MIRACLES OF

SROGANT

The Flood Chronicles

The Thin Sun

A death at the University of Solmar

Aodhàn Mac-Talla



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About this tale

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

The Thin Sun grew out of that play. Its people are the ones the season's decisions and disasters landed on.

Reading time: about 30 minutes.

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The Thin Sun

Aodhàn Mac-Talla

Chapter I

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 Solmar, 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.



The next world

Armidion

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