. It was the first time Foss had seen him do it.

Rethka had gone down to the stream, well below the hollow. She scooped up a handful, tasted it, spat. 'It's warm,' she said. 'It tastes of metal.' She wiped her mouth on the back of her wrist, where the fur had grown back pale in old crescents, and stood coiling and uncoiling the hound-lead at her belt.

Foss had counted every animal in the party at the main camp. There was no hound.

Both reasons went on the right-hand side of the page. He could think of one way to test the first, and did not mean to use it.

'Captain.' Kell had not raised his voice all day, and he did not raise it now. 'We have walked since before light. It will freeze up there tonight.'

True, and not the point. Kell did not mind the ridge. He minded who had chosen it.

Foss had the rank, the one thing he had out here that the other four had not, and he knew its price on a mountain to the penny. But no House he had ever served paid for knowledge in order to argue with it.

'The ridge,' he said.

'They answer to Castell, Captain.' Kell said it quietly, and not to the orcs.

'Then Castell should listen to them.'

Kell looked at him a moment longer than was polite. Then he ran his thumb along the crossbow string, as he had every hour since the camp, and followed the others up the slope. Last, with all three orcs in front of him.

The ridge was a spine of older ground, bare to the westerly: a long view down into the valley on one side, a longer one down the far slope on the other, and a way off the back. Kell walked it once, end to end, looked down both sides, and said nothing at all.

Foss had seen Ledger auditors go quiet in just that way, on finding the books in better order than they had hoped.

He measured while the light held. The marked rod went a finger and a half into the ash before it found stone. Wind westerly and steady, off the lake. When he laid his palm flat on the ground, the ground was warm, and he kept it there longer than the measurement needed. Frost would come down tonight, and the heat would rise to meet it.

We will sleep between the two.

Uzkul sat on his heels by the fire-pit and watched him, with the patience of a grown man watching a child count stones. Foss knew the look. He measured anyway.

When the fire was lit, Uzkul took out his knife and began to shave his left shoulder. The three old lines had been cut so often over the years that the skin beneath had ridged. A fourth crossed them, fainter, where the fur was coming back. It was the fourth he was cutting now, in small exact strokes, without a mirror, without looking.

Foss brushed the ash off the page with the side of his hand and entered it on the left. 'U. shaves shoulder. Purpose unknown.'

Tav had settled on a rock at his elbow, as close as he could come without touching, and was watching the pencil.

'What does it say?'

'What I saw today.'

Tav thought about that. 'All of it?'

'The parts that could be counted.'

Tav nodded, as if that were an answer, and scratched at his shoulder.

West, past the mouth of the valley, the Sunder Lake took the last of the light: new water over old country, with the tops of drowned trees standing out of it in rows. Foss put it at eleven miles across, and knew that he was wrong.

Last of all, he entered the camp. 'The ridge. Ground chosen by Uzkul.'

He looked at the name for some time.

Then he left it standing.

2

The crossbow string caught with a small, hard click.

Uzkul looked up from his pelt. He had been combing the ash out of it with his fingers, working against the lay of the fur, and the fire had burned low, and nobody had been saying anything. Now Kell was on his feet with the crossbow half raised, and Foss stood beside him with a hand on his

sword, and both men were staring past Uzkul's head at the sky above the summit.

Tav had got down from his rock. He was standing with his mouth open.

Uzkul turned to see what had found them.

Over the mountain the steam stood up red, lit from below, and dark shapes were crossing in front of it, turning in wide circles, high up. More than a man could take in at one look. When they banked, the red light came up off their wings.

Calls drifted down, thin with distance, short and harsh.

'Like hounds,' Rethka said. 'A long way off.'

There were no hounds here.

'Dragons,' Kell said. He said it the way a man says a word he has only ever heard in stories.

Foss's lips moved, stopped, and moved again. Uzkul left him to it and watched the sky.

They turned the way carrion birds turn over a carcass, but there was no carcass up there, and carrion birds did not do this. The shapes chased one another, broke off, tumbled half a turn and climbed again. Not one of them stooped. Not one of them so much as looked down. Hunting things went quiet, and kept low, and minded the wind. These were loud, and cared for nothing below them.

'They are not hunting,' Uzkul said.

'How do you know?' Kell had not lowered the crossbow.

Uzkul did not answer. He sat down with his back to the sky, and to the two men, and took up his bowl. The meat had gone cold. He ate it anyway, while behind him a man held a weapon up at the sky and waited to see what the sky would do about it. A bolt shot upwards came down again. That was the way of bolts.

Rethka sat down beside him and ate. She had not looked at the sky twice.

Kell kept the crossbow up a long time. When Uzkul finally heard the lever working again, slow and careful, he was pleased, and did not show it. A spanned bow could not be set down like a cup. The man knew his tool, even with his blood up.

'Not hunting,' Foss said, half to himself, in the voice he used for numbers, and wrote it in the book. The book would believe it when he had seen it for himself. That was fair. Uzkul would not have believed it from a book either.

The light went. The shapes did not stop. They were still turning when the dark came on, black against the red, and now and again the calls came down, like hounds on some other mountain.

The sky was theirs, the ground was ours. The elders had said it in the winters, when Uzkul was small, and he had always taken it for a way of speaking: the world shared out, each thing to its place. In the old stories the winged ones were large, but old stories made things large. That was their habit.

He looked up. The shapes went on turning.

These had come large on their own.

When the dark was full, the fires showed: below them, on the lower slopes, three clusters with dark ground between.

Uzkul had read war-camps since before Tav was born. Fires kept to their own. Where two hosts lay close, the dark between them was not empty. That was where they met.

Foss came and stood at his shoulder. His lips moved, counting, and after a while Uzkul heard the pencil.

'Three,' Uzkul said. 'Three hosts. Not one.'

'How many sit at one fire?'

'Twenty. Thirty.'

Foss was quiet, doing the sum. 'Call it thirty to a fire,' he said at last. 'It comes to thousands, all three together.' A pause. 'It's a guess.'

'A guess is honest,' Uzkul said. 'A number says you know.'

Foss did not write the sum down. Uzkul approved of that more than he would have of the number. The fires could be counted. What sat at them could not.

Foss went back to his blankets. Uzkul stayed.

Once, the orcs had moved across the world in their thousands, as one. The elders' word for it was Noi. Here were thousands, in three, and the dark between their fires was where they killed one another.

There was no word for that.

They kept a watch. Kell took the first of it, sitting up with the crossbow across his knees. Tav would not sleep. He kept sitting up to look at the sky, where the shapes turned on, black against the red, until Uzkul spoke to him in their own tongue.

'Lie down.'

'I am not tired,' Tav said, and yawned in the middle of it.

'Then lie down and practise.'

Tav lay down.

The humans slept badly. Frost settled on the blankets and heat came up through the ash beneath them, and the two men turned and turned again, like meat on a spit. Uzkul found the warm ground pleasant enough. It was like sleeping beside a banked fire.

In the small hours the wind dropped.

Uzkul had the last watch. He felt the westerly go, that had leaned on them all day, and the cold came down properly then. The mountain muttered underfoot, felt more than heard. With the air lying still, the valley's own smells came up to the ridge, the ones the wind had been carrying off all night: ash, the warm metal of the stream, the sulphur that never left.

Under them, something new.

Sweat, and old fur, and iron, and blood that was not old. Many bodies, moving, coming up the valley. He smelled them a long while before he

heard them, and what he heard then was only the soft hiss of feet in ash, more feet than he could have counted, had he tried.

Orcs. Many of them.

He woke Rethka first, then Tav: a hand on the shoulder, and they came up out of sleep without a sound.

Then he crossed to where Kell lay, crouched down beside him, and put his hand over the man's mouth.



3

Kell woke with a hand over his mouth.

His own hand went for the knife at his hip and had it half out before the rest of him was awake. Fur against his lips. The smell of orc, close and warm. Then Uzkul's eyes, a hand's breadth from his own, and a single finger raised between them.

Kell let the knife back down.

Uzkul took the hand away and pointed with it, past the dead fire, to where the crest of the ridge cut the grey. Rethka and Tav were already flat there, two shapes against the light. Foss was crawling to join them with the field book under one arm.

Kell rolled out of the blanket and left the frost on it. The crossbow lay beside him where he had set it down, the string let down by hand at the end of his watch. He took it and the lever and went up the slope on his elbows.

The valley lay grey under grey. The light had not yet decided what colour anything was. Down on the floor, among the dead trunks, something was moving that he took at first for the ash itself, stirring in a wind that had not come back.

Orcs. Running.

Thirty, perhaps forty. They ran the way people run who have been running for a long time, bunched and strung out at once, and some of them ran badly. Two were being carried. The rest carried what they had: bundles, spears, a pot swinging on a strap.

'Not a tribe,' Uzkul said, so low it was hardly more than breath. 'A piece of one.'

Then, behind them, the valley moved.

The war-band came out of the dead forest in a line that was not a line. Kell's eye did what it had been taught and counted by tens. Two hundred. More. They ran in a crescent with the horns forward, and the horns were

fast and the centre slow, and the whole shape came up the valley like a hand closing.

He knew it. He had done it himself, on a smaller scale, with sheep-thieves on the high pastures behind Castell. You did not chase. You drove.

The quarry were being driven up the valley, towards the hollow at its head.

Towards the place where he had wanted to sleep.

The hunters' pelts were pale from brow to shoulder, a grey that was the ash's own grey, so that when they stood still they were not there and when they moved they were everywhere. 'One of the three,' Uzkul breathed. 'Whitened.' He did not say which.

The end came where the valley narrowed between two banks of drift. Ten of the hunted turned there and stood.

It was not a stand. Kell had seen stands. It was ten who had decided that the others should have a hundred more paces. They met the horns of the crescent with spears out, and the horns did not slow. Kell saw it as he would have seen it drawn on a slate: the line, the shock, the line gone. The centre of the crescent arrived and walked over the place.

The sound came up after. A thin cry, a clatter, then nothing.

The hunters did not stop. Some knelt over the dead and rose again with spears and knives that had not been theirs, and the crescent went on up the valley with barely a bend in it.

Kell had the crossbow under his hand. He had not spanned it. At this range it would have been a gesture, and he did not make gestures.

The last of the hunted reached the lip of the hollow. Twenty now. Fewer. They went over the edge and down, out of the wind, into shelter, and Kell felt the thing in his chest that a man feels when someone else reaches cover.

The war-band stopped.

They stopped on the lip, in a long curve, and did not go down. They stood with their spears grounded and looked into the hollow like men at the edge of a pit. Nobody threw anything. Nobody went in.

Kell waited for the hunted to come up the far side.

They did not come up.

He waited longer. The light strengthened, and the ash in the hollow lay still, and the whitened orcs stood on the lip and waited with him. Then, one by one, they turned. The crescent unmade itself into a column, and the column went away up the valley towards the mountain.

Nobody had touched the last of them. Nobody had needed to.

Bad air lies low.

He had said, air is air. Twelve hours ago, in good light, with the stream running and the wood stacked there for the taking, he had said it, and he had meant it.

Kell took his eyes off the valley and put them on the three beside him.

Rethka lay with one hand flat on Tav's shoulder, pressing. Not holding him down; he was not trying to rise. Pressing the way you press a hound that is shaking, so that it knows where it is. Tav breathed through his teeth, in and out, in and out, with his eyes on the hollow.

Uzkul had not moved at all. Not a finger. He might have been part of the ridge.

The three lines on his shoulder showed even in this light, and the bar across them, re-cut last night at the fire, showed sharpest of all.

Kell knew what the bar was. Every serjeant in Castell knew. It had been cut into every Ordruk shoulder in the yard below the keep, with the King's officers watching, and the fur had begun growing back the same week, and the Ordruk had been re-cutting it by hand ever since. He had taken that for pride.

A small tribe. A large one behind it.

The band that had fallen on the Ordruk within sight of Castell's walls had not come from these hosts, or not that anyone knew. It had been smaller and nearer. But it had said the same thing, and the record had written down what it said, and he had read it on a day when the refused tribe was still camped outside the north gate.

Small tribes are not welcome.

He had read it as a threat to Castell. It was that. It was also a sentence about the people it had been said to, and he had not read it that way once.

That was why they had sworn. Not to a king, or not first. To a wall.

Not the first of many. The last of few.

Below, the valley was quiet. The dead lay where the drift narrowed, ten shapes the ash had already begun to claim, and no wind had come yet to move the grey over them. It would. By tonight they would be part of the road.

Beside him Foss had the book open on the ash. The pencil was moving. Kell watched it and understood that the man was counting the dead, and felt his stomach turn.

Then he saw the pencil stop, and go back a page, and draw two short lines from the right-hand side of a column to the left.

He did not know what that meant. He knew it was not indifference. It was a man who could not look away, and had been raised to hold something in his hand while he looked.

Uzkul came up onto his knees. 'They will not come back this way today.' He did not say how he knew. He stood.

They all stood, stiff with cold, and shook the frost off, and Kell found himself first at the place where the path went down off the crest. He went over without thinking. The others came behind him, and he heard Uzkul's tread at his back, and knew whose it was.

He noticed it the way you notice a stone in your boot: an hour later, on the flat, with the mountain in front of him and the tread still there.

He did not change it.



4

'That one,' Tav said.

The sky had been full since mid-morning, the same shapes turning over the summit in the same wide circles. He had watched them until his neck ached. Then one of them broke away, lower than the rest, and slid out of the crowd the way a pebble slips out of a handful.

'It is coming down,' said Rethka.

It did not come down the way Tav had thought it would. It fell in long turns, wings spread and still, riding the heat that rose off the mountain the way a leaf swims on a current. Twice it dropped and caught itself. Then it crossed the ridge-line, and the turn became a tumble, and it landed badly on a spur of black new rock two hundred paces along the ridge.

For a moment it looked wrong all over: wings out, head up, haunches too low. Then it gathered itself in with one movement, the way a person rises after slipping on ice, and sat looking out over the valley below it.

Nobody spoke. Foss had stopped with the book open and the pencil still. Kell's crossbow had come up on its own.

The dragon looked at them.

It was the size of a pony, or a large dog grown past its proper measure, and the colour of smoke. Its head cocked, then the other way. Its nostrils worked at the air between them, and Tav felt the westerly on his own face and understood with a jolt that they were upwind, and that the question was whether they were food.

'Is it hunting?' Kell said.

'It is curious,' said Uzkul.

Tav's heart was beating the way it beat when the hunting parties came home and the first drum started. The thing up on the rock was not large, not from here. But it had dropped out of a sky full of its own kind, and he could not make the two fit together. The morning lay only hours behind them, grey and full of the ash of the valley floor, and what he felt now had no room for that. Then it did, and the two sat in his chest with the heartbeat between them.

The dragon came closer.

It did not come straight. It came in loops: out over the valley, round, in towards the camp, and back, each circuit shorter than the last. It watched

them the whole time. Sometimes it skittered sideways as if a stone had moved under its foot, though the rock was bare.

'Nice dog,' Rethka said, under her breath. 'Tail loose. Weight back. Good.'

'Good?' said Foss.

'Mouth shut, eyes soft, no hackle. It's not afraid.'

'It should be afraid,' Kell said. 'We're armed.'

Rethka did not look at him. 'It knows we are armed. It can see where you point.'

The dragon had stopped at a place in its loop where the rock ended and the ash began, perhaps forty paces out. It sat. Then it stretched its neck towards them without moving its feet, and sniffed, head high, and the first calls from above came down over the ridge like hounds a long way off.

Tav was not aware of getting up. Later he would not be able to say how he had come to be standing, only that he had been squatting with his hands on his knees and then he was walking, not fast, straight at it, with his heart pounding at the back of his teeth and nothing in his head but the shape of it, the way the neck set into the body, the way the tail lay still along the rock.

It had been close enough to see.

Then it was gone.

There was a scuff, a clatter of wings, and the rock was empty, and Rethka's hand was in his belt and she was hauling him backwards with a grip he knew from his childhood, the one you did not argue with.

'Not like that,' she said. 'Never straight at it. Not like that.'

Her voice was flat. She was the only one of the three of them who had not moved, except Uzkul, who had not looked away from the sky.

'It will come back,' Tav said. His own voice sounded strange to him, thin and far off.

'It hasn't decided about us yet.'

She let go of the belt. Had not, he noticed, looked at him.

'Sit,' she said. He sat.

She told him then. Sideways, she said. Slow. Eyes on its feet, not its eyes. You let it come to you. That is the whole thing. You wait, sideways, slow, and let it come.

'It is a young hound meeting strangers,' she said, and she was looking at the empty rock now, and for a moment there was something in her voice that was not instruction. 'It wants to know what we are. It doesn't know if we're something to run from, and it's going to keep asking until it knows.'

'It knows we are not food,' Tav said.

'It knows we have hands,' said Rethka. 'That is not the same thing.'

Behind them, Kell had not lowered the crossbow. He was standing as he had stood the night before, tracking nothing, with the stock against his cheek.

'It can see where you look,' Rethka said, without turning.

'It's gone,' Kell said.

'So are you,' she said, 'when you point at me like that.'

The crossbow came down. Not quickly. But it came down, and Kell looked at the ground.

On the spur the dragon had found the edge. It turned once, the way a big animal does in a small space, then it ran for the drop, and opened its wings at the last breath, and fell out of sight beyond the ridge-line. A long moment later Tav saw it rise beyond the valley, winging out, growing smaller, and the shapes above opened to let it back in among them.

'It'll come back,' he said.

Nobody answered.

He found that he had been smiling, and that he could not remember when it had begun. The morning rose in him then, grey and orderly, and he set it down again carefully, the way you set down a bowl you do not want to spill. Not now. Not yet.

He watched the sky until the one shape among the rest was gone, and the wind came back cold on one side of his face, and Rethka sat down beside him with the hound-lead coiled in her lap.

She did not say anything. After a while she handed him a strip of dried meat, and he took it, and they sat with their backs to the ridge and watched the mountain breathe steam away from them, and the two men watched the orcs watch the sky.

5

'A calf,' Uzkul said.

Foss could see the dragon. He could not yet see what it carried. It was a long way down the slope on the valley side, a smoke-coloured shape against the ash, and it moved wrong: on its feet, head low, in a walk instead of a glide, with something red-brown hanging from its jaws.

He had the book open already. He wrote 'a calf' on the right.

It climbed. The afternoon was well on, and the light lay flat across the slope, and the dragon came up through it a step at a time, dragging its burden. Twice it set the thing down and stood over it, breathing. Then it took a new grip and came on.

It was slow. Foss timed it by his own pulse, and stopped when the number began to matter to him more than the animal.

Kell had the crossbow up. He had spanned it when the shape first showed below; Foss had heard the lever go, and the string catch, and had not looked round. Now the stock sat against the serjeant's cheek and the point of the bolt moved as the dragon moved, a little ahead of it, the way a man leads a bird.

Foss made his own assessment, because it was the one thing he could do. Meat, carried up a slope, to a place where the animal had spent the morning watching five creatures of two other kinds. Predators cached. Predators

carried meat home. A dragon that had studied them since mid-morning and then gone to fetch dinner: he could follow that sum as well as anyone.

Are we the larder?

Uzkul, crouched at the edge of the camp, had his elbows on his knees and his hands loose between them. Rethka had the hound-lead out and was running the loop through her fingers, over and over. Neither had a weapon in hand. It was not proof. Foss wrote it on the left anyway: 'U. and R. do not arm.'

The dragon came up over the shoulder of the ridge with the calf dragging behind it, stopped twenty paces off, and dropped it.

Then it backed away. Five paces, six, watching them. It settled onto its haunches with its wings folded and its tail laid along the ash, and waited.

Nobody moved. Foss moved 'a calf' across.

It was red-brown, a few weeks old, and half-eaten. The hide was gone along one flank and the neck hung wrong. Where the jaws had held it the hide was black, not with blood but blackened, the way leather goes when it has been in a fire. And the grass beneath it, the few grey-green blades that had come up through the ash since the fall, was going dark in a ring that Foss could watch widen.

The smell reached them. Sharp, like the lye vats in the dyers' quarter at home.

'Where does a calf come from,' Kell said, 'out here?'

'Down the valley,' said Uzkul. 'There were farms before the mountain. The cattle are still there. Nobody owns them now.'

Foss thought of the farmers, and stopped. He wrote 'unowned cattle in the valley' on the right, where it belonged.

The rod was in his hand. He had picked it up without deciding to, out of long habit: a thing had arrived in front of him, and things were for measuring. He was two steps towards the calf when Rethka said, 'No.'

One word, not raised. He stopped.

She got up and went to the calf, not straight but round, and crouched a little way from it with a length of dead branch from the firewood. She touched the branch to the wet along the flank where the jaws had been. Held it. Drew it back.

The wood where it had touched was darkening. By the time she had walked it over to Foss the tip was black and the black was creeping up the grain.

'Poison to touch,' she said. 'Poison to eat.'

Foss looked at the rod in his hand. Six marks to the finger, his father's marks, worn smooth. He laid it down on the ground behind him.

'Half a calf,' Kell said.

He had not lowered the bow. But he was looking at the meat, and Foss understood the look, because he had been fighting the same arithmetic: they were on three-quarter rations, the main camp on two-thirds, and Coromar had been short of grain since the sea rose and stayed. Fresh meat, twenty paces away. Half a calf.

'It eats it,' Kell said.

'It's a dragon,' said Rethka.

Kell was silent.

The dragon watched them. Its head was low and cocked. Now and then its nostrils flared and it looked from one of them to the next, as if it were counting.

'It is not a kill,' Rethka said.

'It looks like one to me.'

'A kill you keep.' She had gone back to her place and sat, with the black-tipped branch beside her in the ash and the hound-lead still in her fingers. 'You stand over it. You eat what you can and drag the rest off where nobody will find it. You do not carry it up a hill and set it down in front of five strangers and step back.' She nodded at it, once. 'It leaves a gift, not a kill.'

'A gift,' Foss said.

'A young hound will do it. Something it caught. It brings it to you and puts it down and waits.'

'For what?'

'To see what you do.'

Foss looked at the calf, and at the ring in the grass, wider now, and at the dragon sitting on its haunches with its tail still.

'We can't eat it,' he said.

'No.'

'Can we refuse it?'

Rethka considered that. 'You can kick it away,' she said. 'You can shout at the dog and shut the door. Then it knows what you are.'

Kell said something under his breath about Flood and ruin. Nobody answered him.

They talked it through, briefly and in low voices, while the dragon sat and the smell of lye thickened and the light came round to the west. Nobody could take it. Nobody could send it back. Uzkul said, 'Leave it,' and Rethka said, 'Leave it where it was put,' and Kell said nothing, and in the end that was the whole of the decision. The calf lay where it had been dropped. Nobody went near it, nobody turned a back on it, and the dragon watched.

Foss found the House rising in him, unasked. A thing given and not answered was not a gift. It was a debt, and it sat on the books until it was paid. His father had taught him that before he had taught him to add.

He did not write it down. He would come back to it.

Instead he wrote, on the left, in the space under the name of the camp: 'One calf. Not for eating.'

He looked at the line. It was correct. It was complete. There was nothing in it that had been counted.

The dragon waited. The five of them waited. The wind moved the ash a little and laid a thin skin of it over the calf's hide, and the ring in the grass stopped growing.

Then Tav stood up.

6

Tav stood up, and unbuckled his knife, and held it out to Rethka without looking at her.

'Sit down,' Kell said.

Tav didn't.

Rethka took the knife and said nothing. Uzkul, crouched at the edge of the camp, said nothing. Foss had shut the book. The boy was going out to the dragon with empty hands, and the only person on the ridge who had spoken against it was Kell, and he had been ignored by all four of the others without a word between them.

He looked at Rethka. She was watching Tav, and there was nothing in her face that wanted him stopped.

The crossbow had been spanned since the calf came up the slope. The bolt lay in the groove, broad-headed, and its point had been on the dragon the better part of an hour. Kell settled the stock into his cheek and looked along it.

The dragon had come to its feet when Tav stood. It stood with its weight back and its head cocked, watching the boy and nobody else, its nostrils working. Its tail lay along the ash behind it and did not move at all, and Kell understood that the rest of them had ceased to exist for it.

Tav walked. Not at it — on a long slant, sideways on, slow, his eyes down near its feet. He did it exactly as he had been taught. Kell had seen grown soldiers fail at less, under less.

The boy talked as he went, low and without a break, in his own tongue. Kell did not know a word of it. He knew the tone. Any man who had gentled a horse knew it: you talked so the beast could learn the sound of you, and you did not stop, and your hands stayed where it could see them.

Tav crossed the line of the bolt. Kell moved his feet without being told, two short steps to the left, and opened the angle again. The boy kept walking, and crossed it a second time, and Kell shifted once more, and the angle closed anyway, the way it had to, because the boy was walking straight into the middle of everything.

Ten paces short of the dragon, Tav crouched down onto his heels. The talking went on, softer.

Then a word came clear out of it. The same word again.

'Kâsh.'

It was said the way a name is said. To it, not at it. The boy had given it a name. That was what the afternoon had been for.

The dragon looked at him for a long moment. Then it folded its legs beneath it and sat, the way a dog sits, and laid its tail along the ash, and was still.

Tav's hands had not moved. There had been no sign, no command. The thing had chosen.

Behind Kell, Foss had not opened the book.

Kell's eye kept the tally it was trained to keep. Twenty-odd paces. A spanned bow and a broad-headed bolt. Through the eye, perhaps, if the eye would hold still for it. Through the hide anywhere else, a wound. Either way a hurt dragon on the ridge among the five of them, and over the summit the sky still full of its kind, turning and turning, and the boy kneeling out in the open with nothing in his hands.

The only dangerous thing on the ridge was in his own.

He put his thumb against the bolt, the way he had put it against the string every hour of the march, and drew the bolt back out of the groove

and set it in the quiver, point down, without looking. The bow hung cocked and empty in his grip. It would have to be let down by hand, later, slowly, against the lever.

There was time.

Uzkul was watching him. Not the dragon — Kell's hands. Their eyes met across the ash, and the old orc said nothing, and after a moment looked back at the boy.

Nobody said anything.

The dragon yawned.

Its jaws opened the length of a man's forearm, pale inside, and it had a great many teeth.

Kell flinched. Beside him Rethka's shoulders came up, and even Uzkul moved, a small thing, quickly mastered.

Tav didn't. He was grinning like a boy at a fair.



7

Foss came out to him on his knees.

That was the first thing Tav noticed, and he nearly laughed: the ranking officer of the joint party crawling across the ash on all fours because he had seen an orc do it sideways and slow, and did not know which part of it mattered. He arrived at Tav's elbow and stayed low, and the dragon watched him come and did not move.

'What does it want?' Foss whispered.

'Nothing,' said Tav. 'It gave.'

Foss was quiet. Ten paces off, Kâsh shifted its weight from one foot to the other and back and settled again.

'Then it's owed,' Foss said.

He said it the way Uzkul said *bad air lies low*: not an opinion, a fact about the world. Tav looked at him sideways. The man's face was grey with ash and quite serious, and there was a pencil behind his ear that he had forgotten.

'Rethka,' Foss said, without raising his voice. 'How?'

Behind them Rethka took a moment. When she spoke it was in the flat voice she had used on Tav that morning, and Tav found he did not mind hearing it used on somebody else.

'Put it down between you and it. Step back. Do not look straight at it while you do it.'

'That's all?'

'That is all there is.'

Foss reached into his coat and brought out his ration bag and untied it with fingers that were not steady. He took out a strip of the dried meat, dark and hard, the same stuff they had all been chewing since the main camp. Tav had watched him eat the day before. He had cut his strip in half and put one half back.

He looked at the strip for a moment, then took a second one and laid it beside the first. Then he put the second one back.

Tav bit the inside of his cheek.

There was a flat stone in the ash between them and the dragon, a hand's breadth across, grey on grey. Foss went to it sideways, on his knees, with his eyes down, and set the strip of meat on it, and straightened it with one finger so that it lay square to the edge. He did it the way a man lays out coins on a counter, one by one, so that the other party can count them

without touching. Then he backed away, still on his knees, still not looking, and stopped beside Tav.

It was funny. It was also not, and Tav could not have said where the one turned into the other. A human, on his knees in the ash, paying a debt to an animal in the only manner he knew, because he had been told it was owed. Tav had not known they could be like that.

Kâsh looked at the stone.

Then at Foss. Then at Tav, longest.

Its neck went out. The feet stayed planted where they were, four smoke-grey feet in the grey, and the neck stretched and stretched towards the stone like a dog that has decided how close it will come and will not come one step nearer than that. The nostrils worked over the meat. The mouth opened, and Tav saw the teeth again and did not flinch this time, and the strip was gone.

It chewed twice, if that. Swallowed. Looked at them.

Nobody breathed.

Then it turned, all at once, the way it had turned on the spur that morning, and ran for the edge of the ridge with its wings half open and its feet throwing ash. At the drop it went over. Tav's stomach went with it. A long moment; then the wings opened wide below the ridge-line and it was up, gliding out over the valley in the last light, turning towards the mountain.

Beside him Foss had the book open. Tav had not seen him take it out. The pencil moved once across the page, a single line from the right-hand side to the left, and stopped. Foss looked at what he had drawn and shut the book.

Tav had no idea what it meant. He did not ask.

He watched the shape climb. It rode the heat off the mountain in long slow circles, higher each time, growing smaller, until it slid in among the others turning there against the red.

He could not tell which one it was any more.

The calf lay where it had been put, with its skin of ash. The ring in the grass had stopped growing and gone black. In the half-dark the smell of lye was worse than in daylight.

'Burn it,' Kell said.

'No,' said Uzkul. 'Smoke carries. There are three hosts below.'

Kell said nothing to that. He had the crossbow across his knees and the lever on it, and Tav heard the ratchet go, click by click, as he let the string down by hand, slow, the way you let a heavy thing down a rope. When it was done he set the bow aside and stood up.

'Then dig,' he said.

They dug. The ash came away easily; it had not had time to settle into anything. Rethka and Uzkul scraped the hollow a little way off from the camp, a body's length long and half that deep, and Kell went to the firewood and came back with two dead poles, each as long as a man, and gave one to Tav without a word.

They put the poles against the calf's flank, Kell on one and Tav on the other, and leaned. It slid. It was heavier than it looked and softer, and it rolled into the hollow with a sound Tav did not want to hear again. Rethka pushed the ash back over it with the side of her foot. Nobody touched it. Nobody had, since it came up the slope in a mouth.

They stood a moment at the edge, the two of them, with the poles still in their hands.

'A dead calf becomes a new calf,' Tav said. It was what you said. He had said it over goats and once over a dog and once over his mother's brother, and it came out of him now without his deciding.

Kell looked at the grave. 'The soul is a traveller,' he said.

Neither of them explained. Tav turned the human's words over and could not make them fit anything he knew, and could not make them fit nothing either. Perhaps it was the same thing in a different mouth. Perhaps

it was a different thing that only sounded the same. He did not decide. Kell laid his pole down beside the grave and went back to the fire, and Tav laid his beside it.

The flat stone was still out on the ash where Foss had left it. Tav went out to it sideways, from habit, though there was nothing there to be sideways for. Where the dragon's mouth had been the stone was stained dark, a wet-looking patch the size of a palm, and when he bent close the smell came up sharp.

He turned it over with his foot, stained side down, so that nobody would set a hand on it in the dark.

Then he stood a while longer with his back to the fire and looked up at the summit, where the steam stood red and the shapes went round and round, and tried to find the one that was his.

8

'A dog,' said the Castell commander.

He said it flat, the way a man says a figure he does not believe but cannot fault. He sat on the far side of the fire with his gauntlets off, rolling a ring round and round on one finger, and the firelight came and went on it.

'A dog, sir,' Foss said. 'In its manners. Not in its teeth.'

They had come down off the mountain that morning, five where five had gone up, and the march back had taken the rest of the day through the drifts with wet cloths over their mouths. The main camp lay where they had left it at the edge of the ashfields: twenty-five men, a week's supplies, and a fire a man could sit at without first counting who stood behind him. The Coromar factor sat beside the commander, a small neat man with a cord of counters in his lap.

'From the beginning,' the factor said. 'If you please, Captain.'

Foss gave it in the order he had set down. The tribes first: three great hosts at war in the ash, in the thousands, hunting the smaller groups. He told the valley in the fewest words he had. The words did not improve it. He told the hollow: the dead birds, the fox, the bad air that lay low and killed without a mark, and the hunters who had known it and used it. Then the dragons, turning in the mountain's heat by day and by night.

'How many?' the commander asked.

'Not counted, sir.'

He heard himself say it, and heard no apology in his own voice. He had counted what could be counted.

'Where did they come from?' the factor asked.

'I could not learn.'

The factor slid a counter along the cord, which Foss had not expected; apparently an honest ignorance counted for something, in a ledger.

'And the young one,' the commander said. 'The dog.'

'It came to us three times. The third time it brought a calf and set it down in front of us and stepped back.' Foss gave them the blackened hide, and the grass dying in a ring, and the stick gone dark at the tip. 'Poison to touch and to eat. We left it where it was put. It watched us leave it.'

'What did it want?'

'Nothing, sir. It gave.'

'And what did you give it?'

'A strip of ration meat.'

The factor slid another counter. Foss had served Houses all his life. He knew a closed account when he saw one approved.

Then the commander turned his head.

'Serjeant. The Ordruk.'

Three words, and everything that hung on them hung in the air over the fire. The three orcs sat a little back from the light. None of them had spoken during the report. Nobody had asked them to.

Kell got to his feet. He looked at the commander, and not at the orcs, and said what he had to say in the fewest words he had.

'They chose the ground.'

The commander waited.

'We'd be lying in that valley,' Kell said, and sat down.

The ring had stopped turning. Nobody said anything for a moment. Then the two leaders drew apart from the fire and spoke together, low, with the night around them, and came back, and the factor said the expedition would decide in the morning.

Later, when the camp had gone quiet, Foss opened the field book at the fire and worked backwards through it.

He turned each page and checked the right-hand column. 'Made yesterday.' Crossed. 'Not hunting.' Crossed. 'A road.' 'Bad air.' 'Hunted.' Crossed and crossed and crossed. Page after page of the orcs' knowledge, each entry with its single line drawn across to the left, each one paid off by his own eyes. He reached the first page, and the right-hand column of the whole book stood empty.

He dipped the pen and wrote, in the report: 'The statements of the Ordruk guides are entered throughout as observed. They were confirmed in every particular.'

The House his father had kept would have written it shorter. *Their credit is good.*

He did not write that. It was not a House.

'What does it say?'

Tav had come up without a sound and was perched on a pack at his elbow, watching the pencil the way he had watched it since the first evening.

'It says what I saw.'

'All of it?'

'The parts that could be counted.' Foss found the line and read it aloud. 'One young dragon, which the scout Tav named Kash — ash-pup.'

'Kâsh,' said Tav. 'Ash. Aash. Long.'

Foss looked at the word. Then he dipped the pen and corrected the ink, and the circumflex arrived on the page, small and exact, and the name sat properly in the report of the joint expedition of Castell and Coromar, between the calf and the meat.

Tav read it over his shoulder, though Foss did not know whether he could read. He seemed satisfied. He went away to his blanket as quietly as he had come.

Foss dipped the pen once more and wrote the last of it.

'Recommend the advance continue. Recommend the same guides.'

Tales from the Western Reaches

The Scarf

A tale from the Western Reaches



Reading time: about 70 minutes

Autumn, 2 After the Flood. The Valleys of Nepor.

I

The doe came out of the Elvenwood just before first light, picking her way over the boundary as though there were no boundary, which for her there wasn't.

Elgin Farras had been standing in the alder scrub above the stream for the best part of an hour by then, cold in the particular way of a man who has chosen not to move. The wind came down-valley, which was right. The light was coming up, which was also right, though slowly. He watched the doe test the air, put her head down, test it again. Behind her, at the very edge of the trees, a fawn unfolded itself out of the shadow and came after her on legs that had not quite agreed to the arrangement.

No shot, then. He eased his string hand down and let them be.

The boundary here was three old oaks, spaced along the eaves, each with the elf-mark cut into it a long time back and the bark grown thick over the sign. Past them, the law of the Lord of Nepor stopped and the wood's own law began. Nobody felled in there, nobody grazed a goat in there, and if you wanted anything from the elves you asked in Aurec town and waited, sometimes a year. They were, on the whole, the best neighbours a valley could have, a thought Elgin had more than once, usually while touching the nearest oak on his way down to the hunt – out of habit, the way other men touched shrine-posts, though he would have been hard put to say what he was asking for. Luck, probably.

There was a legend in the valley that the Farras line had elf blood in it, that his grandmother was not entirely human. Elgin liked the legend enormously. It made him a quarter elf, by his own arithmetic, and he kept a private list of evidence: the tracking, the bow, the way he sometimes knew

where a deer would be before the deer had decided. It was probably nonsense. He touched the oak anyway.

The buck came out a hundred paces further along, old, grey-faced, alone. One arrow, behind the shoulder, and it was over quickly. Elgin gralloched him where he fell, hung what he could not carry out of fox-reach, and shouldered the rest for home.

Eavesend was a dozen houses where the middle valley gave way to the eaves, too small for any map, and the Farras stead was the last of them. His mother was salting fish at the side table and did not look up, which was her way. His grandmother was in the kitchen room with Gudrun Sarl, a farmwife from down the lane, and the air in there had the feel of a sentence being passed.

'A charm,' Grandma Farras was saying, in the tone of a woman reading out a death warrant. 'For the star.'

'It gets bigger every night,' Gudrun said. 'Dreams preserve us, but there it is, bigger. And they say –'

'They say.'

'They say it's a sign. A brand, like. From the judgement.' She dropped her voice on the last word, as if the judgement might be listening.

Grandma Farras – Hildr Farras in the tax book, Grandma to the whole valley, and feared in at least three others – looked at her for a moment. She had been a beauty once and still carried it, which did not make her impatience any easier to be on the wrong end of. She had been angry for as long as Elgin had known her, angry at stupidity principally, and since the Waters the stupidity had been coming up the valley like meltwater. Not the Flood itself; Nepor had got off with a wet year. What came after was the trouble: the old order gone, the roads nervous, men preaching fire at the forest edge, and now a new star for people to be frightened of. Elgin did not pretend to understand it. His grandmother understood it, loudly and at

length, and he admired her for it without reservation, which he suspected put him in a small minority.

'Here's what I have for you, Gudrun Sarl,' his grandmother said, and reached a jar down from the shelf. 'A charm against the star I have not got. Nobody has, and anyone who sells you one is a thief. Salve for the cow I have got, because cracked teats are a real thing, which is more than anyone can say for brands in the sky. Rub it in morning and night. Take her off the wet ground. And sleep in your bed at night instead of standing in the yard looking up – the star will manage without an audience.'

'But they say –'

'Stop listening to men who earn their bread from your being frightened. Off you go. And Gudrun.' The farmwife paused in the doorway with the jar clutched to her. 'Water your milk a little less. People notice.'

The door shut. Elgin discovered a great interest in unshouldering the deer, but not quickly enough.

'And you can stop grinning.' His grandmother did not turn round from the shelf. 'Stood in the alders an hour, I'll wager, watched a doe with a fawn go by, and came home with an old buck you could have shot from the door.'

She could not have known about the doe. There was no way she could have known about the doe. Elgin hung the buck and said nothing, which was what you said.

After supper he went out to see to the hanging. The night had come up clear, and there it was, low in the east over the dark line of the Elvenwood: the new star, with a tail on it now, unless he was imagining the tail.

Brighter than yesterday.

It was a beautiful thing, if you didn't think about what it might mean. Elgin tried not to think about what it might mean, with the usual success.

2

The wind changed an hour before dusk and cost him a deer.

He had been on the stag since mid-afternoon – a yearling, fat on lower-pasture grass, moving unhurried along the stream where the meadow gave way to the eaves. Elgin had the range and was down to his breathing when the wind swung round off the forest and brought smoke with it, and under the smoke, singing. The stag's head came up. It went into the alders without hurry and without fear, and that was that.

Smoke, though. Smoke at the eaves was accident or trespass, and both of those were Farras business. He went after it with his temper for company.

The fire was at the Old Hearth, which did not surprise him once he thought about it. The ruin stood a bowshot from the boundary oaks: four walls of tumbled stone out of the drowned age, black with old weather, and at one end a hearthstone the size of a cart, the only thing in the place that had kept its purpose. Somebody had built tonight's fire in it, a big fire, and round it stood forty people singing something he didn't know.

The singing stopped while he was still deciding whether to go home. A man climbed up onto the hearthstone – Brother Callun, the fire-folk's speaker, grey and spare and ordinary, a man you'd pass at market without a glance. Elgin knew what everyone knew about him: the wet years had taken his wife, and the fire had answered when nothing else did. It didn't make what followed better. If anything it made it worse, though Elgin could not have said why.

'You remember the rain,' Callun said. He spoke quietly, and the quiet carried. 'The rain that didn't stop. The water in the door. Some of us lost more than doors. That was judgement, brothers and sisters. The world had earned it.'

Elgin stood at the edge of the light and glared. He had lost a deer to these people. He wanted them to know he was there.

'And now look east at nightfall.' Callun's arm came up, and there it was, low over the dark line of the Elvenwood, the tail clear tonight, no imagining about it. 'There's a brand in the sky and it grows. The fire set it there the way you'd brand a beast. Marked. And ask yourselves what came among us before the water came. Ask what lives next door, under the trees, answering to no law and no lord and no faith, watching us, waiting.' He let it sit. 'The foreign brought the Flood down on us. And the foreign is still here.'

Faces turned. Somebody's lantern shifted, and the light found Elgin – a valley boy with a bow on his shoulder and fury on his face, in full view, not moving. A murmur went through the singers. Near the front a big netmender Elgin half-knew from market days looked round and then quickly didn't. Elgin would rather have had the hard look.

The singing started up again, and Elgin stayed. Going home now would feel like being sent.

It was at the fire's edge, a little apart from the rest, that he saw the girl.

She was about his own age, dark-haired, her face lit from below and doing nothing at all. Everyone around her had their mouths open and their eyes shut. She wasn't singing.

She looked up – across the fire, across the ruin, straight at him. The look lasted a breath, maybe two.

He forgot, for the length of it, that he had ever wanted a deer.



3

He knew her for fire-folk before she spoke, because nobody else in the valley wore mourning grey when they weren't mourning anyone.

She was standing on the far bank with her feet in the water, skirts kirtled up like a fishwife, and for a long moment neither of them moved. Elgin had a string of grayling and his wading boots on. She had a shawl she'd plainly grabbed in a hurry and a look on her face he recognised from every deer he'd ever surprised in a clearing: weighing the distance home.

'You're the boy who glared,' she said.

'You're the girl who didn't sing.'

Something happened at the corners of her mouth, not quite a smile, not not one. She picked her way over the stream stones towards him, wobbled on the second one, caught herself, and sat down on the bank a courteous distance away, the way you'd sit near a strange dog you had hopes of.

'Senja Hollev,' she said. 'Of the Aurec Hollevs. The net-mender's daughter.'

'Elgin Farras. Eavesend.'

'I know. Everyone knows the Farras stead.' She said it neutrally, but he heard what sat under it – the feared grandmother, the legend, all of it – and she heard him hear it, because she added, 'I didn't mean anything by it.'

'You can,' said Elgin. 'We're proud of it.'

She was out, she told him – not straight away, but on the third thing they talked about – because there was singing tonight at the Old Hearth, and she had told her mother her head hurt, which was half true, and had come down to the stream instead, which was the other half of the cure. Elgin cleaned his grayling while she talked, because his hands wanted something to do that wasn't him.

The star came up early, as it did now. They watched it come clear over the dark line of the trees.

'Brother Callun says it's a brand,' she said. 'That the fire set it there. Marked, like a beast.'

'My grandmother says it's a star.'

'And which is it?'

Elgin considered. He was nineteen and had a girl sitting next to him asking what he thought the sky meant, and he understood, dimly, that there were better and worse answers. 'It's a star,' he said. 'My grandmother's never wrong about things you can check.'

That got the almost-smile again. 'My father says the world's ending.'

'What do you say?'

She picked up a flat stone, turned it over, put it down without throwing it. 'I think it might be changing,' she said. 'Ending is easier. Ending, you're off the hook. Changing, you have to decide things.' Then, as if she'd said too much, she told him about the rumours from over the eastern mountains – a pedlar in Aurec town swearing that dragons had crossed the high passes, that whole goat herds had gone missing off the summer pastures, that a man in the next valley had seen one come down out of the sky at dusk, big as a mill-wheel. Elgin said his grandmother said there hadn't been a dragon east of the Stonecrowns in living memory, and that the pedlar had probably seen a buzzard, and the goat herds had probably been seen too, by wolves. Senja said her father said the pedlar had no call to lie. Elgin said pedlars didn't need a call, it was a gift.

She laughed. It came out of her suddenly, too loud, and she clapped a hand over her mouth and looked back over her shoulder towards the Old Hearth – nothing there, the eaves dark and quiet – and when she turned round again she was laughing still, quieter, like something let out of a box and not quite caught.

After a while, because the sky had them both, she asked it.

'Is it true what he says? About the elves?'

'Which part?'

'That they watch us. That they're waiting for something. That they –' she hunted for the word Callun would have used and visibly decided against it, '– that they're not like us.'

Elgin thought of the boundary oaks, the bark grown over the old marks. He thought of the year you asked the wood for something and waited, and the way you were answered or not answered, politely, in Aurec town, by people with better cheekbones than seemed entirely fair.

'The strangest thing about the elves,' he said, 'is that they leave people alone.'

She looked at him. 'That's strange?'

'You tell me. You've met Callun.'

She laughed again, and this time she didn't look over her shoulder.

They talked until the light went – about the Flood, a little, carefully, the way you walk a frozen pond: his father, dead of the wet-years fever when Elgin was small, whom he remembered mostly as a smell of wool and river water and a pair of hands fletching an arrow; her father, before the fire took him – her phrase, and she heard it herself and went quiet – a net-mender out of Aurec town who could throw a cast-net so it opened like a flower, before the harbour silted and the trade went and there was no mending left that would keep a family.

'He still mends,' she said. 'Other people's nets, when they'll let him. For nothing, half the time. He says the fire gave him back his pride.' She turned the flat stone over again. 'I don't know what he means. He was prouder when the nets were his.'

The stream went on about its business. Somewhere up the valley a dog barked and stopped.

'I should go back,' she said, and didn't get up. 'They'll sing for another hour. Then there's the walking round the fire, and the names of the drowned.' She said it without mockery, and that made it sadder. 'It's not all –' she gestured at the sky, the wood, the whole accused world. 'Some of it's just people who lost things. Standing together. That's a real thing too.'

'I know,' said Elgin, and did know, because he had a grandmother who frightened the valley and a mother who salted fish and didn't look up, and he understood that people were mostly doing their best with what had happened to them. He didn't say any of it. He said, 'Will your head hurt again next week?'

She stood and shook the wet out of her shawl. 'Heads are unreliable,' she said gravely. 'Mine especially.'

She went back the way she'd come, over the stones, steadier now. At the far bank she stopped.

'Farras of Eavesend.'

'Hollev of Aurec.'

'If it is a brand,' she said, '– the star – then it's a brand on all of us. Not just the elves. He never says that.'

Then she was gone into the alders, and Elgin sat on the bank a while longer with three cleaned grayling going soft in his creel, and thought about how strange it was that the elves left people alone, when leaving people alone was clearly the easiest thing in the world, and the thing nobody could manage.

4

His grandmother caught the smell before he had got his coat off.

'Woodsmoke.'

'There are fires in the valley, Grandma.'

'And fools round them. Which were you?'

Elgin hung his coat by the door. It had been hanging there since the bonfire, apart from the hours he wore it, and she had chosen tonight to notice. Or tonight to mention it, which with his grandmother was a different matter and usually the more troublesome one.

'They were at the Old Hearth. I went to see.'

'And have you seen?'

He set the grayling on the table. Three fish, cleaned, a perfectly respectable reason for having been out until dark. She gave them the attention they deserved and no more.

'Callun,' she said. 'Standing on a stone telling hungry people whose fault their hunger is. Did he point at the wood?'

'Yes.'

'They always point. Saves them having to do anything with their hands.'

She took a dish down and laid the fish in it, examining the gills of each despite his having caught them himself and carried them home, which ought to have settled the question of freshness. Elgin watched her thumb lift the red folds. He had been looking forward to supper.

'There were people remembering the drowned,' he said.

'And while they remembered, he told them who to hate. A useful evening's work.'

'You weren't there.'

'Was I needed?'

He could hear Senja saying that some of it was just people who had lost things, standing together. It had sounded reasonable by the stream. Here, with his grandmother arranging fish in a dish, he found himself wanting to defend it before he had worked out how.

'They're not stupid, Grandma. They're afraid.'

She gave a short, unpleasant laugh.

'Then they can be both. Fear has never stopped anyone being stupid. It generally helps.'

'You talk as though they've chosen it.'

'They've chosen to listen.'

'Who else talks to them?'

Her hand stopped over the dish.

It was a small satisfaction and he regretted taking it almost at once, though not enough to give it back.

'Their own scripture tells them to feed the stranger at the fire,' she said. 'Feed him. Ask Callun about that passage next time he's sending you to

look under the trees. He knows the words well enough when he wants bread for his congregation.'

'You've read it?'

'Somebody ought to.'

She reached for the salt.

Elgin had never doubted that she knew more than other people. She knew what would bring down a fever and what would merely make the patient expensive to bury; she knew which field would flood before its owner admitted there was water in it. Apparently she knew Callun's faith better than Callun did. Yet he wondered, for the first time, whether her anger was wisdom, or whether knowing so much could somehow make a person less wise.

He could not ask her that. He was brave enough to sit by a stream with a girl, but there were limits.

'Grandma?'

'What?'

'Is it true about us? About the elf blood?'

She looked at him.

He had seen that look turn grown men back from the doorstep. On this occasion he stayed where he was, and learnt nothing whatsoever.

'Wash your hands,' she said. 'You smell of fish.'

He went to the basin. Behind him she set the dish beside the hearth, where the heat would take it slowly, as he liked it.

5

The second time she came to the stream, she brought no shawl and no hurry and no pretence of a headache. The third time, he let her follow him.

'You walk,' she said, 'like you're about to catch something or be caught.' She said it admiringly, which was the only reason he didn't take offence.

He taught her track in the afternoons, when the deer were lying up and there was time. Not to hunt – he made that clear, and she made it clear she had no wish to. But to read. Here a roe had turned, here a fox had thought about a hare and decided against it, here a man had passed three days ago carrying something heavy on his left shoulder. She had a quick eye and no patience, which was the worst combination a tracker could have and the most endearing to teach. She would stride ahead and flatten sign, then come back and stand over it, accusing, as though the ground had moved the print on purpose.

'You frightened it,' he said.

'You said these were tracks.'

'Prints don't grow legs, Senja.'

She taught him songs in return. This turned out to be a poor bargain, because the fire-folk's songs were not the marching fire he had expected. They were homesick songs. The drowned south ran through all of them: harbour towns Elgin had only heard named, orchards his people had never had the climate for, a woman standing on a quay singing to a ship that did not come. Senja's voice was small and plain and true, and she would not sing them until they were deep enough among the trees that Callun's god, if he was watching, might be thought to have other things on his mind.

'It doesn't sound like a faith,' Elgin said once, after a long one about a drowned city.

'The singing's not the faith part.' She said it lightly, then not lightly. 'The singing's what's left after.'

He did not know what to do with that, so he showed her where the otters had been, and she was glad to change the subject, and neither of them said anything about why a faith should leave anything after.

The scarf came in the fourth week.

She produced it from a pocket like a conjuring trick, but badly – she had been carrying it all afternoon and had forgotten it twice, so that the giving had the air of something rehearsed and abandoned.

'Here.'

'What's this?'

'Valley wool. Mother wove it.' A long strip of undyed grey, soft from the loom, and through it, just once, a single red thread. 'So you smell of smoke,' she said, 'and nobody wonders why.'

He understood the joke at once and laughed, and then the laughter stopped, because she was putting it around his neck and tying it, and it stopped being a joke the moment it was on him.

'There,' she said, not quite meeting his eye. 'Now you belong to us, and everyone will know.'

It smelled faintly of smoke and of the old house and of something else he could not name and would have known anywhere. He reached up and made sure the one red thread lay where it could be seen, which was a strange thing to want, and he wanted it.

The near-discovery was the fifth week, on the far side of the alders, where the old path from the Old Hearth came down to meet the stream.

Senja stopped mid-sentence. Elgin heard it at the same instant – steps on the path, unhurried, a man walking like he owned the ground – and there was no time to weigh it and no need; they went to ground together the way that dread makes two people decide everything at once.

There was a fallen trunk, rotten down one side, and not enough cover behind it for dignity, only enough for the two of them, if she did not breathe and he did not breathe. She did not breathe. He did not breathe. Shoulder to shoulder, he could feel her heart or hers his, there was no telling, and Callun passed within five paces, grey and spare and staring straight ahead as a man going somewhere with a sermon in him.

He did not see them. He went on down the path, and the sound of him faded until there was only the stream.

Neither of them moved for a long count after. Elgin became aware, slowly, of how close the two of them were – aware of it in places Brother Callun would have had words for – and of the smell of smoke off his own scarf, and of the absurd and enormous fact that he did not want to move at all.

'Safe,' he whispered, finally, because one of them had to.

'The stars be thanked,' she whispered back, which was not her people's oath and she knew it, and then she was laughing into her hand, shaking, the two of them holding the trunk between themselves and the gone man and trying to keep the sound from carrying.

They walked back towards the valley in daylight for the first time, side by side, too far apart, and he kept looking at her and she kept not catching him at it, and by the time they reached the eaves the old question had become nothing he needed to ask anyone.

6

The rumours got to the valley before the news, which was how it worked, and by the first frost there was no telling them apart.

A carter passing through from Aurec town sat in the kitchen while his horse drank, and talked of the old speech – the one Lord Nepomok had given a while ago, naming Pyrran a plague-monger – as though he had heard it himself, which by his own dates he had not. Pyrran was a fire faith of its own, not the Church's; its burning mountain was its own too. In the valley's mouth the two were one foreign thing, and no sermon had ever troubled to part them. The words had come back, though. They always came back when men wanted them to. Elgin filled the man's costrel and let him talk, because his grandmother would have and someone had to.

Aurec had acceded, the carter said: the Southern Valley had joined the Lord's peace as a duchy, its Queen ruling on under him as Duchess. Elgin thought of Senja and didn't know whether her people would count this as deliverance or as the noose settling. It seemed to him the two came dressed alike.

'And the Lord?' he asked.

'Setting timbers with his own hands, they say.'

That at least, the valley could believe.

The star grew brighter night over night, and the fire-folk's sermons grew harder in step with it. Elgin did not go to the Old Hearth again, but the sermons came to him anyway, in the tight mouths of neighbours and in the smaller fires that burned unasked at the edge of the eaves, where nobody would own to having set them. One evening, coming back late along the road, he saw what the week had made: an effigy of twigs and old cloth lashed to the boundary oak, too rough to name but wrong in a way that needed no name, and he cut it down and burned it where it stood and said nothing about it to anyone, because saying would have made it real.

The ugliness came to the valley elf the same week.

She was a trader from the eaves, old in the way elves were old, with a cart of finished cloth and a demeanour that had never in living memory offered anyone so much as offence, let alone harm. Two young men of the fire-folk followed her along the road a little way, not touching, and one of them called a word after her in a flat, carrying voice. The word meant nothing to Elgin; the tone did. The elf did not turn. She walked on with her cart as though the men were weather. Elgin would rather she had hurried. Her not hurrying made it an act of quiet courage, and it should never have needed to be one.

After that, nobody would speak of it, on either side, which was how a valley swallowed its own sickness.

It was Callun who found him, on the path above the stream.

The man came out of the tree-line and walked beside Elgin a stretch without speaking, and Elgin, who could go to ground under a speaker's nose and had done, walked on with his jaw shut and his mind on the one red thread at his throat and whether it could be seen.

'The old law lasted a long time,' Callun said at length, to nobody in particular. 'Longer than most. But the Dreamers dreamed it, and the foreign keeps it, and the water washed both clean. What's coming, the fire's already written.' He said it evenly, like a man reading from a page only he could see. 'Fold with it, hunter, or be folded into it.'

Then he was gone up the path, and Elgin stood a moment with his heart where his stomach ought to be, and understood that he had not been warned so much as told.

He found Senja at the stream that last time, before the break, and she knew before he opened his mouth.

'I keep thinking of the bonfire,' she said, 'and how we all stood warm around one fire and were not yet afraid of the people standing with us.'

'You weren't afraid then.'

'I wasn't brave either. I just hadn't been asked yet.'

She told him, low and fast, the things that had begun to be whispered in the congregation's own yard: that the elves had brought the Flood and watched in the trees for the moment to finish it, that the star was the fire's first finger pointing, that a time was coming when folk would have to choose a side and stand with their own. She was frightened of her people and for them in the same breath, Elgin saw, and loving her frightened him more than the words did.

'What will you do?' he asked.

'Sing the homesick songs,' she said, 'until someone asks me to sing the other kind. Then I don't know.'

There was a silence that had the stream in it, and the last light, and the nearness of a winter that would find them on different sides of a thing neither had made.

Then she said it, looking at him, and it was the first serious thing she had said to him with no joke close behind it.

'If we're ever made to go – look for the red thread. I'll leave it where you'd look.'

Elgin, not knowing he was hearing the last promise that would be made easily, heard it only as a cold thing she felt bound to say, and took her cold hands a moment, and said nothing at all.

7

The handbill went up on the shire-post at the crossroads, where the notices always went, and by mid-morning you could not get near it for people reading it twice.

Elgin read it in the crowd, over a neighbour's shoulder, and read the neighbour's mouth reading it, and then wrote it out in his head in the plainest words he had, because printed words never felt true until he had taken them apart.

All Pyrran believers were to leave the Valleys of Nepor. They had four days.

It said – the handbill said – that this was the Long Directive of Lord Nepomok, his reasoned counsel to a people, his protection of the valleys and their peace. Later, Elgin would learn that it was an abridgement: that a clerk in a chancery somewhere had boiled a long address down to a blunt order, and that the valley, a day from Aurec town and a lifetime from any chancery, had read the blunt order and thought it the whole of the man. The handbill promised nothing, explained nothing, and regretted nothing.

Four days.

All Pyrran believers. Which, here, meant the fire-folk. Which meant the people who sang at the Old Hearth and salted their dead with the names of the drowned. Which meant – Elgin stood in the road and did the arithmetic the way you shift a bad weight from arm to arm – which meant Senja Hollev and her father and every grey sleeve in the congregation.

A voice climbed over the murmur, somebody wanting to know if it was true about four days, and somebody else said it had to be, it was printed, and a third said his lordship had his reasons and who were we to read them. Then old Sarl, who had a temper and no love for any man's sermon, said the fires at the eaves had not lit themselves, and the word that had followed the elf-woman up the road had not spoken itself, and if the wood ever took it into its head to answer, it would not stop to ask who had started it. He said it without pleasure, and nobody argued with it, because it was true. Elgin did not stay to hear whose reasons won.

Sergeant Oddi came to the Hollev door in the afternoon, and Elgin, crossing the road with a shoulder of mutton for a creditor, saw the whole of it from one stride to the next and did not stop walking.

Oddi held a list, the paper folded once and much handled, and he stood on the step of a man he had grown up with and read out the names on it as if each one cost him something. He was a decent man. That was the part Elgin could not look away from and could not bear: not the order, but Oddi's face, a good man reading bad words in a careful voice and hating every line of it while he did.

'Aurec,' Oddi said, not loud, 'Harl Hollev. Senja Hollev.' And so on down the list, the Aurec Hollevs and their kin, four days to be gone, and the door did not open wider and did not shut, and Harl came out at last and took the names standing, and Elgin, at the far side of the road, kept walking because it was not his list and not his door and there was nothing in him that would have done either of them any good.

At the Farras stead his grandmother was reading the handbill like a thing she meant to throw into the fire and had decided not to give it the satisfaction.

'Stupidity answered with stupidity,' she said.

She said it once, flat, and then – this was the part Elgin did not understand until much later – she went on being furious in a different direction.

'You despise the fire-folk,' Elgin said, because he did not yet understand.

'I despise their fear,' she said. 'Fear is the only thing they've got, so they've made a god of it and pointed it at the elves. And now the Lord, who ought to know better, has answered fear with fear, and made every frightened farmwife in this valley more frightened, and called it protection.' She looked at the handbill as if the words on it had failed her personally. 'Four days. It isn't even time to sell a cow properly.'

She did not say anything for a while. Elgin had a long acquaintance with his grandmother's silences, and he knew this one for the dangerous kind – the kind where she was not done, where she was deciding the shape of what came next and whether it would be mercy or the other thing.

What she did next was take the basket down from the shelf.

She did it without ceremony, which is not the same as without meaning. Into it went a wrapped loaf, the good one, not the daily; a pot of salve, the same she had sold Gudrun Sarl for the cow; and, wrapped at the bottom, a little twist of dried herb Elgin knew cost more than the rest put together. She did not say what any of it was for or for whom, and that silence was louder than the first.

'Take it to the Hollevs,' she said. 'At dusk. And don't stand on the step like a man owed thanks, because you aren't.'

Elgin looked at the basket. Then he looked at her, and understood that he was being sent to do the one thing in the valley he was most afraid to do

and most needed to do, and that his grandmother, who despised his reasons, had seen both of those facts clearly and packed for them.

He went at dusk, ashamed and grateful, the basket heavy with bread it would break the Hollevs' pride to accept.

Harl Hollev opened the door before he had raised his hand, as though he had been standing on the other side of it a while.

For a long moment the two of them stood with the door between them, the hunter's son and the net-mender, and Elgin found he could not say the word that would make the basket acceptable, and Harl found he could not say the word that would make it leave, and so neither said anything the door could not have said better.

Then Harl took the basket.

He took it the way a man takes something he cannot afford to refuse – with both hands, and his back straight, and a dignity in the taking that made Elgin want to look away, and he did not look away, because that would have been a second refusal.

'Your grandmother,' Harl said, and it was not a question, or it was a question that already knew itself.

Elgin nodded.

Harl looked at the basket in his hands, the loaf, the salve, the little twist of herb that cost more than you would say in front of a hungry man. 'Tell her,' he said, and stopped, and started again, 'tell her we will not forget who fed us before the road.'

He did not say thank you. The word would not have stood upright in the doorway between them, and both of them knew it.

And Elgin, who had come to the door afraid of seeing Senja, stood on the step and was afraid in a different way, because she had not come to the door at all, and the house behind Harl had the stillness of a place already being packed into what could be carried.

The door shut, gently, which was somehow worse than if it had slammed.

Elgin went home through the dark with his grandmother's basket no longer heavy on his arm, and the valley going quiet around him the way a house quiets before the people in it leave.

8

They were leaving before morning.

Elgin heard it from his mother, who had heard it on the road. The carts were being loaded already. There was still time left on the handbill, but the congregation would not wait for the last of it.

'Tonight?' he said.

His mother nodded. He had one boot off and put it on again.

Outside, the frost had not yet taken. The path gave under his heels, and he went too fast down the first slope, catching himself where the mud had spread across the stones. He had walked home this way only a little while before. At the Hollev door he had thought there would be another day.

There had been nothing to stop him asking.

By the time he reached the houses, a cart was being backed into the road. Two men pushed at the wheel while a third held a lantern low, showing them the rut. The horse stood with its head down. Beyond it, more lanterns moved between doorways and the dark shapes of loaded carts.

He looked for Senja.

A woman came out carrying a cooking pot with folded cloth packed into it. She stood beside a cart while someone made room, then passed it up and went back for something else. There was no room for much else. Bedding rose above the sides, tied down with rope; beneath it he could make out the leg of a stool and a basket pushed sideways into a gap. The woman returned

with a smaller bundle and held it against her until a man reached down to take it.

Across the road, neighbours stood in their doorways. Elgin knew most of them by sight. One had his arms folded over his nightshirt; another held the door partly closed against the cold. They watched the loading, but when someone from the carts looked towards them, they found a buckle or a wheel or the ground to look at instead.

The congregation had been told to go, and now they were going. Nothing anyone did seemed to make this easier.

He found Harl beside a cart further up the street. The net-mender was drawing a rope tight over the load. His hands knew the work, though it was taking him longer than it should have; he pulled the knot open once and made it again.

'Can I help?'

Harl glanced at him.

'Hold that.'

Elgin took the rope where he pointed and leaned his weight against it. Harl worked the slack through, secured it, and tested the knot with both hands.

'That'll do.'

Elgin let go. A shallow groove remained across his palm.

'Where's Senja?'

'With her mother.'

Harl bent to lift a sack. Elgin caught the other end, and between them they got it over the side. The cart shifted on its springs. There seemed no place left for people.

'You've still got time,' Elgin said.

Harl kept his hands on the sack.

'To do what?'

Elgin had meant another day indoors, another night with a roof. He had meant a chance to see her somewhere that was not a street full of people being put out of their homes. None of it would have changed the order.

'We'll go while we can load our own carts,' Harl said.

He pushed the sack further in and turned away.

At the head of the line, Callun was helping an old man up to a seat. There was no sermon. Elgin could hear him asking whether the man had both his blankets. The answer was lost under the scrape of a wheel.

Somebody called for the lantern to be brought forward. A horse shook its harness. Elgin stepped into the road to look past the next cart, and a stone came out of the dark and cracked an old carter across the brow; the blood looked black in the lantern-light, and the man swayed on his feet. A militiaman caught the thrower by the front of his coat and shoved him into the mud.

The street went silent.

Oddi stood with his list open in both hands. His eyes stayed on it, though there could have been little enough light to read by.

Harl had gone rigid beside the cart. He did not look back.

Senja did.

She was on the far side of the load, one hand resting on the boards. Her face turned first towards the old carter, then towards the place where the militiaman stood. After that she saw Elgin.

He went to her.

Someone helped the carter sit. The militiaman stayed where he was, and the young man in the mud did not get up. Elgin recognised him, vaguely, as someone he had passed on the road and thought nothing about.

'Are you all right?' he asked Senja.

She nodded, too quickly.

She was dressed for the cold, with a woollen wrap pulled tight and her hair tucked beneath it. There was mud on the hem of her skirt. He noticed these things because he could see them, and because he could not make sense of her standing beside a cart that would take her away.

'Father,' she said.

Harl looked round.

'I'm getting in at the back.'

Her father's eyes passed over Elgin and settled on her. He nodded once and went forward to the horse.

Elgin followed her to the tailboard. She put a foot on the wheel, and he offered his hand. She took it without looking down, braced herself against him, and climbed into the narrow space left between the bundles.

Then she sat with her feet hanging over the back and kept his hand.

For perhaps half a minute they were almost at the same height.

'Your basket's under here,' she said, touching the bedding beside her.

'Keep it.'

'Mother said it ought to go back.'

'She can keep it.'

Senja nodded. Her fingers were cold. He closed his other hand around them, carefully, as though this were something useful he could do before she went.

'Which road?' he asked.

'North. Towards the Graemoor road.'

'All of you?'

'I think so.'

It would be the long way round. Everyone knew the southern neck was shut to the likes of them – the earthworks at the neck were his lordship's, and they did not open for the expelled. The road to Pyrran, for the people being pointed at it, began by going away from it. Elgin thought of the handbill, promising nothing and explaining nothing, and said none of it.

A man walked past them carrying a lantern. For a moment he could see her clearly, the tiredness beneath her eyes and the place where she had bitten her lower lip. Then the light moved on.

She looked at the scarf around his neck. One end had worked loose beneath his coat, and she reached out with her free hand and tucked it in. He felt her knuckles against his chest.

Neither of them said anything.

There were things he could have said about finding her, about roads and distances, about what would happen once the four days were over. He knew the paths along the eaves. Beyond them he knew what other people had told him. She was watching his face, and he could not give her a certainty he did not have.

The harness tightened at the front of the cart.

'Senja,' her father said.

'Yes.'

She answered without turning. Elgin held her hand for another moment, then loosened his fingers so she could draw hers away.

The cart moved.

He walked beside the tailboard for a few paces. She shifted her feet out of his way, an ordinary little movement, and it nearly undid him.

'Mind the wheel,' she said.

He stepped aside.

The next cart was coming. He had to let it pass, and then there was a horse between them and a lantern swinging from a board, and he could see only part of her face beyond the load.

She was still looking back.

He stood against the wall while the rest went by. Wheels pressed deep into the road. People walked beside them with bundles held close or strapped across their shoulders. One woman stopped to change the arm she

carried hers on, and the man behind her waited without speaking. Callun came near the end, on foot.

Across the street a door closed. Another stayed open until the last cart had passed.

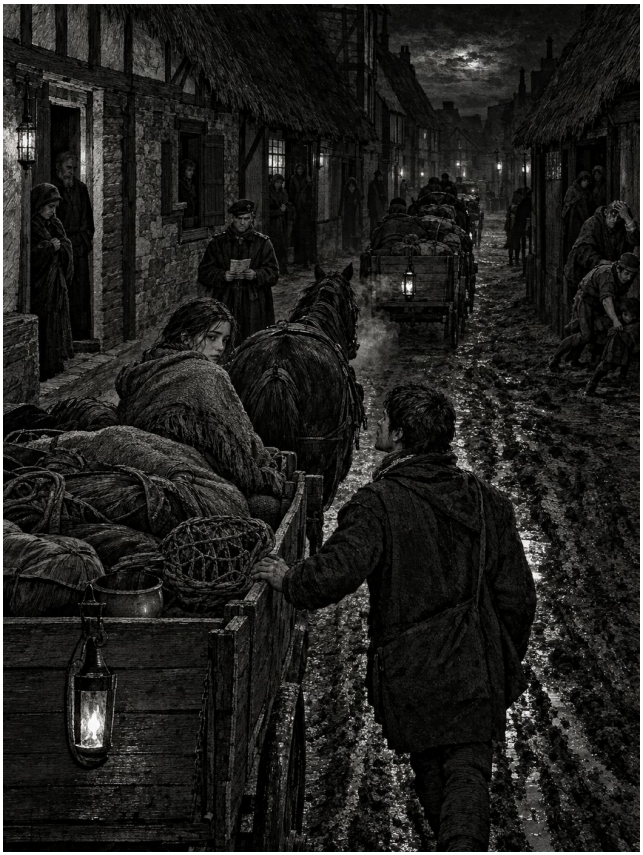
Elgin followed as far as the turn. From there the road ran north, and he could see the lanterns moving along it, close together at first, then further apart as the carts found their pace. He could no longer tell which was hers.

He put a hand inside his coat and found the soft edge of the wool. The single red thread was hidden in the dark.

She had nothing of his.

He searched his pockets then, too late, and found the small things he had carried all evening. He could have given her something. At the tailboard, while her hand was still in his, he could have thought of it.

He stayed until the last light went round the bend.



9

Elgin went out at dawn because there was nothing else a hunter could do with a morning, and the valley had used up its words.

The road north was empty. The wheel-ruts the carts had pressed into the frost were still there, frozen sharp, and he stood a moment reading them as he read any trail – so many axles, so much weight, the direction plain. Then he turned his back on the road and went up towards the eaves,

where there was meat to be had and work to do, and where, he told himself, nothing was expected of him.

The wood was quiet.

He noticed it the way you notice a missing tooth – by touching the place with your tongue. No birdsong. Not the thin, half-hearted winter kind, either. Nothing at all. He stood in the alder scrub where he had stood on the morning this all began, and the silence had a texture to it, a held quality, like a room where everyone has stopped speaking just before you came in.

At the stream, the tracks were wrong.

Deer sign, fresh, and a great deal of it – but moving downslope, all of it, does and yearlings and an old buck, heading for the valley floor at a pace that was not flight and was not grazing. At noon. Deer did not move at noon, not in cold weather, not in numbers, and not downhill towards men's dogs and men's doors. He followed the sign a little way, more out of disbelief than craft, and it did not change. The whole hillside was coming down.

He tried the ridge path above the Old Hearth, and there the dogs found their limit.

Old Becka, who had gone up that path a thousand times and would have followed a stag into his lordship's own hall, stopped dead at the first turn and stood with her legs braced and her head low, and would not go on. Not for the whistle, not for the hand-signal, not for the strip of dried meat that had never once in her life been refused. The young dog got further by the simple expedient of not knowing better, then thought better of it halfway up and came back with his tail down, and sat on Elgin's boot, and leaned.

Elgin stood with a dog on his foot and looked east, along the ridge, to where the Stonecrowns shouldered up out of the treeline.

The slopes were bare.

He did not understand it at first, because the absence of a thing is harder to see than the thing. There were always birds on those slopes. Crows

working the sheep-grass, kites on the warm air, the little dark crosses of them against the rock at any hour of any day he could remember. He stood a long time making sure, because it was the kind of thing a man got wrong and was laughed at for. The sky over the Stonecrowns was empty from end to end, and the rock faces stood in the thin sunlight with nothing on them at all, and the snow up high had no speck in it.

He thought of the pedlar's dragons, for one disloyal moment, and then put the thought down where he put most thoughts that began with a pedlar. A dragon was a thing you could see. Whatever had emptied the sky had done it without being seen, and that was worse.

Something tapped once against the inside of his chest, and it was his own heart, and he could not have said what it knew.

He went home by the stream path, and the wood around him stayed quiet, and the quiet stayed with him after he had left the trees, the way smoke stays in a coat. In the lower meadow three does stood in the open in broad daylight, and watched him pass, and did not run.

His grandmother was on the stoop when he came up the lane. She was looking south, though there was nothing to see that way but the sky, which was the colour it always was.

'Grandma,' he said. 'The birds have gone off the Stonecrowns.'

She looked at him for a moment, and whatever she saw in his face she did not mock it, which frightened him more than the birds had.

'I know,' she said, and went back to looking south.

Elgin stood beside her a while, because there was nowhere else to stand. The afternoon came down grey and ordinary over the valley, and the smoke rose from the chimneys of the houses whose people had stayed, and did not rise from the houses whose people had gone, and he thought about Senja on the open road, two days north, with her feet in the cold of a cart's tailboard.

He was still thinking it, and she was still two days north and getting further, when the ground moved.

Not much. A tremor, brief and deep, that came up through the soles of his boots and the bones of his legs and into the pit of his stomach, and was gone. The kind of thing you would swear had not happened, except that old Becka, asleep by the door, had come awake with her hackles up, and every pot on his mother's shelf had rung once, like a struck bell, and the stoop was still humming faintly under his feet.

Down in the valley, very faint, he heard a door bang, and a voice call out to another voice, and neither of them had an answer.

His grandmother's hand came out and took hold of the doorpost. He had never once, in nineteen years, seen her take hold of anything for support.

'Grandma?'

'Quiet,' she said, not unkindly. 'I'm listening.'

And Elgin, who had spent his whole life learning to read what the world was saying, stood in his boots on the trembling earth, and understood for the first time that the world had been saying something all day, in birdsong and deer-sign and the silence of the Stonecrowns, and that he had only just begun to hear it, and that it was already too late to answer.

10

The sky went copper on the fourth night.

Elgin saw it first from the yard, going to bar the shed, and stood with the bar in his hand and forgot to set it. It was not sunset – the sun was long down – and it was not dawn, and it was not the aurora, which he had seen twice in winters and which moved. This did not move. The whole southern quarter of the sky had gone the colour of a forge door, a deep burning red-brown that had no source and no edge and no business being there, and un-

der it, far away past the valley's southern wall, past everything he knew the name of, there was a light. Not a glow. A light, small and far and so bright it hurt, like a forge spark at the bottom of a well, and as he watched it grew brighter instead of dying, and went on growing brighter.

'Grandma.'

She came out. She looked south for a long time. The copper light lay on her face like lamplight, and he saw her read it as she read everything, and he saw her not find a name for it, which he had never seen before.

'Get your mother,' she said, and her voice was quite calm, which was worse than shouting. 'And bring the dogs in.'

The tremors came first, before midnight. The one on the stoop had been a warning knock; these were the door coming off its hinges. They came in waves, minutes apart, then breaths apart, the earth under the valley floor rolling like a slow sea, and the stead's timbers groaned, and everything on every shelf that could fall fell. Outside, in the gaps between the shaking, Elgin could hear the valley making sounds it had no right to make: a tree going over somewhere up the slope, a long splintering, and then, from far down the valley, a roar that was not thunder and did not stop.

The river ran backwards.

He saw it in the morning, because nobody slept, and he was on the ridge path before first light with Becka pressing against his leg. The Aurec ran north out of the lake and down the valley; it had done so for as long as the valley had stood in anyone's memory, and on that morning it ran up it. He stood on the ridge and watched the water climb back over its own bed, brown and heaving and full of torn trees, flowing south against the lie of the land, towards the burning sky, and his mind kept offering him explanations and he kept refusing them, because every explanation his mind offered was worse than the thing he was watching.

It ran backwards for the better part of an hour, and then it remembered itself, and came down again all at once.

The second day was when the valley learnt what the signal posts were for.

The border earthworks stood at the valley's southern neck – dykes and walls and banks that his lordship's people had thrown up after the Waters, when everyone said it was soldiers' work with no soldiering left in it, mud and timber and a line of tall posts with fire-baskets on top. Elgin had walked past them a hundred times and thought about them not at all.

At midday the southernmost post lit its basket. Then the next, and the next, the fire running north up the line towards Aurec town, and behind the line, over the valley wall, the copper glare stood at noon the way it had stood at midnight, and the light in the far south was a light no one cared to look at twice.

What came up the valley over the next two days was not an army. It was the border settlers – the families who had taken land at the southern neck, closest to whatever the sky was doing. They came up the road with their goods in barrows and their children on their backs, and every one of them was alive, and every one of them had left a house standing empty behind them, and the signal posts had given them the hour in which to do it. The dykes held back most of what the river tried to do. The walls took the water sideways into the old wash-channels. The houses went. Elgin heard it from a settler who sat in the Farras kitchen with a bowl of his mother's broth, and who said, in the flat voice of a man too tired to grieve: 'I stood on the earthworks and watched my own roof go under. I had time to watch it, because the baskets were lit.' He turned the bowl round in his hands. 'I don't know which of those two I'll dream about.'

Nobody could tell anyone what was happening in the south.

The rumours did what rumours do. A pedlar who had been four days south came through and said the mountain had come down – the whole

mountain, the burning one, Pyrran's own peak, gone into the sea. A carter said the sea had come up instead, and was still coming. A settler woman said her cousin had seen the far southern sky catch fire like a thatch roof, all of it, horizon to horizon. A man from Aurec town said that a wood-elf had stood at the town gate on the third day, spoken one sentence to the gate-guard, and gone back into the trees. The sentence had been passed from mouth to mouth all the way up the valley, and by the time it reached Eavesend it had been improved so many times that no two tellings matched. Elgin's grandmother heard the third version and the fourth, and said only that when the elves spoke one sentence, they meant one sentence. 'The valley,' she said, 'has plainly decided to write the rest of the letter itself.'

The one thing every telling agreed on was this: nobody knew. The sky burned, the earth shook, the sea stood up and walked – and no one in the Valleys of Nepor, man, woman or elf, could say why. They never did learn.

The star was gone from the east.

On the second night Elgin sat on the stoop and watched the southern glow and did the arithmetic he had been doing since the carts went north.

Senja had had four days' start. The carts had gone north towards the Graemoor road, away from the south, away from the burning sky – the right direction, the lucky direction, and he told himself so, and then he looked at the light in the south and thought about how far a cart went in four days on a bad road, and how far the sky had gone in one night, and the two distances did not bear thinking about together, so he thought about them together, because he could not stop.

She was on the open road under that sky. That was the whole of it. She was somewhere out there with her feet on a tailboard and the sky on fire behind her, and there was not one thing in the world he could do about it, and the not-doing was a worse pain than any doing he had ever had.

He put his hand inside his coat and held the scarf. It still smelled faintly of smoke.

On the third night the glow dimmed, and the tremors came less often, and the world seemed, very carefully, to be deciding to stop.

His grandmother came out onto the stoop late, wrapped in her shawl, and stood looking south the way she had looked south every night since the carts went. Elgin brought her the stool, and she sat on it, which she never did – she stood to watch things, always; sitting was for indoors – and it was the sitting, more than the glow or the tremors or the running river, that told him how the world had changed.

They watched the copper sky together for a long time. The valley lay quiet below them, the chimney-smoke going up straight for the first time in three days, the lights on in the houses of the families who had stayed and dark in the houses of the families who had left, and nobody singing anywhere.

'They'll be coming back,' Elgin said at last, to have something to say. 'There's nothing to expel them into now.'

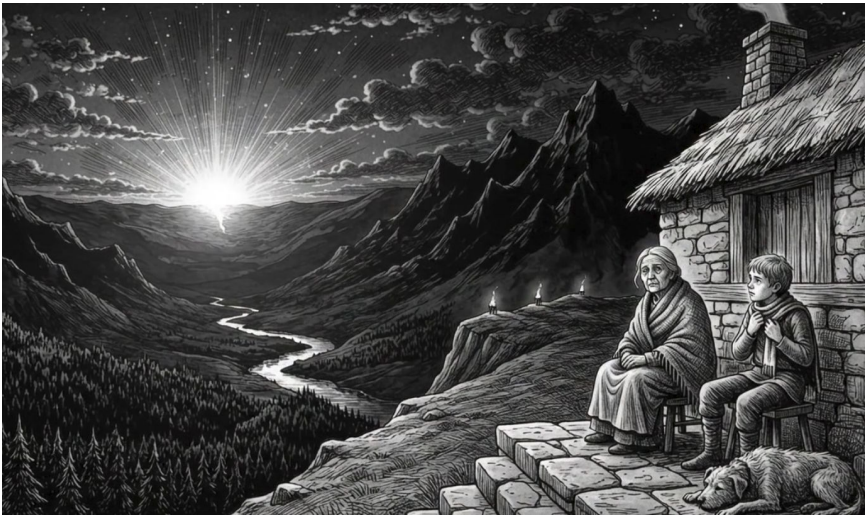
His grandmother did not answer for a while. Her anger had been the loudest thing in the valley for as long as he could remember – anger at the fire-folk, anger at the order, anger at the handbill and the star and the men who pointed – and it had all had somewhere to go, some door to be hammered on, some stupidity to be named. Now the sky had burned and the sea had stood up, and the stupidity had been drowned out with everything else, and her anger had nowhere left to go, and without it she looked – he saw it in the forge-light, sitting small on her stool – she looked old. He had never once thought of her as old. She had never once let him.

'No one is stupid tonight,' she said.

She said it quietly, to the southern glow, not to him, and it was not forgiveness and it was not surrender; it was something he had never heard

from her before, and he understood, watching her face in the copper light, that it cost her more than anger ever had.

He sat down on the stoop beside her stool, the way he had sat when he was small, and stayed there until the light in the south faded to embers, and neither of them said anything else at all.



II

The word came up the valley the way all the bad words had come up that winter, unprompted and unwelcome, and this time there was no outrunning it.

Pyrran was gone.

Not defeated – that would have been a thing you could turn and fight or flee from. Not broken into new borders and new names, the way things changed in peace. Gone. The realm, the mountain, everything south of the border earthworks, the whole of the country that the expelled had been

told, four days before the sky went copper, to go back to – a country most of them had never seen. The place no longer existed.

Elgin heard it in the road, from a man who had heard it in the town, and he stood in the road while the world kept turning round him, and the first thing he thought – the thing he was ashamed of afterwards, and could not un-think – was not of the dead. It was that the order had not even had the decency to leave them a home to be driven out of. They had packed their carts in the dark and gone north into nothing. The handbill had pointed them at a place, and the sky had taken the place away. You could not even call the exile cruel, afterwards, because cruel needed an object, and the object was ash.

'How far?' he asked the man.

'All of it.'

'No. I mean – the road. How far did they get?'

The man didn't know. Nobody knew. The people who had gone with the carts would tell their own stories or not, and the ones who did not come back would tell no stories at all, and what happened on the Graemoor road in those days had become a thing the valley would learn in pieces, the way a family learns of a death, one mourning at a time.

The old carter had gone with the carts, driving at the back of the column.

Elgin learnt that in the tavern, as grief is always learnt, overheard in a low voice meant for the table it belonged to.

'Gone on the Graemoor road,' a man at the next table was saying. 'The old carter. Him that took the stone that night.'

'Of the stone?'

'Of the road and the cold and the sky. The stone just went with him.'

So the old carter with the cracked brow – the blood black in the lantern-light, the man swaying on his feet but up again and driving on – had not come home either. Elgin drank to him, quietly, to no one in particular.

The man who had thrown the stone sat two tables along. He heard it like everyone else. He set his cup down, pushed the bench back, and stood, and the talk did not stop, exactly, but it thinned. He walked out of the tavern with his head up and his jaw set – not in defiance, but in the place where defiance had been – and no one called anything after him, and no one had to.

Elgin heard the other thing on his way out into the dark – the thing the valley would be telling itself for years, in the careful voice people use for the part that must not be got wrong.

Brother Callun did not turn back.

When the recall came – his lordship had put the word out that the expelled were to be taken back, every one of them who could be found – the valley began arguing, in a low, ashamed murmur, about what exactly that meant for everyone who had watched the carts go. Brother Callun did not turn back. He went on. South.

Towards a Pyrran that was no longer there.

Nobody knew if he had understood. That was the sentence the valley settled on, in the end, because it was the only one that could be said without the sayer being wrong. Nobody knew whether Brother Callun had understood that the country he was walking back to was gone, or understood it and walked anyway, towards the fire he had spent his life telling people to fear and love – or whether his feet, once pointed, could simply not be stopped. The word ran out of town with him and stopped somewhere south of the border earthworks, where the road stopped being a road.

Elgin walked home in the dark with the tavern warm behind him and the southern sky dark above the eaves, and thought about a man walking into nothing with a faith in him, and about a young man with the price of a thrown stone on his back, and about a girl on a cart somewhere north of all of it. And the joke – if it was a joke, and not something worse, something

with no bottom at all – was that the handbill had not even survived to be wrong. The thing it had pointed at was gone. The people it had pointed were scattered. And the only man in the valley who had known the words to say over the dead was walking the wrong way into the sky.

12

This time the words were read aloud.

The herald stood beside the shire-post with Sergeant Oddi at his shoulder and waited for a cart to pass before he began. There were fewer people than there had been for the handbill. Some were working on houses damaged by the tremors; others had heard already and saw no reason to stand in the road to hear again. Elgin had heard too. He stood close enough to see where the herald's thumb held the paper against the wind.

By order of Lord Nepomok, the expelled were to be taken back.

The herald read steadily. Someone at the edge of the gathering asked whether that meant all of them, and he lowered the sheet.

'All who return.'

Then he raised it and finished.

Oddi fixed the new notice over the old one. The lower corner curled back, showing a strip of the first order beneath it, and he put another nail through both.

Elgin waited until the others began to leave.

'How far has the word gone?'

The herald folded his paper.

'It's being carried along the roads.'

'The Graemoor road?'

'That too.'

'How far along it?'

The man looked at him properly then.

'I couldn't tell you.'

Elgin thanked him, because he had answered as much as he could, and went to look north.

The first family came back with the same cart they had left in.

Elgin recognised the cooking pot, wedged beneath the seat with its lid tied on. He had watched the woman carry it out of her house on the night of the departure. Now she sat above it with her hands tucked into her sleeves while her husband led the horse. Neither looked towards the doorways.

A neighbour came out before the cart had stopped.

'Wheel's running loose,' he said.

The husband looked down at it.

'It's held.'

'Best get the weight off.'

He reached for the rope. After a moment the husband let him.

Elgin helped with the bedding. It was damp underneath, and when they lifted it clear there was a dark patch on the boards. The woman climbed down slowly. She stood at her own door while her husband searched inside his coat for the key.

'Swelled a bit,' the neighbour said. 'With the wet.'

The husband worked the key in the lock.

'Lift it as you turn.'

'I know.'

Nobody spoke while the door opened.

They carried everything inside. There was less than Elgin remembered loading, though he could not have said what was missing. His grandmother arrived while they were bringing in the last bundle and gave the woman a loaf wrapped in a cloth.

'There's more tomorrow,' she said.

Elgin waited for something about the damp bedding, or the congregation, or the folly of setting out with a loose wheel.

His grandmother asked him to carry the empty basket home.

At the gate he turned back.

'Did you see the Hollevs?'

The woman had begun to close the door. She kept it open to answer.

'There were carts behind us.'

'A net-mender. His wife and daughter.'

'I'm sorry. There were so many.'

'Of course,' he said. 'Thank you.'

He had made her apologise on her own doorstep.

The next return came on foot.

Three people, carrying between them what one tired man could have lifted. Elgin met them above the crossroads and took a bundle from the eldest. The man surrendered it without argument, which told him something about its weight, or about the man.

They had left their cart where an axle broke. Someone had taken them part of the way after that.

'We heard we could come back,' the younger woman said.

'You can.'

'We heard it from a traveller. He hadn't got a paper.'

'It's on the post. They read it out.'

She nodded but kept looking past him towards the houses.

Her boots had rubbed through at one heel. He shortened his stride and pretended the bundle required it.

By then everyone knew that Watcher Helsa Brun had objected to the expulsion when it was ordered, and had put her objection on the record. People who had never mentioned her before spoke of her with a familiarity Elgin found surprising.

'Brun told them,' a man said outside the smithy as the three passed.

His companion nodded.

'She had the right of it.'

Elgin shifted the bundle to his other arm. He remembered one of them saying the Lord must have his reasons. He could no longer remember which, and was glad not to.

His grandmother was waiting at the house with bread. She let the returning family sit before she asked what they needed.

Later, when the eldest man had eaten, Elgin asked about the Hollevs.

The man remembered a net-mender, perhaps. There had been someone mending a harness beside the road, a grey-haired fellow with a daughter.

'Dark hair?' Elgin asked.

'I think so.'

'About my age?'

'Possibly.'

The younger woman shook her head.

'That girl was a child.'

The man rubbed his eyes.

'Then it was somebody else.'

Elgin poured him more water.

A third cart came in rain. He saw it from the upper path and ran down, slipping in the places where the frost had broken the surface.

There was a young woman walking behind it.

For a stretch of the descent he was certain.

Then she turned to speak to the driver, and he slowed. By the time he reached the road he had breath enough to offer help without having to explain why he had none.

He carried a chest into a house near the crossroads. The driver asked him to mind the bottom, which was coming away. He minded it. Afterwards he stood under the eaves while the family went inside and the neighbours finished untying the load.

No one had seen the Hollevs.

Over the following weeks about half came back. Some returned to houses; some to rooms lent by people who had watched them leave. Others sent word that they would stay where they were. There were names spoken quietly, and names nobody could give an account of at all.

The Hollev door stayed shut.

Elgin passed it whenever he had business nearby, and sometimes his business took him further than it needed to. He hunted, brought meat home, helped mend a shed roof. Every day he found some reason to be where he could see the northern road.

When the third week came with no word of the Hollevs, he went up the Graemoor road himself.

He took two days and the old horse, and he rode the road as the carts had walked it, reading what was left to read: the ruts the frost had kept, the places where wheels had dragged and slewed, the grey ash of night-fires long rained on. At the waystone above the moor he found the broken cart the walkers had told him of, stripped to its boards, and a little way off it a cairn of new stones, the turf around it not yet healed. Whoever lay under it had died among strangers, and the strangers had done the work decently. He stood there a while, because somebody from the valley should.

He asked at the two steadings that had roof enough for travellers. At the second, a woman remembered grey sleeves, and a girl with dark hair.

'Might be her,' she said. 'Might be twenty others. The road darkens everyone's hair, by the end.'

It was not Senja. He made sure of that kindly, which took a while.

He came home without her. The word had gone further up the road than he could carry it: people had heard, and turned, and gone. He told himself all the way down the valley that this was what mattered, and believed about half of it.

From the rise above the crossroads he could watch a cart for a long while before it reached him. He learnt how little a person needed to resemble another person at that distance.

He waited until they came close enough.

13

The valley wintered. Roofs were patched, debts half-forgiven and the rest forgotten; the river froze, and woke, and ran the right way again. The public peace came to Aurec on a Fourthday, in the warmest stretch of the year, read out by the same herald who had read the recall, beside the same shire-post, in the same voice. It seemed to Elgin that the man was getting tired of his own voice.

The Valleys of Nepor were a land of many peoples. Any attack on a person for their kind or their blood was a crime against the Lord's peace and would be tried as such. There was more, about courts and witnesses and fines, but most of the crowd stopped listening after the word *crime*. People nodded. A few clapped, uncertainly, the way people clap at a wedding when they aren't sure the vows are finished. Gudrun Sarl said loudly that it was about time, and the man beside her, who the autumn before had stood in his doorway and watched the carts go, said nothing at all.

Then everyone went home and got on with the harvest.

That was the strange part. Life simply went on. The mill turned. The Sarls' sow farrowed, eleven piglets, and the whole lane came to look. Two of the returned families had their roofs patched by the very neighbours who had not met their eyes in the dark, and nobody mentioned it, and the roofs held. The sky had been an ordinary blue for so many days now that children had stopped checking it.

Elgin went hunting.

He hunted with the scarf around his neck. A man wore as little as decency allowed that summer. Elgin wore a wool scarf. His mother remarked on it once. He said it kept the midges off. She looked at him for a long moment and didn't remark on it again.

He didn't let her wash it, either. She'd taken it off the peg one morning along with his shirts, and he'd caught her at the tub and taken it back out of her hands, more roughly than he meant to. It still smelled faintly of smoke – of a bonfire at the edge of the wood, of a night he could no longer quite picture. Soap would have finished that. He didn't explain any of this. He hung it back on the peg, dry and unwashed, and went out, and when he came back his mother had put a sprig of lavender beside it on the shelf. Neither of them said anything about the lavender.

He knew how it looked. A grown hunter carrying a girl's scarf around like a holy relic. He'd have laughed at anyone else for it. He might, a year ago, have laughed at himself.

It happened in the second week, on a grey morning with a low mist on the water.

The stag was a good one – eight points, heavy in the neck, coming down to drink at the bend below the Stonecrowns where the river ran wide and fast over stones. Elgin had the wind and the cover and all the time in the world, and he shot badly. He knew it the instant the string left his fingers. Too far back. The stag went up like a startled horse and crashed across the river and into the alders on the far side, and Elgin swore, once, very quietly, and went after it.

A wounded animal is the hunter's debt. Grandma had taught him that before she'd taught him to string a bow. You don't go home while something you hurt is still walking.

So he went into the river. It was higher than it looked, and colder, and the stones were slick with weed. Halfway across the current took his legs and he went down to one knee, then to his chest, and grabbed at a branch

of a fallen willow that lay out over the water. He pulled himself along it hand over hand, bow held high, and came up the far bank soaked, gasping, already looking for blood on the leaves.

He found it. A good trail, bright and plentiful. He'd gone forty paces along it before his hand went to his throat out of habit.

Nothing there.

He stood very still. Then he turned and ran back to the water.

The willow branch was where he'd left it, stripped and dripping. On one of its twigs hung a single grey thread, a hand's length, fluttering in the current. That was all. The river went on past it, quick and brown and entirely uninterested, round the bend and out of sight.

He searched until dark.

He went down the near bank and then the far one, crossing twice more at places no sensible man would cross. He poked at every snag of driftwood with his bow. He climbed out along rocks. Once his heart leaped at something grey caught in a root, and it was a dead heron, and he sat down on the bank beside it for a while. The mist came back towards evening. The light went. He could not, by the end, have told anyone which stretch of river he'd searched and which he'd only meant to.

He did not go back for the stag.

He thought about it, walking home in the dark, wet to the bone. Somewhere across the water an animal was lying down in the alders with his arrow in it, and he had left it to search for a piece of wool. That was the truth of his day. He tried to feel worse about the stag than about the scarf, because that was what a decent hunter would feel, and he couldn't manage it, and that made him feel worse about everything.

It was ridiculous. He knew it was ridiculous. A scarf. People had lost their houses. People had lost the whole south of the world, if the rumours were half true, and nobody knew whether they were. The old carter on the Graemoor road had lost his life. And here was Elgin Farras, a grown man

by most reckonings, walking up the lane with his chin trembling over a strip of cloth.

Knowing it was ridiculous didn't help in the slightest. If anything it made it worse, because now he was sad *and* foolish, and there was no one he could tell about either.

Grandma was on the stoop. She was there most evenings now, wrapped in her shawl, watching the south out of a habit she'd never admit to. She looked at him as he came up – the wet clothes, the empty hands, no deer, the bare neck – and he waited for it. Something sharp. Something about boys who go swimming in their boots. He almost wanted it. It would have been easier.

She said nothing for a long while. Then she moved over on the bench, a hand's breadth, which for her was the same as opening her arms.

He sat. He was shivering. She smelled of woodsmoke and wool and the bitter herbs she kept in her apron, and he did not look at her, because he didn't trust his face.

'It was only a scarf,' he said, eventually.

'Yes,' said Grandma.

They sat. Down in the valley someone was singing, badly, at the Sarls' – a christening song for the piglets, by the sound of it. A dog joined in.

Grandma put her hand on the back of his neck, where the scarf should have been. Her fingers were dry and cold and very light.

'You didn't lose her on a branch, boy.'

That was all she said. She took her hand away, and got up, slowly, one hand on the doorframe, and went inside, and he heard her telling his mother to heat water before he caught his death, and also that the lavender on the shelf was a waste of good lavender.

Elgin stayed on the step a long time.

In the morning he crossed the river again, at a better place, and found the stag in the alders two hundred paces from where he'd lost the trail. The

ravens had found it first. He cut out his arrow and stood there for a while, not praying, exactly, because he didn't know who to pray to any more. Then he went back to the riverbank and began to search again.

14

He went back to the river the next day, and the day after that.

It was not hope, exactly. Hope was a word for something with a chance in it. This was more like the way a man returns to the place where he was last whole, not because the place can give it back but because there is nowhere else to stand. He worked the banks in both directions from the willow, further each day, learning the river's habits the way he'd learnt Senja's face – which stones caught things, which eddies gave them back, which stretches held them under until the autumn floods.

He found other men's losses. A cart-wheel with the iron tyre still on it, half-buried in gravel, some farmer's misfortune from the tremor-days. A wooden spoon, worn smooth. A child's shoe, very small, which he did not touch. Once, a twist of grey cloth that made his heart stop until he pulled it free and saw it was a torn scrap of sail-canvas, someone's patching, never anyone's scarf.

On the fourth morning he was five kilometres downstream, past the old ford, when he heard the horses.

The column came up the valley road in no hurry, thirty riders on good horses, riding two by two where the road allowed. Guardsmen in the Lord's grey-green, but not all of them – there were men and women in plain riding clothes, a woman in travel-stained blue whose horse alone was worth the Farras stead, and one rider, near the middle, who sat a grey mare with the particular ease of someone who had been in a saddle longer than Elgin had been alive.

The Wood Elf. It could only be.

Elgin stood at the ford's edge with his boots in the water and his heart doing something complicated, and the column came on, and nobody called halt, because this was a ford and the river was low and there was no reason to stop for a boy with a bow standing on the bank. The first riders were already in the water when he saw it.

It hung from the cantle of an outrider's saddle, grey wool, damp at one end, a single red thread running through it.

Elgin made a sound. He would not have been able to say, afterwards, what kind of sound it was.

The outrider heard him, or saw his face, or both, and reined in at the ford's edge. The column went on past, hooves drumming the ford's stony bed, and Elgin stood in the water up to his ankles and pointed, because his voice had gone somewhere else entirely.

'That's –'

'Found on a blackthorn,' the outrider said, unhurried. 'Three kilometres down. You're the one who lost it?'

Elgin nodded. His hand was already out.

The outrider did not hand it down. He looked at Elgin for a moment – a practised look, the look of a man who dealt in found things and knew their weight – and then he turned in his saddle and called back, not loudly.

'My lord.'

The words moved down the column like a stone through still water, rider to rider, and the column stopped. Not dramatically. Horses stood. Water ran around their legs. Someone up the line asked someone else what the halt was, and got no answer, and the question stopped.

The rider who came back along the column's length was not the largest man on the road, nor the best dressed, nor the one with the most silver on his tack. He wore a cloak that had been wet and dried twice, and his gloves were work gloves, the kind a man wears when he has spent the morning doing something with his hands that gloves are for. He was not young. He

looked like a man who had recently had to rebuild a great deal of the world and had not yet caught up with the paperwork.

He drew up beside the outrider and looked down at Elgin as a carpenter looks at a joint he hasn't made: attentive, measuring, unhurried.

'My lord,' said the outrider, and gestured at the scarf.

Lord Nepomok of the Valleys of Nepor reached down, took the scarf from the saddle in both hands, and looked at it.

He looked at it as he looked at everything, it seemed to Elgin – as though it mattered, as though it were a document or a boundary stone or a man's testimony. His thumb found the red thread and rested on it a moment.

'Yours?' he said.

'Yes, my lord.'

He handed it down.

It was a small thing, that handing down. A ruler on a horse, a boy in a ford, a strip of wet wool passing between them. But he did not pass it through the outrider, and he did not toss it, and he did not make a show of it. He leaned down and put it into Elgin's hands as you put something into the hands of a person, and Elgin took it, and for a moment neither of them spoke.

Then Lord Nepomok straightened in his saddle and looked at the valley – at the ford, at the banks, at the treeline, at the sky – as a man looks at a place he is responsible for. It was not a long look. But it was thorough.

'What does the valley need?' he said.

It was the question of a man who had been riding for days and asking it at every stop. Elgin understood, with a clarity that arrived too late to be useful, that he was being asked to report.

His mind, which had spent four days on a riverbank and before that several weeks on a road, offered him nothing sensible. It offered him the Hollevs' closed door. It offered him Senja's hands. It offered him the old

carter's blood on the stones. It offered him the word *nothing*, which was not an answer a lord could use.

He said the thing that was true.

'For people to come home, my lord.'

Lord Nepomok looked at him for a moment longer than was comfortable. A receiving look. He nodded once, as a man nods when a report is short and accurate and says what needs saying, and then he turned his horse and rode on up the column.

The outrider gave Elgin a nod – or gave the scarf a nod; it was hard to say – and followed.

The Wood Elf passed three riders behind.

She – or he; at that distance, in that light, it was hard to be certain – sat the grey mare with her face turned towards the ford, and her eyes found Elgin as a hand finds a shelf in the dark. Not searching. Knowing.

The look lasted half a second longer than it needed to.

It was a look that contained something Elgin could not read – recognition, perhaps, or its opposite, or something for which the valley had no word. It touched his face like a stranger's hand on a doorframe in passing, checking the grain.

Then she was past, and the column was past, and the road was dust and hoofbeats going north.

Elgin stood in the ford.

The scarf was wet at one end and smelled of blackthorn and horses and the road, and under all of that, faintly, of smoke. He stood in the cold water up to his ankles and held it in both hands and did not put it on, because putting it on would have meant admitting it had been off, and he was not ready to do that.

The banners went up the valley. Grey-green, small, at the column's head, almost apologetic in the wide air. They passed the turn where the road bent towards Aurec town, and then they were gone.

Elgin climbed the bank and sat on the stones. The sun was up properly now. The river ran brown and ordinary past his feet, giving nothing back, keeping nothing, being a river. Somewhere upstream a fish rose, once, and the rings spread and vanished.

He sat there a long time.

He thought about the Lord's gloves – work gloves, worn through at the right thumb. He thought about the elf's eyes, and what they had or hadn't seen in his face. He thought about the scarf on a blackthorn three kilometres downstream, and how long it must have hung there before the column found it, and how the column had found it at all, and whether found things on the Lord's road were always carried, or only when the Lord was riding, and whether that made it better or worse.

He thought about what he had said. For people to come home. A small thing. A true thing. He had said it to the Lord of the Valleys of Nepor, and the Lord had taken it like a report, and maybe it was one.

He thought about Senja.

And then – it arrived quietly, as the best things do – he thought that the Lord was riding the valley road asking people what they needed, and that the expulsion had been reversed, and that the sky was blue, and that the road north was open, and that somewhere on that road there were people coming home, and that some of them might be the people he was thinking about, and that this was, for the first time in more weeks than he wanted to count, a thing that could reasonably be hoped.

He put the scarf around his neck.

It was damp and it smelled of the road and the red thread was still there, and it was the warmest thing he had ever worn.

He stood up, whistled for the dogs, and went home, and the valley, for the first time since the copper sky, looked like a place where things could happen that were not terrible.

15

Elgin came back from the forest at dusk with two hares and a head full of nothing in particular, as a man comes back from a day that has asked nothing of him and given nothing either – which was its own kind of mercy.

He had the scarf on. He always had the scarf on now, weather or no weather, and the valley had stopped remarking on it, as the valley stops remarking on a limp or a missing finger – it had become, simply, the way Elgin Farras was.

The light was going soft and blue over the eaves. He could see the stead from the last rise, the smoke going up straight, the door shut, the stoop empty. Nothing unusual. He came down the lane at his usual pace, unhurried, the hares swinging from his belt.

He was twenty paces from the door when he saw the thread.

It was tied to the door latch, where his hand would fall: a single red thread, no longer than his finger. He read it as he read sign – twice, because the first reading could not be true. Red thread, where he would look. He had been told where to look, once, by a girl at a stream, the autumn before.

Then he saw her.

She was sitting on the stoop with her hands in her lap and her feet together, as you sit when you have been sitting a while and have stopped expecting anyone. She was wearing his grandmother's shawl – the grey one, the good one, the one Grandma wore on cold evenings and had never once, in Elgin's memory, lent to anyone – and it was too big for her, and she had it pulled tight around her shoulders against the evening cold, and her hair was longer.

He stopped walking.

She looked up. The light was going, but it was not gone, and he could see her face, and her face was tired and thinner and older in a way that had nothing to do with age, and it was hers.

Neither of them moved for a moment. The smoke went up. Somewhere down the lane a dog barked, once, and stopped.

'Senja.'

'Elgin.'

He came the rest of the way to the stoop and stood there with the hares at his belt and the scarf at his neck and his heart somewhere he could not account for, and she looked at the scarf, and then at him, and something happened in her face that he had seen once before, across a fire, in a ruin, when he had been a boy glaring at people he didn't know.

'Your grandmother,' she said, 'gave me bread.'

'She does that.'

'She asked me about the road. For an hour.' A pause. 'Then she gave me the shawl.'

'Mother and Father are at the house,' she said. 'Someone had seen to the roof.'

Elgin looked at the shawl. Then he looked at Senja, and she was looking at him, and the look lasted as long as it lasted, which was long enough.

'Stay,' he said.

'Yes.'

He sat down on the stoop beside her, and the door behind them was open, and the light was on inside, and the valley lay quiet in the dusk, and the road north was empty now, because there was no one left on it that he was waiting for.



Tales from the Western Reaches

The Thin Sun

A death at the University of Solmar



Reading time: about 30 minutes

Chapter 1

The landlady found him before the sun did.

She had come down to draw water, and Master Silvan Tero was lying at the foot of his own stair, one hand open, the other curled as if it still held something. His purse was gone, and his slate lay broken on the second step. The chalk that was always on his fingers had left a pale smear on the frame of his door at the top, at the height of a man's shoulder, running down.

Mag Hurle did not scream. She was a Lower Town woman, and the water had come into the Lower Town a month ago and not gone out again; she had done her screaming then. She sent the boy for the Watch, and sat down on the wet step beside the old man, and took the open hand in hers, because it seemed wrong to leave it like that.

Watch-Sergeant Ulla Prett came within the hour, with a constable at her back. Twenty years on the quays had taught her to read a stair the way a clerk reads a column. She read this one from the bottom up.

The old man had been standing at his own door, facing it, with one hand up on the frame where the smear began. There was blood on the top step and the one below it, and then on every step, because he had come down the stair the fast way and the slate had come down with him. She turned his coat back with two fingers and laid it straight again. Two wounds, both from behind and below. Whoever held the knife had stood two steps down, where a man at his own door never looks, and had not needed to reach.

Quay work. She had seen it forty times, and it was the third this month. The city was full of men who had lost everything and found a knife.

Constable Voss had gone up past her to the door. He was young, and he had been drilled on the standing order since the first marked door in Sol-

mar, and she had watched him look at every doorframe on the quays ever since. Now he crouched at this one with his nose a hand's breadth from the wood. Then he stood up too quickly and said the word.

'Sergeant. That's a mark.'

Across the lane a shutter opened, and then another.

Prett looked at the smear. It was the shape a dying man's hand makes on wood. It was chalk because the man had lived with chalk on his fingers, and it ran down because he had gone down.

'That is chalk off his own fingers, Voss,' she said.

'It might be a mark, Sergeant. The order says any chalk near a body goes to the desk, any chalk at all, and it says we don't decide.'

'Flood and—' she began, and stopped. Mag Hurle was sitting at the foot of the stair with the old man's hand in hers, and a Lower Town woman did not need to hear the Flood used as a curse any more.

The word had been said now, in the lane, where the neighbours could hear it, and it could not be unsaid. By noon it would be in every drinking-house on the quays. Somewhere on the high ground a bell would ring, and a file would open, and men who had never seen this stair would decide what had happened on it.

'Run to the chalk desk,' she said. 'Tell them it might be a mark. Tell them I said *might*.'

He was gone before she had finished, and Mag Hurle went in to fetch a blanket. Prett sat down on the wet step where the landlady had been, beside the old man, and looked at the broken slate.

It had come apart cleanly in two, and one half lay face down. The other lay face up, and on it, in a small neat hand, was a column of sums, each a little smaller than the one above it. All but the last were ticked. The last was small.

The marked dead had all been keepers of small counts; every constable in Solmar knew that much now.

It was a robbery. She had read it from the foot of the stair, and she had not been wrong about a stair in twenty years.

She sat with the column of sums and the open hand, and for the first time that morning she was not sure.



Chapter 2

'Two evenings in the week, always the same two,' the porter said. 'He went out at the sixth bell, and he was back by the tenth.'

He kept his finger on the line in his book while he spoke, as though the words might get out if he let go. His name was Benno, and the University's lodge was his: a room of new lime-wash under an old carved lintel, salvaged from some drowned merchant's house and set in again. Its window looked down the new street towards the quays.

'Not at first, mind,' Benno said. 'The first weeks he never went out at all. Then a month back he started, two evenings, always down the hill, and he took his stipend with him in coin.'

'Is that strange, for a Master?'

'The others leave theirs on the books and draw paper against it. Coin is heavy, Sergeant, and a man doesn't carry it down the hill at night unless he means to leave it there.' He looked at the line under his finger. 'Every week, the whole of it, and gone by the next.'

Prett wrote *two evenings* in her book, and then *coin*. She did not like the two words together.

By mid-morning the University had claimed him, with a grief that was three parts genuine and one part terror. It was a season old, and it had cried its Open Chairs across the Reaches as the safest place on the continent for a learned man to think. Now one of its chairs lay on a board in the Watch house under Mag Hurle's blanket.

The copyist came down to the lodge while she was still writing. He was a narrow, quiet man from Carrick called Cadell, who had known Tero in the valleys and had named the body an hour before. He kept wiping his fingers on his sleeve, though there was no ink on them.

'He was born at Seren,' Cadell said, before she had asked him anything. 'That was before the Order, when it was still a warm coast with towns on it and a great temple he used to describe to me. He left young and never went back, because there was nothing to go back to.' He wiped his fingers again. 'He came to us in Carrick, and he stayed forty years.'

'And what did he do in Carrick, for forty years?'

'The stars.' He said it as if it explained a life, and perhaps it did. 'He read the sky, and the Elves let him sit with their records. Nobody sits with their records, Sergeant. They let him, over years, the way they let nobody else. He knew things about the sky that no other living man knows, because the ones who taught him were not men.'

Prett wrote *stars*, and then *elves*, and felt the day getting heavier.

'He was to lecture next week, on the earlier lights,' Cadell went on. 'The Elves remember skies like this one, he said, with a new star in them and a thin sun. They have seen it before, and they wrote it down.' His voice went, and he waited for it to come back. 'He was so glad to be here. He told me once that before he died, he wanted to sit in a room full of minds and not be the only one.'

Up on the hill a bell began to ring. It was not the hour for any bell.

* * *

Emmerin had counted the steps twice. There were nine, and the old man had come down all of them.

He knelt on the top one with his lamp and laid the first tracing against the doorframe. The oiled paper was stiff with cold and did not want to lie flat, so he held it down with his thumbs and looked through it at the smear. Then he laid the second tracing, and the third.

He knew the fair hand better than he knew his father's. He had traced it from more doors than he cared to count, and Emmerin counted everything. He knew where it pressed and where it lifted, and how evenly it spaced its strokes, like a clerk who expects an auditor. This was not that. This was four fingers dragged down wood by a man who was falling.

It was chalk. It was not a mark.

He sat back on his heels. The sergeant was sitting two steps below him, looking up at the door as if she were measuring it. She had been sitting there when he arrived, and she had not moved, and he did not like to ask her why.

'Well?' she said.

'It does not match the hand.' He said it carefully, because it was true and he wished it were more certain. 'The fair hand is exact, and this is a drag. It is chalk, but it is not a mark.'

She let out a breath, and he watched her let it out and knew what he was about to do to it.

'But the hand has changed its ways before, Sergeant. It stopped for a whole season, once, and it has done things nobody expected.' He made himself look at her. 'I can tell you this is not its usual work. I cannot tell you it is not its work.'

He knew what *cannot* would do. It would keep every bell on the hill ringing until somebody brought him a certainty, and nobody ever had. If he said *not*, and he was wrong, the next marked door in Solmar would be his, and he would have to stand in front of it and know.

So he had said *cannot*. It was the honest word, and he hated it.

The desk's runners had lifted both halves of the slate from the step in a cloth. He unwrapped them on the landing and turned them over, one and then the other. On one face was a line of figures with small signs between them, hours perhaps, or angles; it had yesterday's date at its head, and it stopped halfway along, as if the writer had been called away. On the other face was a column of sums. The sergeant looked at it as though they had met before.

'It is a keeper's count,' Emmerin said. 'Payments or receipts, something being counted down.'

He did not say the rest. On that stair he did not need to.

Inside, the rooms said little that helped. The notebooks stood on their shelf, eleven of them, close-written, their margins laced with a fine sloping script that was not the old man's own but had been copied in his hand. The lecture lay half-written on the table, his good coat hung on the door, and nothing had been disturbed.

Emmerin counted the notebooks, and then, because he was Emmerin, he counted the leaves. In the fourth notebook, close to the spine, there was a stub. Someone had cut a page out with a sharp blade and a steady hand.

He held it to the lamp, and the sergeant came and looked, and for a while neither of them said anything.

A purse was gone from the stair and a page was gone from the shelf, and everything else of worth was here. Emmerin had been taught, like every clerk on the chalk file, to read a room for staging. He read this one, and did not like what it said.

Chapter 3

'He was paying someone,' Captain Strood said. 'Two evenings a week for a month, down the hill, with his whole stipend in coin. A man does not do that for small beer.'

The back room of the Watch house had four chairs and seven people, which told Prett who mattered before anyone else spoke. Strood had one. Master Hesketh had come down from the University and had another, and he held his gown gathered in his lap so that it did not touch the floor. A Tally man called Pardew had the third, sent down from the hill to count something. Emmerin had been given the fourth and did not seem to know what to do with it. Prett stood at the back by the door, where she could see all of them.

'Paying whom?' said Hesketh. 'Surely that is the whole of the question, Captain.'

'Whoever cut the page out of his book.'

'Then we agree.' Hesketh smoothed his gown over his knees. 'Master Tero carried the only record outside the Groves of what the Elves have seen in the sky, and somebody knew it. They took the page they came for, and a purse to make it look like the quays.' He let that settle. 'He was not killed for a purse, Captain. The University will not have it said that he was killed for a purse.'

'Or he was killed for what he counted.' Strood pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes, as he did when a day had gone on too long. 'Emmerin, tell them about the slate.'

Emmerin told it well, in order and without once raising his voice, and the room grew colder as he went: a line of star-figures, broken off, and a column of sums, counted down.

'The marked dead were keepers of counts, every one of them,' Strood said. 'And here is a man who keeps counts nobody else in the Reaches can keep, killed the week before he stands up and reads them out.'

'Or it is Seren,' said Pardew. He had a way of pricing things as he spoke, as if the room were a cargo. 'I have sold rope to Seren. They pay on the nail, and they do not care for men who read signs in the sky. Here is one of their own blood, raised among Elves, about to lecture a foreign University on lights and omens. If I were the Order, I would want that stopped.'

'The Wardens are the length of the Reaches away,' said Strood.

'So is Carrick,' said Pardew. 'And I can tell you to the last coin what Carrick's goodwill is worth to this city, Captain, which is a great deal more than a purse.'

'Then do we enter it in the channel?' Strood asked.

Nobody answered at once, and Prett watched them work it out, each by his own arithmetic. Hesketh did not want three other courts reading that Solmar's University could not keep its Masters alive. Pardew did not want Carrick reading it in the channel before Solmar's own letter reached them. Strood did not want to be the captain who had kept it out, if it was the hand.

They all looked at Emmerin.

'I cannot say it is not,' Emmerin said, to his knees.

'Captain.'

They turned round, and Hesketh looked faintly surprised that the back of the room had a voice.

'A man goes down to the quay edge two evenings a week with coin in his purse,' Prett said. 'One night somebody follows him home, puts a knife in him at his own door and takes the purse. I have stood over that man forty times, sirs. I will stand over him again next week, and nobody will ring a bell for him.'

'And the page?' said Hesketh.

'I don't know about the page yet, Master Hesketh.'

'And the notebooks?' said Strood. 'Worth more than every purse on the quays, and left on the shelf.'

'Because a quay knife can't sell a book he can't read, Captain. Nobody on the quays would give him a copper for it, and he knows that, so he takes the purse.'

'Or,' said Hesketh gently, 'somebody wished us to believe exactly that.'

There it was. If the notebooks had gone, it was a thief of the Groves; because they had stayed, it was a thief of the Groves who was cleverer than that. Whatever had been taken proved a thief, and whatever had been left proved a stager.

There is no shape it can take that makes it small.

She had one argument left, the only one she had ever needed, which was that she had read the stair. In this room it would sound like a sergeant's feeling. She sat down on the end of the coal-box by the door, which was not a chair.

Strood took his hands from his eyes. 'We have to bring this to Senectet Osgar.'

* * *

'Do the marks match?'

The First Tally heard it standing, in the ledger-room with the two locks, with his back to a cold grate. He had let the captain talk for as long as it took to trim a lamp. Then he asked his one question, and he asked it of

Emmerin, who was the least important man in the room and the only one who knew.

'No, First Tally.' Emmerin stood straight in the doorway and looked smaller for it. 'But the hand has changed before, and I cannot—'

'Give the file to Wend.'

Strood cleared his throat. 'The channel, First Tally, if it is the hand—'

'Not on a smear.' Osgar did not look up from the sheet on the desk in front of him, already begun, and though Prett could not read it from the back of the room, she could see that it was short. Condolences ran long. Warnings did not.

'Seal the notebooks under two hands,' Osgar said. 'Nobody reads the star-work but a Master, and not alone.'

'With respect, First Tally,' said Hesketh, 'there is no Master in Solmar who can read the star-work.'

'Then seal it anyway.'

So two Masters would sit in a sealed room with a book neither of them could read, and watch each other not reading it. Prett kept her face still.

Osgar looked up at them then, all of them, and it was the face of a tired man who had just been told that his safest place on the continent had lost a chair to a knife.

'And find me the small end of it,' he said. 'There is always a small end. Somebody find it before we frighten Carrick over a robbery.'

Prett was no longer sure there was a small end to find. She went to look for it anyway, because it was the only kind of looking she knew.

Chapter 4

'The old gentleman,' said the keeper of the Lampwick. 'Aye, two nights a week, small beer, in that corner.'

He was wiping a cup that was already dry. His name was Coll, and he had kept the Lampwick since before the Waters, when it stood on a street. Now it stood on piles at the end of the plank walks, where the stilt-slums began and the lamps burned behind oiled cloth, and the street was somewhere under the floor.

Prett had walked the old man's evenings from the top of the hill to the bottom, and it had taken most of the morning. She had asked at three houses before a boatman gave her the fourth. Coll was one of the keepers who were paid to listen, which everyone on the quays knew and nobody said, and he answered her straight because in twenty years she had never once sold him.

'Who did he drink with?'

'Nobody. He sat with a girl.' Coll set the cup down and picked up another. 'He talked to her, that's all. He never went up, Sergeant, not once, and I'd know. He'd buy her hour the way you'd buy an hour of a clerk, and then he'd sit there and tell her about the sky, and she'd listen. He paid her fair and went home.' He held the cup up to the lamp and did not look at it. 'Sad old thing. Kind, though. You don't see kind in here.'

'What was her name, Coll?'

'Her name's Liss. She's a Lower Town girl, lost her people when the water came into the rows.' He hesitated. 'He was getting her out, Sergeant. Paying down what she owed, a bit every week. She told me once, laughing, like she didn't believe it herself: an old man from nowhere, buying her clear coin by coin, and wanting nothing back but somebody to hear about the stars.'

So he had been paying someone. They had been right about that, up on the hill.

'And who holds her paper?'

'They don't tell me that. The girls don't, and the men who hold it don't drink here.' Coll turned the cup in his hands. 'You're the second to ask after her today.'

Prett waited.

'Men from up the hill, first thing this morning. Grey coats, and they didn't drink either.' He put the cup down. 'They had her name before they came in, and his. They had it from me, weeks back, because I sent it up the way I send everything up. A foreign gentleman sits with a girl, talks, pays.' He moved one shoulder. 'It wasn't anything, then.'

'What did they want to know?'

'They wanted to know when she'd be in, and I said dusk, if she comes at all. She hasn't been in since he died.'

'Did they ask where she sleeps?'

'No.' Coll almost smiled. 'Men from up the hill never think the girls sleep anywhere.'

Prett looked at the corner, where a bench stood against the wall with a stool facing it across a small table. The old man would have given the girl the bench, so that she could see the room, because in her trade you watched the door. He would have taken the stool.

She sat down on the stool with her back to the door, and did not like it. When she turned to look behind her, the door was five paces off, and anyone standing in it would see the table over her shoulder: the cups, the girl's hands, whatever was counted out between them.

She thought about dusk, and about the grey coats taking Liss here in front of every boatman on the plank walks. The man who held her paper would hear of it by midnight, and he would know what she might have said. A man who could put a knife in a Master at his own door would not sit at home and wait to be asked about it.

'Where does she sleep, Coll?'

* * *

The room was the size of a wardrobe, and the water talked under the floor.

Liss sat on the bed with her sleeves pulled down over her hands. She had heard he was dead, and she had not slept. She looked at Prett's coat, and then at Prett's face, and Prett watched her decide there was no use in pretending about anything.

Above the bed, held to the planks with two fish-hooks, was a page.

Prett knew the paper before she knew the drawing. It was the paper of the old man's notebooks, cut close to the spine, and down its margin ran a line of fine sloping script, copied in his hand.

For the space of a breath the whole theory from the hill stood up in that little room and looked at her. A girl in one of the Tally's own listening houses. A foreign Master of the Groves, paying her in coin. A page of the star-work, cut out of its book, on her wall.

So they're right. No. She did not know that yet. She knew there was a page on a wall.

'Where did you get that, Liss?'

Liss looked up at it. 'He gave it me,' she said, and her voice was hoarse. 'I told him I couldn't see the stars any more, not since the Burning, because you look up and it's all milk. So he drew them for me the way they are behind it, so I'd know they were still there.' She pulled her sleeves further down. 'He cut it out of his book with his little knife. I said he'd get in trouble, and he said it was his book.'

The theory sat down again.

'How did it start, you and him?'

'He came in out of the wet. He was writing on his slate, and I asked him what, because you ask them things; it's part of it.' She almost laughed. 'And he told me, for an hour. Then he paid me for the hour, like I'd done something.'

'What did he tell you about?'

'The sky and what's in it. Which ones wander and which ones stay put. That the new star isn't new, not to the Elves. They've seen it before, he said, and the last time they wrote it down.'

'What did they write?'

'He wouldn't tell me that part.' Now she did smile, and it was worse than crying. 'He said the Masters had to hear it first. It was only fair, he said, because they'd been waiting longer.'

The lecture had been given, then. Two evenings a week, at the Lampwick, to an audience of one.

'He was paying what you owed,' Prett said.

'Every week, coin on the table where I could count it.' Liss looked at the floor, and the water moved under it. 'He wrote it on his slate, what I owed and what he'd paid and what was left, and he showed me every time. He said a debt you can't see never ends.'

'How much was left?'

'Nothing. After this week, nothing.' Her voice went flat. 'He had the rest of it with him that night, all of it, in his purse, and he showed me. He said next time we'd count it out together in front of Coll, so it was witnessed and nobody could ever say I owed.'

At a table five paces from the door.

'Liss,' Prett said, as gently as she knew how. It cost her something, because in the girl's trade gentleness was a tool, and the girl would know it for one. 'Who holds your paper?'

'Fenn,' Liss said.

Then she heard herself, and could not take it back.

She put her hands over her face, sleeves and all. Prett stood in the little room with the water under the floor. The coin meant to buy a woman clear of a cruel man was the exact thing that had got a kind one killed.

When Liss could speak again, she looked up at the page. 'Are you going to take it?'

Osgar had sealed the star-work under two hands. The page was evidence, and it might belong to Carrick, or to the University, or to a dead man's estate. It was also the only thing in the room that was not damp.

Prett took out her book and wrote: *One leaf, fourth notebook. Not recovered.*

It was the first false line she had written in twenty years. She looked at it for a moment, and then she closed the book.

'Stay here tonight,' she said, 'and don't go near the Lampwick.'

'Where would I go?' said Liss.

It was past noon, and the grey coats would be back at the Lampwick by dusk.



Chapter 5

Fenn stood up when she came in, as though she had called on him.

Everything about him was pleasant: the open face, the clean hands, the way he offered her the only stool in the room and sat on the edge of the bed himself. He called her *Sergeant* at the end of nearly every sentence, the way a shopman says *madam*.

The room was over a chandler's at the edge of the relief yard; Liss had told her where. There was no chase worth the name. Voss found the knife under the pillow, not cleaned, and the purse under a loose board by the bed, and not a coin of it had been spent.

He had heard the bells like everyone else. He had heard what the quays were saying about chalk and elves and the Order, and he had sat in this room and listened to the whole city look for somebody else.

'I help them, Sergeant,' Fenn said. 'House Renn gives them a bowl and a spade. I give them a roof, and somebody to see they're not robbed in the night, and that costs. What they owe me is what it cost. That's not a crime in Solmar, Sergeant. That's a ledger.'

'A ledger is written down,' Prett said. 'Where is yours?'

He tapped his temple and smiled.

'The old man wrote his down.' She laid the half of the slate on the bed between them, column up. 'Every coin he paid, and every coin still owing. By the end of this week it came to nothing.'

Fenn looked at the column without reading it, and Prett doubted that he could. 'Well,' he said. 'It didn't, though. Did it, Sergeant?'

By the door, Constable Voss shifted his feet.

'Why keep the purse?' Prett asked. 'You could have spent it three times over.'

'It's hers, isn't it?' He sounded surprised that she needed telling. 'It's what she owes me. I was keeping it for her.'

Prett let that lie on the bed beside the slate. She had one more question, and she had been saving it.

'Do you know who he was?'

'Some old flood-drunkard, sniffing round my girl.' He shrugged. 'Sergeant.'

'He was a Master of the University, and he read the sky,' Prett said. 'The Elves let him sit with their records for forty years, and they have let no other man do that. There is nobody alive who knows what he knew, and next week he was going to stand up and tell it to the whole University. You put a knife in all of it.'

She watched it reach him.

He was not ashamed, and she had not expected shame. He was interested. He sat up a little on the edge of the bed, and something moved behind the pleasant face, the way a man weighs a purse in his hand before he opens it.

'Is that right,' he said. It was not a question.

He had meant to deny it. She could see him meaning to, and she saw the moment he stopped. A man who knifed an old fool over a girl was nobody. A man who had killed the one man the Elves trusted was somebody, and he would be somebody in the quarries for twenty years.

'I went up the steps behind him,' Fenn said. 'He never even turned round.'

Voss had gone the colour of lime-wash. 'Plague-rat,' he said, under his breath. Prett found that she had stood up, and did not remember doing it.

There was nothing behind Fenn: no hand, no creed, no design. There was a young man with a pleasant face who had wanted to be bigger than an old man, and who thought, now, that he was.

Down at the Lampwick, the grey coats would be settling in to wait for a girl who was not coming.

Chapter 6

'It's nothing,' Wend said.

He had brought the file back up the hill himself, and he stood with it beside the First Tally's desk, as he had stood in that room for thirty years without once sitting down.

'A man out of the relief queues who keeps women on paper. The old Master was buying one of them clear, and the man followed him home and knifed him for it.' He set the purse down between the two locks. 'This was under his floor, not spent. There's no channel in it, First Tally. There's no hand. There's not even a plan. There's a knife and a grudge the size of a coin.'

Osgar did not touch the purse, and Wend had not expected him to.

'And it was in our own book,' Wend said.

Osgar looked up.

'The Lampwick sent it up weeks ago. A foreign Master sits with a girl twice a week, talks, pays.' Wend kept his voice level. 'We filed it under nothing.'

He had read the line himself the first time and thought nothing of it, which was what it had been worth. After the bells he had read it again, and it had been worth everything; he had sent two men to the Lampwick on the strength of it, and they had sat there till midnight waiting for a girl who never came. It had been worth neither. That was the part he would keep.

Osgar said nothing for a while, and then he asked his question.

'The girl,' he said. 'Not the man. The girl. What happens to her?'

Wend had known it would be that question. He had been at Osgar's elbow long enough to know which end of a thing the man would pick up.

'Nothing. The purse was the last of what she owed. Prett has it from the girl, and from the old man's slate, and he'd have paid her clear this week. Now it goes into evidence, and then to his estate, and there's no heir this side of the mountains.'

Osgar waited. He was good at waiting; Wend had watched him outwait whole Tally Houses.

'The man goes to the quarries. The Open Bench sits tomorrow, and it's always the quarries now, with the Works Quarter wanting stone. So nobody holds her paper any more.' Wend paused. 'She's free, if you like. She's back in Renn's queue, First Tally. That's what free is, down there.'

Osgar looked at the purse for a long time.

Wend knew what was in it to the coin, because it was in the file. He also knew what the bells had cost, because he had signed for them: the runners, the doubled watch on the quays, two Masters' fees for sitting in a sealed room with a book neither could read, a courier kept waiting at the harbour for a letter. The purse would not have paid for the first night.

The letter had never gone; Osgar had written it that first night and then kept it back, which Wend had noticed and not remarked on. Now the First Tally took it out of the drawer, read it through once and laid it face down, and drew a fresh sheet towards him. A condolence was a better letter to send, and a worse thing to explain.

There was one more line in the file, and Wend had read it three times. *One leaf, fourth notebook. Not recovered.* He had read a great many sergeants' books, and he knew the difference between a thing not found and a thing not taken.

He let it stand.

Outside the window the grey sea light came in over the scaffolds of the Second Founding, raw timber and lime-wash rising out of a drowned city's stone.

'The world is full of great designs,' Wend said, into the quiet, because it fell to him to say such things. 'Most men still die of small ones.'

* * *

'Hold it to the light, would you?' Cadell said.

Prett held the half of the slate up to the window. The Great Ledger lay open on its stand between them, and the copyist had found the old man's

pages, entry after entry in the same small neat hand since the Chairs were cried. Beneath the last of them Cadell began to write in his own.

He copied the date, and the line of figures, and the small signs between them. Where the slate stopped, he stopped.

'You could finish it, couldn't you?' Prett said. 'A man who knew him.'

'I could guess the rest. Anyone could.' Cadell wiped his fingers on his sleeve. 'But it would be my guess, not his.'

He sanded the page and closed the book. Then he looked at the slate in her hand, at the other face of it, turned towards her.

'And that side?'

'Accounts,' Prett said, and turned it face down. 'Nothing for the Ledger.'

'He never gave his lecture,' Cadell said. 'Whatever the Elves remembered, it went down those steps with him.'

Prett thought of a room the size of a wardrobe, and a page on two fishhooks. She thought of Master Hesketh in that room with his gown held up off the wet planks, writing a girl down.

She said nothing.

* * *

Mag Hurle was on the top step with a bucket, scrubbing the doorframe. Prett sat halfway down the stair and watched the smear come off. It came off easily, because it had only ever been chalk.

Constable Voss was cutting the Watch's cord from the latch. When he had finished he came down and stood on the step below her, winding the cord round his fingers.

'I'm sorry, Sergeant.'

'What for?'

'The word. They're saying at the Watch house what the bells cost, and they're saying a constable who can't tell a smear from a mark—'

'You were right to say it.'

He looked at her as if she were being kind, which was not a thing she was known for.

'It was a smear,' she said. 'You didn't know that, and neither did I. I only thought it, because I always think it. One of these mornings it will be a mark, and I'll think it's a smear, and I'll sit down on the step.' She looked at the doorframe, wet and clean. 'The order says we don't decide. The order is right.'

He nodded, and did not believe her. She hoped he would say the word again anyway.

She had been right. It was not the same as knowing.

On her way down she passed the relief yard. House Renn's queue went twice round it, as it had every day since the rows went under: boatmen, porters, net-women, a bowl apiece and a spade after. Liss was in it, halfway along, with her sleeves pulled down over her hands. It was the same yard, and somewhere in it, a month ago, a young man with a pleasant face had been kind to her.

Liss looked up once, at the sky over the new scaffolds, where the sun stood thin behind its haze as it had since the Burning. Then the line moved, and she moved with it.

* * *

Filed. No channel. No mark. The bell need not have rung.

Chapter 7

'That is all of it, every coin,' Tero said, and drew the purse strings tight. 'Next time we count it out in front of Coll, and he witnesses it, and then nobody can ever say you owe.'

Liss laughed, the way she always did when he told her something she could not afford to believe. He had stopped minding, because she would believe it next time, when there was nothing left to count.

He turned the slate over and showed her the column once more, as he did every time. The last sum sat at the bottom without its tick. Next time he would tick it and rule a line under it, and that would be the end of the column, and he found he was looking forward to the line more than to the lecture.

'Say the beginning again,' she said.

He cleared his throat. 'Masters of the University.'

'Slower. You go fast when you're pleased.'

He said it slower. Then he told her again how the Elves kept the sky, night after night, the way her city kept its ledgers. He told her how they had shown him their pages over the years, one at a time, as if each were a test. She had heard it before, but she let him tell it anyway, and asked the question she always asked, and he gave her the answer he always gave.

'The end is for the Masters. It's only fair. They've waited longer.'

When he left, a young man at the door stood aside to let him pass and wished him good night. He had a pleasant face, and Tero wished him the same.

The plank walks were wet, and the lamps behind their oiled cloth made small warm rooms of light along the water. Below the quay the drowned rows stood roofless in the dark, each window a hole with nothing behind it. He climbed out of the herring smoke into the smell of lime and new timber, past the scaffolds of the new streets, and on up the hill towards his stair.

Next week he would sit in a room full of minds, and by then she would be clear. He was sixty-eight years old, and he could not remember a week he had looked forward to more.

At the top of his stair he stopped, as he always did, and looked up.

The haze was there; it was always there now. But it was thinner tonight, and for a moment, low over the water, he had it: the new star that was not new, faint as a thumbprint on glass.

He took out the slate, turned it to the clean face and set it against the doorframe to steady it. He wrote the date first, as he always did, because a figure without its date was only rumour. Then the hour, and the first of the figures, and the sign between them.

Someone was coming up the steps behind him, unhurried. The boy, perhaps, back late from an errand.

He did not look round. He had half the line, and the haze was closing again, and he wanted the rest of it.



Tales from the Western Reaches

Ryhomir Day

A tale from the Western Reaches



Reading time: about 1 hour 40 minutes

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 daybook 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 Pel-

lan. 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.

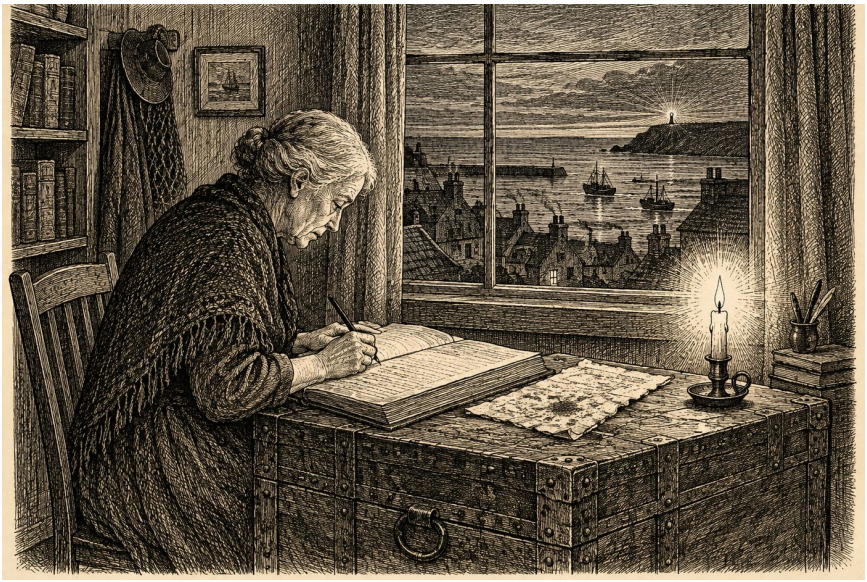
When she looked up again, it was dusk.

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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