The Unfinished Form

Book Two of Starfall Catastrophe

Lim Boon Chuan

Contents

1. A Hand That Would Not Open 3
2. The Examination 9
3. The Clapperless Bell 19
4. What the Lesson Gave 25
5. The Margin 33
6. Two Letters 41
7. The Broken Spear 47
8. A Voice on Paper 55
9. The House beside the Weir 61
10. A Receipt for Ash 69
11. Four Names on the Door 75
12. The Arrangement Desk 81
13. The Correction 89
14. An Unsigned Map 97
15. The Other Schools 103
16. The Price of a Safe Lesson 111
17. The Green House 119
18. The Sister at the Door 127
19. A Rest Day 135
20. The Attendance Book 143

21. Ash at the Kitchen Door **151**

22. A Junction Cut Too Soon **157**

23. Separate Tasks **163**

24. The Perfect Student **169**

25. Beyond the Shutter **173**

26. The Reserve **179**

27. Open the Doors **185**

28. Lesson Ends **189**

29. Irrecoverable Loss **193**

30. The Unfinished Form **197**

31. The Unreturned **201**

32. The Inquiry **207**

33. What Remains **217**

34. The Name on the Notice **229**

35. A Performance without a Count **235**

36. A Door Left Open **243**



Figure 1: Cover

1. A Hand That Would Not Open



The man at the ferry had forgotten how to release his sword.

Mali noticed the hand before she noticed the blade. His thumb had whitened beneath the guard. The other fingers moved a little, trying to unhook themselves, then tightened again. He stood on the wet landing between a basket of live hens and a woman holding two passage tokens. Behind them, the morning boat knocked gently against its posts.

“Teren,” the woman said. “The boat is here.”

He turned his head toward her. It was an ordinary face, sunburned across the nose, with a small patch of shaving missed beneath the jaw. He seemed embarrassed. Mali looked away to give him room to recover himself.

Her employer was already aboard. She could see the merchant’s round hat above the sacks of flour, and the empty space he had kept beside him for the hired guard. Half

her fee waited on the opposite bank. The other half was in her purse, less the cost of breakfast and a new sole for her left boot. She had calculated the remainder twice. Enough to get to the road school, if its roof had survived another winter.

Teren’s wife reached for his sleeve.

The sword rose.

Mali put her travelling bundle between his wrist and his cheek. Steel went through her spare shirt and out beside the knot. She turned with the blow, letting the bundle fall, and drove her shoulder under his arm.

She had expected resistance. She had not expected him to be looking at her with such concentrated apology.

“Can’t,” he said.

His elbow struck her ear. The landing tilted. She dropped to one knee among the baskets and brought the flat of her scabbard across his knuckles. Two fingers broke with sounds she felt through the wood.

The sword fell. His hand remained closed.

Above the toll box, the public announcement horn gave a soft pulse. A pale glass fitting had been added behind its brass mouth. Mali had taken it for part of the fare counter until the light inside it branched. The ferryman looked up, then toward the northern hills.

For a moment the quay was full of things hitting boards. A ferryman’s pole. A dropped plum. One of the brass tokens, rolling in a circle so exact that Mali watched it instead of the man she had hurt.

Her own right hand had closed around the scabbard.

She told it to open.

Nothing happened.

All along the landing, bodies inclined toward the northern hills. The ferryman bent over his empty hands. A child by the hens had made fists against her chest. Teren’s wife stared at the remaining token pressed edgewise into her palm. Mali could feel the right next movement waiting inside her shoulder: draw, turn, finish. The relief of knowing it was dreadful. She had been tired for so long.

Then a hen beat against the basket lid, scattering white feathers through the railing, and the pressure passed.

Mali let go so abruptly that the scabbard slipped against her knee.

Teren made a small, wounded sound. His wife took his wrist. Blood ran from her palm onto the back of his hand, and he began to cry.

Nobody moved to help.

Mali looked up at them. A dozen strangers, all trying to discover whether the thing that had just happened could be hidden by an ordinary expression. She knew the effort. She had spent years perfecting it.

“Cloth,” she said.

The child opened her fists. “I’ve got a ribbon.”

“Clean cloth.” Mali heard her own sharpness and made herself look at the girl. “Thank you. Keep it for now.”

Teren’s wife pulled a folded towel from her basket. She tried to shake it open one-handed. Mali reached for it, but the woman drew away.

“You broke him.”

“Yes.”

The word left them with no pleasant way past what had happened.

“He was going to cut his face,” Mali said.

“He wasn’t going to cut anyone.”

Teren’s good hand caught his wife’s sleeve. She looked down at him. They held each other’s eyes for a long time. Then she gave Mali the towel.

His name was Teren, hers Ilya. Mali learned this while folding cloth around a straight piece of basket wood. The hens’ owner complained until the ferryman offered to mend the basket himself. One of Teren’s fingers sat at an angle Mali did not like. She had bound injuries on the road, but she had never learned to put bones back where they belonged.

“The infirmary at the weir,” Ilya said. “They’ll know.”

“Can he walk?” asked the merchant from the boat.

He was looking at Mali, not Teren.

“I don’t know yet.”

“The current turns soon.”

Mali pressed the towel’s loose end beneath the binding. There was blood inside her collar. Her ear had swollen until it seemed to have a heartbeat of its own.

“You can go without me,” she said.

“You took an advance.”

She looked up. He was not an unkind man. He had bought her breakfast and pretended not to notice how quickly she ate it. Behind his shoulder, two labourers waited with a grain trolley. Delay would cost them money too.

Mali untied her purse.

The coins felt warm. She put back the half-fee she had earned for guarding the wagons from the southern road, counted out the advance for the crossing, then counted it again because hunger made arithmetic unpleasant. Six copper pieces remained.

The merchant watched her set his money on the boards.

“I can’t pay for an injury you chose,” he said.

“I know.”

He might have said something else if she had argued. Instead he picked up the coins, and that was the end of their acquaintance. The ferryman pushed out. Ilya’s dropped token rolled as the wake reached the landing, and the child caught it beneath one bare foot.

Teren would not look at the splint. His eyes followed the boat.

“We were going to see my brother,” he said.

“You still will,” Ilya told him.

“Not today.”

“No. Not today.”

Mali sat back on her heels. A woman with a jar of salve asked to look at her ear. Mali almost said it was nothing. The woman was already setting down her jar, and refusing would have required a kind of strength Mali no longer had. She turned her head.

The salve stung. Teren watched her wince with something like gratitude.

Above the northern hills, the rift was a pale, crooked scar. Seven months had passed since the Convergence. Five people had come back alive, and their names were painted on walls all the way from the coast to the highland passes. Mali had slept beneath a portrait of Doctor Boon in a granary once. The painter had given him a sword. She wondered whether he knew.

Everyone knew the signal had fractured. Everyone had been told there would be a chance to rebuild.

No one had promised that a chance would be comfortable.

“Does it happen often?” she asked Teren.

He shook his head, then stopped.

Ilya said, “At night sometimes.”

“Not like this.”

“No. Not like this.”

He flexed his good hand. One finger at a time, as though someone might inspect the result.

“Bad dreams?” Mali asked.

“Waking is worse.” His face tightened. “Was worse.”

Ilya touched his shoulder. He let her this time.

“He trains at Bell House,” she said. “The recovery lessons. He hadn’t slept a whole night since the river camps. After the fourth lesson, he slept until morning.”

Mali glanced at the sword lying beside the basket. It was a worker’s blade with a plain grip, sharpened unevenly. Nothing in Teren’s movement had suggested training enough for steel.

“They give swords to people who can’t sleep?”

“He works the night watch. He had the sword before.” Ilya’s voice had cooled again. “They gave him his work back.”

Mali had made a mistake. She was good at hearing them after she had spoken.

“I wanted the fear to stop,” Teren said.

There was nothing she could say against that. At Red Eave, they practised until thought left the body and the body obeyed. Deren called it freedom from hesitation. Mali had once wanted it badly enough to let him hurt her.

Ilya picked up the ruined bundle. The cut had passed through the spare shirt and opened the side of Mali’s little food pouch. Rice had soaked into the boards. The woman’s eyes paused on the few things inside: a comb with two missing teeth, a sewing roll, a pair of stockings, a letter creased soft from being opened often.

“We can replace the cloth,” she said.

“Keep your money for the infirmary.”

Mali took the bundle before Ilya could see the letter properly. She folded the torn shirt over its contents and tied the knot tight. Teren’s sword she pushed toward his wife with two fingers.

“Wrap that until someone can carry it.”

Ilya obeyed, then looked annoyed with herself for obeying. Mali stood.

The hens’ owner had found a handcart. He and the salve woman argued over which path to the infirmary was less rutted. Teren tried to rise before they were ready and went pale. Mali caught his elbow. This time his wife let her.

Between them they got him into the cart. He apologised for his weight, for the broken basket slat, for the blood. He did not apologise for the sword until Mali had stepped away.

“You didn’t mean it,” she said.

He stared at her. “I still did it.”

The salve woman took the front handle. Ilya took the other. Their progress up the bank was painfully slow. Once the cart caught on a stone and Teren cried out, and Mali had to stop herself running after them. There were already enough people at the handles.

The old ferryman came back empty, the merchant’s hat diminishing on the far road. He collected the abandoned pole and tested the grain with his thumb.

“Next one’s free,” he told her.

She looked across the water. The road school was three days west of the crossing, if she could find work and keep her food dry. Its former keeper had written that nobody used the practice floor now. The house was too far from the accredited schools. Its roof let in rain. The owner might let it cheaply to someone prepared to do repairs.

She had carried the letter for six months. In every town she asked the cost of timber and left before asking the cost of permission.

“Bell House,” she said. “Which bank?”

The ferryman looked at her ear, then at the departing cart.

“This one.”

“Where?”

He pointed upstream, toward a pale roof beyond the willow trees.

“Go later. They’ll be teaching.”

“That’s why I’m going.”

A fishing boy offered her a strip of bread as she passed. She wanted it too much to decline politely. She gave him one of her six coppers. He examined it, looked at the bread in her hand, and broke off another piece.

Beyond the landing, the road forked. One branch went up to the toll post and the highland way. The other followed the river past washing stones and a line of gardens. Mali took the second.

Her right hand had closed on the bundle again. There was nothing strange about that. It was how a bundle was carried.

She shifted it to her left anyway.

2. The Examination

Two years earlier, the day before her final examination, Mali had taken a ladder into the Red Eave teaching hall.

It was not the sort of thing students were permitted to take there. The ladder belonged in the kitchen yard, where the cook climbed to the drying racks. Its feet had left black marks on the polished floor. Mali rubbed at them with her sleeve while Anet held the ladder upright.

“If someone comes,” Anet said, “I’m repairing the roof.”

“Then hold it properly.”

“I am holding it properly. You’re climbing it improperly.”

Mali had put one foot on the top rung. From there she could see over the carved beam that divided the student hall from the masters’ gallery. A hundred red roof tiles slanted toward the gorge outside. Below, the road curled out of the mountain, white with dust.

The road school stood beside that road, beyond the ferry and the lower farms. She had seen it only twice, years before, when her mother brought her to Red Eave. Children practised there with willow sticks while their parents bartered at the well. Nobody asked the children whose families had paid the winter fee.

That was what Mali meant to do after the examination. She would ask Deren for the travelling seal, reopen a small practice floor, teach enough students to mend the roof. She had imagined asking so often that the words had worn smooth. Master, I would like your permission to teach outside the mountain.

She hated the permission. She wanted the seal.

“There,” Anet said.

On the gallery wall, just beyond Mali’s reach, hung the examination board. Six names, six proposed assignments. Anet’s was third. Mali’s was first.

Beside it, instead of ROAD, someone had written RESIDENT.

She looked until the word stopped meaning anything.

“Well?” Anet asked.

“I’m staying.”

“You sound delighted.”

“Hold the ladder.”

She reached over the beam. Her fingers brushed the board’s lower edge. If she could turn it slightly, she might see whether the mark meant an instruction or a recommendation. She knew the difference. Deren enjoyed reminding students of it when they mistook a suggestion for the freedom to refuse.

The ladder shifted.

Anet swore. Mali caught the beam, swung her weight sideways and came down badly, one heel striking the floor before the other. Pain ran up her ankle.

Someone laughed from the doorway.

Deren stood there with a tray of cups. No sword, no audience of senior instructors. He had been fetching tea for the examination council. The ordinariness of it made Mali feel twelve again.

“An ingenious inspection,” he said.

Anet straightened. “The roof—”

“Is entirely sound. Mali checked it last spring.”

He put the tray down and came toward her. She hated that he had seen which foot she was keeping light. He knelt without asking, pressed two fingers along the outside of her ankle, and waited while she tried not to move.

“Strained. Not broken.”

“I can examine tomorrow.”

“I did not say otherwise.”

He rose. His own knee clicked. She had never noticed that before.

“Put the ladder back. Clean the floor. Both of you.”

Anet took the ladder quickly, grateful to be given a task that led out of the room. Mali stayed where she was.

“The assignment,” she said.

Deren glanced at the board. “You have a talent for correction. I intend you to assist the first-year classes.”

“I asked to teach on the road.”

“You asked to be considered.”

“I’ve been considered for six years.”

He looked at her ankle. “And you still believe wanting a thing makes you ready for it.”

She could have stopped then. There were ways to let him save his dignity. She knew all of them. Agree that he had judged wisely. Wait until after the examination. Ask

his oldest friend to speak for her. She had planned to use one of those ways, and the planning had made her feel mature.

Instead she said, “You need someone to teach the first-years without paying another master.”

The room altered around them.

Deren did not raise his voice. That had always been part of his power. Students shouted, traders shouted, her mother shouted when the mule bit. Deren spoke softly enough that people had to make themselves quiet to hear him.

“Tomorrow,” he said, “you will demonstrate why your judgement is fit to stand beside your skill.”

He took up the tea tray. One cup rattled against another. Mali watched his hand until he noticed, then looked away.

The examination began before dawn.

Cold stone showed through the soles of her thin shoes. She had bound her ankle too tightly and loosened it once beneath her robe. Anet stood across the court with the other candidates. When Mali caught her eye, she touched two fingers to her own left heel: remember which one.

Mali nearly smiled.

The first tests went well. Footwork, edge alignment, the descending cuts. Deren asked her to correct a junior student’s posture. She placed a hand against the girl’s shoulder blade and felt how frightened she was.

“Let your breath out,” Mali whispered.

The girl did. Her sword tip settled.

Mali looked toward the masters’ bench before she could stop herself. Deren had made a small mark in his book.

The last test paired her with Anet.

They had practised together for four years. Anet was patient where Mali was quick, better in the low guards, slower to seize an opening and far less likely to imagine one that was not there. They knew the shape of each other’s mistakes. In ordinary sparring that knowledge made them kind. Under examination it became a way to win.

Mali wanted to win so cleanly that Deren would have no reason to keep her.

“Returning Swallow,” he said.

Anet’s wooden blade came in low. Mali turned it, stepped through and lifted her own. The first movement pulled at her ankle. Not badly. Enough to make her shorten the step.

“Again.”

They did it again. This time Anet saw the adjustment and made her attack a fraction shallower. Their blades met in the right place. Mali’s ankle held.

Deren closed his book.

“Again. The whole step.”

Mali looked at him. He sat between two senior masters, his back straight, the grey at his temples catching dawn light. He had taken her into the school when her family could pay only half the fee. He had shown her how to sharpen a nick without shortening the edge. He had sat beside her mother’s bed the winter fever came through the valley.

She had used those things against herself for years.

“Her ankle is swollen,” Anet said.

“I have eyes.”

Nobody laughed. Anet’s mouth went flat.

Deren turned to Mali. “The whole step.”

She tried. Pain opened along the outside of her foot. Her balance went toward the gorge. Anet could have touched her throat with the practice sword. Instead she turned the blade aside and stepped away.

“You left your place,” Deren said.

Anet stood very still.

“She couldn’t hold it.”

“Then the examination has revealed something useful.”

He sent them back to the starting marks. Mali could feel the other candidates watching. If she failed now, the account of it would follow her down the mountain. Promising student. Poor discipline. An injury made into an excuse.

She set her left foot outside the mark.

Deren saw it. “Mali.”

“I can complete the cut from here.”

“That is not the form.”

“I know.”

“Then why would you offer it?”

Because I can do it. Because you asked whether I was ready to teach and now you’re asking whether I can hurt quietly enough to please you. The answers rose together, all of them unusable.

She said, “There may be students who can’t make the whole step.”

“Then teach them what they can make. This examination concerns what you can make.”

It was a good answer. That was what made arguing with him so difficult. There was always something true inside the correction, and finding it took long enough that the rest could pass unchallenged.

Anet lowered her sword.

“I won’t strike into a foot she can’t move.”

Deren stood.

He crossed the court and took Anet’s blade. Gently. He put it into the hands of the junior girl Mali had helped. The girl looked from him to Mali.

“Stand aside,” he told her. “Watch.”

He drew a light practice sword from the rack. No cruelty in the preparation. No temper to give Mali an excuse for hers. His first cut touched her sleeve. His second turned her wrist until she had to go with it. At the third, she should have taken the whole step.

She took half of it and hit him with her shoulder.

The contact surprised them both. Deren stumbled against the boundary post. His sword struck her left ankle as he recovered, hard enough to fold the leg beneath her.

She went down.

There was no beautiful lesson in the pain. Her stomach cramped. She tasted the morning water she had drunk. Somewhere a cup broke, and for a foolish moment she thought it was the same cup that had rattled on his tray.

Deren reached for her.

She struck his hand away.

“Don’t.”

He stopped. His face was close enough that she could see he had not meant the blow to land where it had. She needed that to make no difference, and could not manage it.

“Pain is information,” he said quietly. “You failed to read—”

“Stop teaching me.”

The words carried to every balcony.

He drew back. Behind him, Anet had one hand pressed to her mouth. The junior student held the unused sword across her body like something stolen.

Mali got up without help. The first attempt failed. She heard the scrape of Anet’s shoe and shook her head before the other woman could approach.

It took her until noon to pack.

Everything she owned fitted in a cloth bundle except the sword and scabbard. The sword had been a gift after her fourth year. She laid it on her bed, lifted it, laid it down

again. Returning it would be noble in a way she could imagine other people admiring. Taking it would mean he had given her something she still wanted.

She took it.

Anet found her at the gate, trying to get a boot over the swelling.

“You could wait a week.”

“For what?”

“To walk.”

Mali pulled the boot hard enough to make her eyes water. “I can walk.”

“You can hop. There’s a difference.”

Anet knelt and loosened the lower laces. Her hands were competent, almost impatient. Mali let her do it.

“You should have stayed on your mark,” Anet said.

“You refused him too.”

“And I expect to spend a winter hearing about it.”

“You don’t have to.”

Anet looked up. “My sister’s here. My wages pay for her room. I can’t take her down a mountain on one bad ankle because you’re ready to leave.”

Mali had been preparing a speech about courage. She was suddenly ashamed of every word of it.

“I’m not asking you to come.”

“You looked as if you were.”

They sat without speaking while the midday students crossed the lower court. One boy waved at Mali and was pulled away by his friend. The kitchen smelled of sesame and scorched onions. It would be years before that smell stopped making her hungry for the same room.

Anet finished the knot.

“Does he know?” she asked.

“He has eyes.”

It should have made them laugh. Anet’s expression closed.

Mali wished she could take the words back without taking herself back with them.

“He kept your name on the board,” Anet said. “He’s waiting for you.”

That was almost enough. She would remember it later with anger, but what she felt at the gate was longing. To go upstairs. To find her bowl in its place. To have the bad morning folded into the account of a difficult student who had eventually learned.

She put her bundle over her shoulder.

“Tell him I won’t be examining.”

“Tell him yourself.”

Mali opened the gate. The mountain road lay bright and empty. She had no teaching seal, no promised position and no idea how to ask strangers to pay for what she knew. The first downward step hurt so badly that she gripped the gatepost.

Behind her Anet said, “Write when you get somewhere.”

Mali nodded without turning.

She did write, four weeks later, from a stable where she was sleeping in exchange for teaching the owner’s sons. She put three funny stories in the letter and nothing about the ankle. There was no reply.

By then she had learned that being paid to teach meant listening to the person who paid.

The stable owner wanted his elder son ready for road work before the autumn loads. The younger came because his brother did, carrying a willow stick he had cut himself. Their names were Rusk and Tel. Neither knew what the Red Eave seal looked like. That ignorance had secured Mali’s first employment more effectively than any demonstration of skill.

They practised in the empty yard between the evening carts. The smell of warm horses stayed in the air. Mali showed them how to hold a line, where to put a foot and why a blade carried too high made the shoulder slow.

Tel learned quickly. Rusk did not.

She told herself she was patient. She broke the first movement into four, then eight. She touched his elbow, moved his heel, made him begin again. By the end of the third evening he was worse than he had been at the start.

“Too much thought,” she told him.

He looked at the stick.

His father watched from the feed shed. That made every correction larger. Mali could feel her room in the loft resting on the next successful turn of the boy’s wrist.

“Again.”

Tel stepped into place. Rusk did not.

“I need to take the oats in.”

“After.”

“They’ll get damp.”

“Then we’ll finish before they do.”

She could hear the borrowed voice. She let it continue because she needed the movement to improve badly enough that the need began to sound like concern for him.

Rusk tried. The stick turned late. Tel touched his chest and pulled back, already apologising. Mali sent them to the marks again.

The elder boy dropped his stick.

Not defiantly. His hand opened and the wood fell, leaving him staring at the dirt with a face so blank she could not decide which part of him she had offended.

His father came out of the shed.

“Pick it up.”

Rusk did. He did not look at either of them.

“She’s making time for you. Use it.”

Mali should have spoken then. She knew it even before she could name what she ought to say. Instead she let the father return to the shed and told the boys they were done for the evening. Tel ran to carry the oats. Rusk stayed behind to stack the practice sticks against the wall.

“Does your hand hurt?” she asked.

“No.”

“Then why couldn’t you turn?”

He leaned the last stick in place too carefully.

“I don’t know.”

There was no good lesson for that answer. At Red Eave, not knowing meant more practice or less discipline, depending on what the master already thought of the student. Mali had left because neither category seemed large enough for what a person could be. Here she had reached them both within a week.

She went to the loft and wrote the first version of the letter to Anet. In it the boys were funny, the stable owner generous, the work unexpectedly rewarding. She described the younger one training a chicken to follow his stick. That part was true. She left out the elder’s open hand.

The next day Rusk did not appear.

His father said he was sulking. Mali found him behind the tack room, sorting harness straps by length. A bucket stood beneath a slow leak in the roof. The place smelled of old leather and wet dust.

“I owe you an apology,” she said.

He stared at her.

“For what?”

“I asked why you couldn’t do something you were trying to do.”

“That doesn’t make sense.”

“I know.”

He smiled reluctantly. It was the first expression she had seen that did not seem directed toward an adult’s judgement.

She sat on an empty feed box while he worked. The straps had to be checked for softened stitching, not merely matched in pairs. He found a weakened seam with a thumb, set it aside and continued. Every movement was precise, quick and unhurried. She had spent three evenings trying to teach coordination to someone who used it all day.

“Show me,” she said.

“The stitching?”

“How you tell.”

He put a strap across her knees. She pressed where he pointed and felt nothing. He told her to try at the edge instead of the middle. The difference arrived under her thumb, slight enough that she would have trusted the first place if he had not stopped her.

“Like that?”

“No. Here.”

She tried again.

He did not look pleased by her failure. He looked interested in whether she would find what he knew was there. Mali had seen that expression in Deren once, before examinations and resident assignments made every correction an account of who deserved the next room. She had forgotten how much she learned when somebody was still interested in the work.

They sorted harness until the bucket filled.

Rusk stood to empty it. Mali took the other handle. He looked at her injured ankle, now strong enough for ordinary walking, and shifted the weight toward himself without being asked. She let him. It seemed a poor way to repay an apology to refuse the competence he had already shown her.

In the yard she asked whether he still wanted the road lessons.

“Father does.”

“That wasn’t the question.”

He looked toward the feed shed.

“I want to go with the loads.”

“Because of the road?”

“Because of the horses. They’re different when they’re working.”

She understood the difference only after he showed her. A horse in the stall stood under the hands of people deciding for it. On the road, a man who failed to read its ears might lose a cart. The animal made part of the journey whether the driver respected that or not.

Mali changed the next lesson.

No private form. No insistence that his hands learn a shape before she understood what they already did. They practised stepping clear of a falling pole, turning a heavy sack without trapping a foot and keeping a short stick between a face and a swing. Tel complained that it looked less like sword work. Rusk came back the following night.

The stable owner was not impressed.

“I can teach loads,” he said. “I’m paying for the blade.”

Mali stood in the kitchen with her bowl untouched. Her room in the loft, her meals, her first chance to earn a place without Deren’s permission: all of them seemed balanced on the lip of the conversation.

“He isn’t ready for steel.”

“You said three weeks.”

“I was wrong.”

The owner put down his spoon. He was not a cruel man. He had a living to make, a road to cover and a son he wanted alive at the end of it. Mali had offered certainty cheaply and was now asking him to pay for her uncertainty.

“You could have said before.”

“Yes.”

He reduced the fee. She kept the loft until the end of the agreed month and paid for half her meals by mending a run of broken shingles. The boys continued with her, fewer evenings, shorter lessons. She did not pretend the reduced pay was a victory for enlightened teaching. It was money she could not afford to lose. She had helped create the condition by promising a result before seeing the student.

At the month’s end Rusk could keep a practice stick between himself and Tel’s attack without losing his footing. Tel was bored enough to ask for another teacher. Rusk asked when Mali would return.

She had no road planned that would bring her back. She said so.

He nodded and gave her a short piece of harness cord that had become too worn for a loaded cart but still held a bundle well. She took it as payment for the lesson in stitching he had given her. He laughed at that. Then he helped carry her things to the gate.

She posted the letter to Anet the next morning, leaving the funny stories and adding one sentence about not being a very good teacher yet. She wrote yet twice before deciding it could stay.

On the ferry landing two years afterward, watching Teren’s cart climb away, she would remember the junior girl holding the unused practice sword.

She had never learned the girl’s name.

3. The Clapperless Bell

Bell House had put a bench outside its gate for people who were afraid to go in.

There were three on it when Mali arrived: an old woman turning a wooden bead between her fingers, a boy who had brought his own chair and would not sit in it, and a man in an apron with flour along one sleeve. The gate was open. Beyond it lay a courtyard shaded by a pear tree. Someone had swept the fallen fruit into a neat heap beside the wall.

Mali expected guards. A girl carrying a water jug asked whether she needed the cup with two handles or the ordinary one.

“Neither.”

The girl looked at her bloody collar.

“Water’s free.”

Mali took an ordinary cup. Her fingers shook against the clay. She held it in both hands before anyone could see.

The boy with the chair watched from outside. He was perhaps fifteen, all elbows and an effort not to look frightened. His chair had a broken rung tied with cord.

“Do they mend those?” Mali asked the girl.

“No. He brings it because he knows where it came from.”

She went away before Mali could decide whether that was a rebuke.

Thirty people stood in loose rows beneath a bronze bell. Its clapper had been taken out; a cord hung empty through the mouth. On a low wooden platform, a clean-shaven instructor lifted his palms. The students followed. Some got the movement wrong. One woman could not raise her arm above her shoulder, and the instructor stepped down to adjust the space beside her so she would not collide with her neighbour.

Nobody shouted.

Mali stood at the gate with the water cooling her hands and felt her certainty become less convenient.

The exercise ended. Students sat where they had been standing. A few lay down on mats. The instructor passed among them, asking questions Mali could not hear. When he reached the woman with the weak shoulder, she took his sleeve and laughed at something. He laughed too.

The old woman from the bench came in. Mali stepped aside for her.

“First time?” the woman asked.

“No.”

It was a stupid answer. Mali had never been there before, and she had said it as if the woman were about to inspect her stance.

The woman patted the bead in her pocket. “There’s a place by the tree if you don’t like people behind you.”

Mali followed her far enough to see the side room. Bowls stood ready on a table. Two children were disputing possession of a cup; an attendant separated them with a practised weariness that belonged to every kitchen Mali had known. Above the bowls hung a notice.

REST WITHOUT FEAR.

Below it, smaller letters: Supported by the Assembly of Twelve Courts. Comparative lessons approved for supervised use.

The instructor saw her wrist binding and came toward her with relief.

“Red Eave. We thought Master Deren might send someone before the exhibition.”

“Did you?”

“I’m Joss. Have you come about the sequence?”

“A man at the ferry couldn’t open his hand.”

His smile remained. His left heel moved inward.

Mali knew that placement. Deren had spent a winter making her find it without looking down. It prepared the third cut, the one that closed the opening Returning Swallow pretended to leave.

Joss wore no sword.

“What was his name?” he asked.

“Teren.”

The smile went.

“Was he hurt?”

“Yes.”

“How?”

“I broke two fingers before he could cut himself.”

Behind Joss, the woman with the weak shoulder had risen. She looked from one of them to the other.

“That’s not one of the lessons,” Joss said.

“I saw his hand. Then I saw everyone’s.”

“You should speak to Master Vale.”

“Where is he?”

“In the city. Preparing our demonstration.”

“Then you have to stop this until he gets back.”

Joss’s gaze went toward the room with the bowls. The children had quietened. It was not difficult to imagine what he saw when he looked at them. Mali did not want to imagine it. She wanted him to let the frightening part of her message be sufficient.

“Look at me,” she said. “Where did you learn the third cut?”

He looked down at his feet, then moved them apart. “I don’t know your names for things.”

“Your left heel was inside the seam.”

“It’s comfortable.”

“That’s what he taught us to say when we stopped feeling it.”

A student made a small sound behind her. Mali turned her head. Not enough to see. Enough to lose the instant in which Joss’s hand rose.

Two fingers came toward her throat.

She caught his sleeve and stepped through. Returning Swallow, the answer she had performed a thousand times: turn the arm outward, draw the shoulder into the empty space, let the attacker fall past you.

Joss’s palm was already waiting where her ribs would be.

The blow drove the breath out of her. She struck the bell frame with her back and went down on one knee. Her cup shattered. Water spread across the swept stone.

Joss stared at his hand.

“I didn’t—”

His right foot moved.

Mali got the scabbard between them. His fingers struck the wood hard enough to leave blood along a knuckle. The pain did not seem to reach him. He turned the scabbard aside with a small circular motion that belonged to a school she had seen on the coast, then came toward her again.

She drew half a blade.

His eyes followed the brass guard. His body settled into the answer. Around him, students rose from the mats. The old woman stood beneath the pear tree with the bead clenched in her fist. The boy at the gate had pulled his chair in front of him.

Mali saw the whole court waiting for the cut she knew how to make.

She pushed the sword back into the sheath.

It caught a little on the mouth. For a moment she thought that small indignity would kill her. Then she let it catch, abandoned the effort to make anything clean, and kicked the nearest platform leg.

The kick was ugly, low and too far across her body. It pulled her damaged ribs. The platform lurched into Joss, throwing him against the bell frame. Somebody screamed. The frame rocked, the empty bell swinging hard enough to flash its hollow mouth toward the sun.

A roll of translucent material slipped from beneath the platform.

Joss scrambled after it.

Mali put her foot between him and the sheet. “Stay there.”

He raised his face. There was blood on his chin. He looked, abruptly, like a man who had fallen off a badly made platform.

The students inhaled at different times.

Mali heard it. Later she would remember that more clearly than the strike: thirty people recovering their separate breaths. A woman began to sob. The boy let go of his chair so suddenly that it fell against the gate.

Under Mali’s boot lay a branching mark. Not ink. The lines ran inside the material, pale and precise, and shifted when she changed the angle of her head.

She knew nothing of such things. She had seen shard fragments carried in lead boxes by Freeborn couriers. Those hummed. This was silent.

Joss reached again.

She struck his hand away with the scabbard.

“Don’t take it,” he said.

“Who gave it to you?”

“I won’t remember.”

“What?”

“The next lesson.”

The woman with the injured shoulder had come closer. “Joss. You’re bleeding.”

He touched his mouth. The sight of red on his fingers seemed to frighten him more than the attack.

Mali crouched, using the frame to keep her weight off her ribs. She untied the ruined bundle. The shirt was still damp from the quay. She shook out her possessions onto clean stone, put the letter and sewing roll back in the bundle and wrapped the sheet in the torn cloth without looking at its mark again.

The woman gripped her arm.

“Leave it here.”

“It made him strike.”

“You don’t know that.”

Mali did not. She knew the court had changed when the platform fell, and that Joss knew something he should not. Those were not the same as knowing what the sheet did.

“Then nobody should be following it until someone does.”

“We have people who haven’t eaten without help for months.” The woman’s voice rose. “You come in, break a table, break a cup, and tell us to wait.”

“It isn’t a table.”

She hated herself as soon as she said it.

Joss put both hands over his ears.

“It writes at night,” he whispered.

Nobody answered him. Mali had pulled the cloth tight. The branching light no longer showed, but her hands felt warm around it.

From the side room came the crash of a bowl.

The boy had backed through the gate. The old woman was sitting on the ground beneath the tree. People were calling to each other, asking which attendant to fetch, where Master Vale could be reached, whether another lesson ought to begin. Mali heard too many requests and knew how to answer none of them.

“There’s an observatory on the high road,” she said. “They’ll know who to ask.”

“Will they?” the woman asked.

Mali had been hoping she would say yes.

She left with the wrapped sheet and the torn bundle, limping slightly because she could not breathe deeply enough to stand straight. Behind her the woman was saying Joss’s name, over and over, much as Ilya had said Teren’s.

At the road fork she stopped.

The observatory was visible from there, a squat tower against the foothills. Half a day’s walk, perhaps less if she took the straight path and did not rest. Scholars there would have equipment, a courier, knowledge that did not end at the length of a sword.

She took three steps uphill.

The warmth in the bundle increased as a cart passed. The driver’s shoulders rocked with the mule’s stride. Mali stepped into the ditch until he had gone, then sat on a stone and unwrapped one corner of the shirt.

The mark had another branch.

She could not be certain. She had scarcely looked at it before. She wrapped it again and held the bundle away from her body.

A sensible person would have taken it to the observatory at once.

The shattered bowl in the side room had been followed by a child’s cry. She had not stayed to see who was hurt. She had done something frightening in a house full of frightened people and left because she could not bear their questions.

Her bundle rested against her knees. Six copper pieces, less the bread. A letter about a roof. A blade she had been proud not to draw. She tried to make the good parts of what she had done add up to permission to continue up the hill.

They would not.

She stood, turned back and began the walk to Bell House.

4. What the Lesson Gave

By the time Mali returned, the boy’s chair was inside the gate.

He had put it beside the old woman’s bench and sat on the ground in front of it. Someone had tied a strip of linen around his palm. He looked at Mali’s bundle, then at her face.

“Master Vale’s here.”

“Already?”

“He was coming anyway.”

That answered a question she had not asked. She stepped past him into a courtyard that had become a different place.

Mats covered the broken cup. The platform lay on its side against the wall. Joss sat beneath the pear tree while the woman with the weak shoulder cleaned his knuckles. In the side room, a man was crying loudly and without apparent shame. Two attendants carried water toward him.

Nobody stopped Mali. That was worse than being challenged.

The boy followed her in, leaving his chair behind. “I cut it on the bowl.”

“Is it deep?”

“No. I’ve had worse.”

He held it so carefully that she suspected he had not.

The man crying in the side room was large, with the heavy forearms of a mason. He sat on a stool, both feet planted, tears running into his beard. A young teacher knelt in front of him and held out an empty cup.

“One hand,” the teacher said. “Whichever you want.”

The mason put his left hand forward. It shook.

“We can wait.”

“You said that last time.”

“I remember.”

“I threw it.”

“Then we’ll move the bowl this time.”

One of the attendants took the bowl away. No crystal sheet lay under the stool. No one counted. Mali stood at the doorway while the man reached toward the cup three times and touched it on the fourth. He could not close his hand around it. The teacher did not pretend he could.

“That will do for now,” he said.

The mason nodded, crying harder. The teacher waited until his breathing slowed, then rose with one hand against the wall.

He was scarcely older than Mali. His pale grey robe had a splash of soup on one sleeve. Dark hair, cut to his jaw, was tied back from a face too smooth for the weariness in it.

“Master Vale,” the boy said.

“I see her, Ned.”

The name settled somewhere inside Mali. One boy she could name, at least.

Vale looked at her ear. “Come to the washroom.”

“I came to help.”

“Then let Joss sleep before you speak to him.”

It had the shape of a reasonable request. She did not know yet how often she would hear that shape.

The washroom stood behind the kitchen. Vale filled a basin, put a clean cloth beside it and opened a jar of ointment. A row of small packets lay on the shelf above his shoulder. Each had a name written on it.

“Which bank?” he asked.

“What?”

“Teren. Was he taken to this bank or across?”

“The weir infirmary.”

Vale shut his eyes briefly. “I sent someone along the river. They should find him there.”

“You knew it might happen.”

“I knew he’d been ashamed of asking for help with his hand. I didn’t know he was going to the ferry with a sword.”

He wet the cloth and held it toward her. She took it herself.

“Joss attacked me.”

“So he says.”

“Do you believe him?”

“Yes.”

The directness robbed her of the argument she had prepared.

“Then why are you still teaching?”

“We aren’t. Not until I’ve spoken to everyone.”

Outside, the mason began to hum. Three notes, one of them wrong. An attendant answered him, and the wrong note changed. Mali watched Vale listen to it.

“Who is he?” she asked.

“Caro. He worked on the river wall. The flood camp burned after the Convergence. He can’t always remember which came first.”

“Was he here when you started the new exercises?”

“He was here when I started.”

The distinction had weight for him. Mali could hear it without knowing why.

She put the wet cloth against her ear. The water turned pink. Vale opened another packet and laid out a narrow bandage. When he lifted it, his left thumb twitched.

She looked down before he caught her watching.

“You trained at Red Eave,” he said.

“Yes.”

“Under Master Deren?”

“Yes.”

“He speaks well of you.”

“No, he doesn’t.”

Vale’s mouth moved, almost a smile. “He speaks of you often, then.”

It hurt more than she expected. She bent over the basin.

Vale did not press. He told her to take her tunic loose enough for him to see the bruising below her ribs. She refused. He put the salve on the shelf and turned his back while she loosened it herself. The bruise was beginning to darken beneath her right breast.

“Don’t bind it tight,” he said, looking only when she told him to. “If you can’t draw breath, or the pain changes, get someone with more skill than I have.”

“Not an exercise?”

His expression went still.

“No.”

She retied her tunic. The sensible thing would have been to thank him. She was tired of sensible things arriving with obligations she had not agreed to carry.

“What are the packets?”

“People’s things. Keys. Letters. A lock of hair. Things they can reach for when the room is unfamiliar.”

“Why aren’t they holding them?”

“Some are. Some lose them.”

He closed the jar. The conversation might have ended there, if Ned had not put his head around the door.

“Caro wants to go outside.”

Vale set the jar down too carefully.

“Then bring his shoes.”

“He says he wants to go home.”

Mali watched the teacher’s left hand. The twitch had reached the next finger.

“His home isn’t there,” Vale said.

Ned knew this already. That was plain in his face.

“He still wants to go.”

Vale went past him without answering. Mali followed.

Caro stood beside the stool, one shoe on and the other in his hand. His crying had stopped. Without it he looked much older. He turned the shoe over as if inspecting the workmanship.

“The lower lane,” he told Vale. “I can find it.”

“The lane was washed out.”

“I’ll see.”

“You went last month. Do you remember what happened?”

Caro rubbed his cheek with the shoe. “You said.”

“We found you at the wall. You’d been there two days.”

“Then come with me.”

“I have to stay here.”

“Someone.”

An attendant was nodding. Vale did not look at her.

“After supper,” he said.

Caro turned toward the outer door. Vale caught his elbow. Not hard. Mali had held Teren that way when getting him into the cart.

“After supper.”

“I’ve eaten.”

Ned said, “He has.”

The teacher’s hand tightened. Caro looked down at it.

For a moment nobody moved. Mali saw how easy it would be to call the grip care. How difficult it would be to prove that it had become something else.

“I could walk with him,” she said.

Vale looked at her bundle. “You have somewhere to go.”

“It can wait until morning.”

It had cost her more than he could know to say that. He studied her, perhaps hearing the cost without knowing its shape.

At last he released Caro.

“To the old wall. No farther. It isn’t safe after dark.”

Caro put on the second shoe. It was the wrong foot. Mali crouched to tell him, then thought better of taking it off herself.

“Will that be comfortable?”

He looked down. “No.”

He sat and changed them. Vale watched until Mali looked back, then went to help the mason by the shoulder.

They took Ned with them because Caro asked. The boy brought his chair as far as the gate, hesitated, then left it under the pear tree.

Mali put the wrapped sheet in a dry fish jar the cook lent her. The cook wanted to know whether the jar would be returned.

“Tomorrow.”

“People say that.”

Mali gave her two coppers as security. The woman tried to return one, saw Mali’s face and pocketed both.

The wall was half a mile away along the river, stones jutting from a bank where new willow roots held the soil. Caro walked slowly, stopping twice to breathe. Mali matched his pace until she felt the jar grow warm against her hip. Then she changed it, pausing to look at a bird, stepping aside for Ned, letting the distance between them lengthen and shorten.

Caro noticed.

“Hurts?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Don’t have to pretend.”

They reached the wall as the last direct light left the water. A row of stones ran down into reeds. On the far bank, a burned post leaned above the shallows.

Caro stood looking at it.

Mali had expected him to be mistaken. She had prepared to explain gently that this was not a house, that the camp had been elsewhere, that he had remembered a road nobody could use. Instead he put one hand against the post nearest him and traced a mark left by an old iron bracket.

“My brother hung the kettle there,” he said.

Ned sat on a stone. “Did he make good tea?”

“Awful.”

The boy laughed. Caro did not, but the hand resting on the post loosened.

They stayed until the water darkened. Nothing was cured. Caro did not recover a missing year or thank Mali for allowing him to suffer usefully. When she said they should go back before the path became hard to see, he told her he hated the path and hated the house and hated being taken care of by children.

Ned looked at the river.

Mali could have made Caro apologise. She could hear Deren explaining that care did not remove the duty of courtesy. She said instead, “Ned asked to come.”

Caro looked at him.

“I know.”

That was all. It seemed to be enough for the boy to get up.

They returned after the lamps were lit. Joss was asleep. The woman with the weak shoulder was eating rice from a bowl with a crack along its rim. She made space for Mali on the bench, though she did not smile.

Vale met them at the gate. “What happened?”

“Nothing,” Caro said.

“You’re shaking.”

“I walked.”

Mali expected the teacher to catch his arm again. Instead he stepped aside. Caro went to the kitchen and asked whether the second pot had any onions in it.

Ned picked up his chair.

The boy’s sleeve had ridden back while he carried it. On the inside of his elbow were three small punctures with bruising around them.

Mali saw Vale see her notice.

“Night treatment,” he said.

“What sort?”

“For panic. Only when it’s necessary.”

Ned adjusted his sleeve with his bandaged hand. “It doesn’t hurt much.”

She could not tell whether he meant to reassure her or Vale.

After supper, Mali helped wash bowls. With one rib refusing to let her lean over the basin, the task took longer than it should have. The cook said so. Mali accepted the criticism with an ease that surprised her.

Caro fell asleep before the bowls were dry. Ned carried a blanket to him. Vale stood in the doorway, one hand hidden in his sleeve.

“You can stay until your side eases,” he told Mali.

“I’ll leave in the morning.”

“For the observatory?”

She turned.

“Joss told me.” Vale looked at the jar by her feet. “They’ll ask where it came from.”

“Yes.”

“Tell them what you saw before you made him fall.”

She waited for the threat. It did not come.

“Tell them about Caro,” he said.

Later, sleeping on a kitchen pallet, Mali woke to a soft count from the courtyard. Vale stood alone beneath the empty bell. His hands shook in the lamplight. He lifted them, brought them down, lifted them again. On the third repetition the shaking stopped.

The jar beside Mali warmed through its earthen wall.

She lay still until he went inside.

At dawn she ate the cook’s bread, thanked the woman with the weak shoulder and promised Joss she would tell the scholars he had not wanted to strike her. He listened with his injured hands folded between his knees.

Ned stood by the open gate. This time he had no chair.

“Will they take the lessons away?” he asked.

Mali had meant to say yes. Last night that would have seemed a promise.

“I don’t know what they’ll do.”

He nodded once, without comfort.

She took the uphill path with the jar held against her left hip. Behind the wall a man’s voice began to count, stopped, began again. She did not know whether it was Vale or someone trying to learn from him.

5. The Margin



Sel would not touch the jar.

They stood on the observatory steps with five small lights around their shoulders and asked Mali to set it on the flagstones. A lamp-keeper came out of the doorway, carrying a box of tools. He looked at her dusty boots, the blood beneath her ear and the jar she had put down, then moved the tools to his other hand.

“If that’s for specimens,” he said, “you want the lower building.”

“Where did you get it?” Sel asked.

“Bell House.”

“The jar?”

“The thing inside.”

A light separated from the others and came close enough to illuminate the lid. Sel said, “Warden.” The light withdrew.

It was not a command Mali had heard before. It had the sound of a name spoken by someone afraid of having to speak it twice.

“Have you opened it?” Sel asked.

“Once. Yesterday.”

“Did you follow the mark?”

“I looked at it.”

“That isn’t what I asked.”

Mali was very tired of questions that revealed their correct answers after she had answered them. She put her bundle on the step and made herself recount Bell House from the moment she arrived. Sel interrupted twice: once to ask how the instructor had placed his left foot, once to ask whether the bell had sounded.

“It had no clapper.”

“That doesn’t mean it couldn’t sound.”

“I didn’t hear it.”

“The ferry had an announcement horn,” Mali added. “Glass fitted behind the mouth. I saw a light when the hands closed.”

Sel asked her to describe it and wrote the detail beside Bell House, keeping the two observations separate.

Sel turned to the lamp-keeper. “Oren, clear the workroom.”

“Everything?”

“Everyone.”

The old man went inside. Mali heard his voice carrying up the stair. He told someone to take her breakfast with her and someone else that the south shutter could wait until afternoon. No reason was offered, and after a little grumbling none was requested. Mali watched Sel watch the doorway.

“You’ve done this before,” she said.

“Yes.”

“Does it help?”

“Sometimes.”

They carried the jar upstairs without touching it at the same time. Sel took the first flight; Mali the second. It seemed ridiculous until Mali remembered the heat on the road. Then she wished they had explained before she had to think it through herself.

The workroom had a broad desk, shutters opened to morning light and a hand-cranked press tall enough to flatten a chest. Sheets of ordinary paper lay drying on cords near

the ceiling. The room smelled of oil and damp stone. At its centre, on a low table, stood the Cosmic Codex.

Mali had expected a great book. Everyone who described it used words that made greatness seem a matter of size. It was little wider than a flour ledger. Its cover held a depth she could not understand. She looked at the table instead.

Sel set a sheet of black cloth beside it.

“Put the carrier there. Keep the jar.”

Mali unwound the shirt. It had dried stiff where Ilya’s blood touched it. The crystalline sheet slid from the last fold and settled flat, though it had been rolled in the jar. Its branching mark shone faintly.

Oren drew a breath through his teeth.

“You recognise it,” Mali said.

“I recognise the way it is wrong,” Sel answered.

They took a sketch from a drawer. This mark had fewer branches. At first Mali could not decide whether it was simpler or merely younger.

“When?” she asked.

“Three weeks after the Convergence.”

She counted without intending to. Six months and more. All the while she had been guarding wagons, asking about timber, telling herself there was time to find a school.

“It was the first new symbol,” Sel said. “Not a translation. Not a record uncovered from a sealed page. The Codex composed it.”

“And you sent it to Bell House?”

“No.”

Sel looked at the drawer before closing it.

“I sent something I thought was different.”

Oren moved a chair for Mali. He rubbed his left shoulder before lifting it, an old familiar gesture. She noticed because she had started noticing such things. He smiled when she thanked him, then looked away from the sheet.

Sel opened the Codex.

Mali saw streets in the leaves. Light passed through them in angles that contradicted the room. She was looking at a narrow passage above an open square and at something too large for either, all at once. One of the small lights moved through the page without entering it. Another hovered above Sel’s hand.

The crystalline sheet on the black cloth turned warm enough to stir the air.

On the Codex’s newest margin, a branch lengthened.

Sel shut it with both hands.

Behind them Oren made a sound.

His left arm was raised to his shoulder. His right hand had grasped the place he habitually rubbed and remained there. The effort to release it showed in his neck. He looked ashamed rather than frightened, as if they had caught him scratching in company.

“It hurts less this way,” he said.

Sel took a lamp from its stand and put it on the table between him and the book.

“Oren. Tell me something I don’t know.”

“I broke the blue cup.”

“I know about the cup.”

Mali got up. Sel held out a hand to stop her, then drew it back before touching her.

Oren’s face tightened. His raised elbow trembled. She remembered Teren saying can’t.

“He needs help,” she said.

“I know. Oren. Something that isn’t the cup.”

The old man breathed through his mouth. Tears gathered beneath his good eye.

“I kept the handle,” he said. “Thought I’d make something from it.”

His right hand loosened. The left arm dropped hard enough to strike the table. Mali caught the lamp. Sel went to him at once.

“What?” Oren asked, looking down. “What did I do?”

Neither answered quickly enough.

Mali set the lamp on the floor. She moved his chair out from the wall and steadied it while he sat. He was shivering. Whatever release the private fact had made possible, it had not made him well.

“Did you have that trouble before today?” Sel asked.

Oren shook his head, then looked at the closed Codex.

“Last week. The shutter catch. Hand wouldn’t come away.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Didn’t want to bother you.”

Sel stared at him. Mali could see the moment they understood how that answer had been made.

“Water,” she said. “Where?”

Oren pointed, and she found the jug. By the time he could hold a cup without spilling, Sel had bound the Codex shut with copper wire from the instrument shelf. The task took longer than Mali expected. The wire slipped twice. Sel’s own hands were shaking.

“A routine,” they said when it was done. “It entered a movement he already trusted.”

“It heard him think about his shoulder?”

“No.” Sel looked at the page. “It observed what he repeated beside the book. The shoulder, the shutter catch. Actions offered again and again. It doesn’t need to invent the first movement.”

“Then it knows what we know.”

“Not everything. Not because we know it. A lesson can carry the sequence into someone who would never approach a shard. A nearby carrier can gather the way they answer it. That is not the same as reading every thought.”

Mali pressed her good hand against the chair. “At Bell House it knew Returning Swallow.”

Sel said nothing.

“How?”

“Fighting schools asked for protection against the fractured signal. Recovery houses asked for movements people could perform without worsening their injuries. We had reports from both. I asked the Codex to compare them.”

“And it wrote the comparisons.”

“Yes.”

“Did you read them?”

“Every line.”

The answer was more frightening than a confession of carelessness. Sel had read every line and still sent Joss something that made his hand go toward a stranger’s throat.

Mali looked at Oren. He held his cup between both knees now. They were all trying to give Sel time to find a better explanation.

“How many?” she asked.

“Forty-three recovery houses. Eleven schools.”

“Did Deren give you his forms?”

Sel opened another drawer. Letters stood there in bundles, each tied with a different colour of thread. They took out a narrow packet with a red cord.

Mali knew his handwriting from the outer envelope. She could have found it in the dark, the strokes pressed hard where he wanted a student to pay attention.

“He corrected our first tables,” Sel said. “Sent the footwork himself. Asked that it remain within accredited teaching.”

The privacy of the third cut had not been stolen from Red Eave. Deren had given it away. Mali sat with that until anger made her ribs hurt.

“Tell them to stop.”

Sel was already reaching for clean paper. “Some will.”

“All of them.”

“Some have families sleeping for the first time since the Convergence. Some have turned away people who asked for older treatments because this one worked better. They have committed resources and reputations. A warning from the person who supplied the lessons will have to cross all that.”

“Then go yourself.”

Sel looked at the wired Codex.

“The houses are demonstrating together at the Assembly in nine days. If I carry this north, I bring every connection it has made.”

Mali looked from the black cloth to the closed book. “You said I carried a connection.”

“You carried one page. The archive has been comparing every report we’ve fed it. I don’t yet know what it can reach through them.”

The nine days hung between them. Oren put down his cup.

“What day?” he asked.

“The morning of the tenth,” Sel said. “Nine days from this morning.”

Oren counted on his fingers. They opened and closed normally. The simple movement made Mali have to look away.

“I’ll put it on the kitchen board,” he said.

Sel nodded. They had begun writing too quickly, the first word crossed out before the second reached the page. Mali watched ink gather on the nib.

“Don’t write as if they already know they’re wrong.”

Sel looked up.

“I’ve been doing that all day,” she said. “It doesn’t help.”

They drew a line through the first sentence.

The remaining four lights moved near Warden, their formations uneasy. One settled above Oren’s blue cup. He took something from his pocket: a curved bit of glazed pottery, blue on one side, rough where it had broken away. He turned it in his palm.

“For my grandson,” he told Mali. “Thought I could make a whistle.”

“Does he like whistles?”

“No idea. Haven’t seen him since the roads opened.”

He put the handle beside the cup. The hovering light tilted toward it.

Mali had imagined telling her grandchildren that she had once seen the Cosmic Codex. She had imagined many foolish things about what a life would contain before she came to the living of it.

“Who will they listen to?” she asked.

Sel folded the first page without sealing it.

“Master Deren chairs the Assembly.”

“I know.”

“He would listen to someone from his own school.”

Mali thought of the examination board. Her name had stayed there for three months after she left. A former student had told her at a market stall, intending it as proof of affection. She had not known what to do with the information.

“He’ll listen long enough to tell me I’m wrong,” she said.

Sel looked at her fully then.

“Could you use that long?”

The road school letter lay in the little bundle beside Mali’s feet. There was a house waiting somewhere west of the ferry, or there had been six months before. The owner might have found someone else. The roof might have fallen. She had been walking toward it for two years without ever arriving.

This was an excellent reason to postpone arriving again.

She did not trust it. She trusted Teren’s hand and Ned’s bruised arm and the warmth coming through the fish jar when Vale stopped shaking.

“I’ll carry the warning,” she said. “I won’t carry instructions for them to try.”

Sel lowered their eyes to the paper.

“Neither will I.”

From inside the wired book came the dry, delicate sound of a page turning.

6. Two Letters

They made the second warning after lunch, at Mali’s insistence.

Lunch was lentils in a chipped bowl, two slices of bread and an argument in the kitchen about whether the south shutter was more urgent than a warning no one could explain. The woman who had been sent out with her breakfast was named Eda. She maintained three of the observatory’s instruments and objected to being treated as a child because she had never entered a rift.

“What do we do if someone falls?” she asked Sel. “Watch until you can find a useful word?”

“No.”

“Then tell us something useful now.”

Sel stood with one hand against the kitchen door. Warden hovered near their collar, casting a cold light across the bronze stitching. Mali had never seen a hero asked to explain themselves over a pot of lentils. She found that it made listening easier.

Sel told the room what had happened to Oren. Oren corrected one detail: his left arm had moved first, not the hand against his shoulder. Sel wrote it down.

“Does the correction matter?” Eda asked.

“I don’t know yet.”

The answer irritated her, but she sat down.

They agreed to keep the workroom shut and move ordinary duties downstairs. No one would work alone near the book. Nobody was to test a movement to see whether the carrier would seize it. If someone became trapped, they would first clear sharp or hot things from reach, call for help and try to speak to them. They would not assume one private memory would always release a hand because it had done so for Oren.

Mali asked what happened if an urgent message came by the public announcement system.

“We don’t have one,” Oren said. “People have to climb.”

He sounded pleased with the inconvenience for the first time.

Afterward Sel brought out writing paper with the observatory’s embossed edge. They had drafted an account of the ferry, Bell House and Oren’s hand. It used the words

reported, observed and uncertain with a precision Mali admired and feared nobody else would admire for long enough to finish reading.

“Put the request first,” she said.

Sel read it aloud. Suspend shared comparison lessons pending inspection. Keep food, shelter and individual care available. Do not eject patients for refusing a lesson. Report new loss of voluntary movement.

“That sounds as if you expect them to do the last thing already,” Mali said.

“I do.”

She looked at the page. “Then leave it.”

Sel signed two copies in front of her. They placed the signatures side by side to dry and made a third, unsigned transcript for the dispatch record. Mali asked them to write Deren’s name on one outer fold and the Assembly council’s on the other.

“If they take the first at a gate, I need something I can still put in his hand.”

“There are couriers.”

“Will you trust them to get through?”

“I’ll use them as well.”

Sel called Eda back. Together they made a list: the nearest houses by foot, the coastal laboratory by courier relay, the forest boundary by the southern route. Every warning carried the same request and the same description of what was uncertain. None included a copy of the branching mark.

“Why not let Boon come?” Mali asked.

“He may. He has six field stations sending reports, and we don’t know which he is at this morning. I can’t ask you to wait for him.”

“You could ask him to tell Deren.”

“Deren has been arguing with Boon about who may certify an exercise for four months.”

Mali could almost hear it. Deren explaining that a body was not an instrument to be adjusted by a coastal engineer. Boon explaining something worse, with measurements. Between them a patient waiting for one of them to remember the purpose of the argument.

Sel wrapped the two warnings separately. The first went into a plain wallet. The second they sealed in oilskin with the route map.

“Show him this one yourself if you can,” they said. “The other may go through the council.”

“Do you want a reply?”

“Yes. Any reply. Even a refusal. Bring the words, not only what you think they mean.”

Mali felt the criticism before deciding whether it had been offered.

Sel reached beneath the desk and lifted a dark instrument case. Inside lay a handset, two sockets and a spool of thin cable. One socket held a length of wire that passed through a small drilled hole in the wall.

“Boon left this in the spring,” they said. “Private point-to-point line, to his relay hut at the north survey station. There are operators between us when he’s travelling. It doesn’t use public carriers or announcement tubes.”

“Does it work?”

“Usually.”

“Have you asked?”

Sel gave her a look she recognised from masters unused to having their next instruction anticipated. Then they picked up the handset.

Mali heard clicks, a distant voice, Sel’s name repeated twice. The operator could not locate Boon immediately. He would try the lower field station and call back before evening if the line held. Sel left the urgent warning and waited while he read it back.

“Your book’s making a new lesson,” the operator said at the end.

“Through the comparison tables. We believe an active crystalline carrier is involved. Tell him I haven’t proved how far it has gone.”

“Can you stop the book?”

Sel looked at the copper wire. “I’m trying.”

They put down the handset carefully. No great intervention came through the wall. Oren went on sorting lamp wicks below the window.

Mali picked up the jar. “What about this?”

“Leave it.”

She was relieved so quickly that it took her a moment to disagree.

“If I arrive with two letters and a tale about a hand, he’ll say the injury confused me.”

“I can describe the sheet in the warning.”

“He’ll say you have never taught a blade.”

“That would be true.”

“He uses true things that way.”

Sel stood looking down at the jar. Mali could see they wanted to refuse. She wanted them to refuse firmly enough that she would not have to decide whether the risk was worth being believed.

Oren set down his wick scissors.

“Can you shut it in something?” he asked.

“Material blocks some exposure,” Sel said. “Distance breaks others. The jar cooled it, you said?”

“Unless we walked together. Then it warmed.”

“Alone?”

“Sometimes warm alone too. After I looked at it.”

Sel wrote that down. Mali watched their pencil and suddenly understood why they kept an account of refusals. Everything became tidier if you recorded only the question you knew how to ask.

“I don’t know exactly when it changed,” she said. “I think it grew another branch after the courtyard. I can’t prove it.”

“Don’t try to make it grow another.”

“I wasn’t going to.”

She would have, if Sel had asked. The realisation made her cold.

They found a narrow survey box lined with dull metal. Sel would not call it safe. They called it the best container they could spare and wrote that on the paper strip tied around it. Do not open among students. Do not reproduce the mark. Keep apart from the original archive.

Mali put the jar inside. Oren packed dry wool around it to stop it striking the box. The cook at Bell House would not get her jar tomorrow. Mali wrote an apology on a scrap of paper and asked the next southbound messenger to take it. She could not bear to let such a small debt disappear beneath the larger thing she was doing.

Sel handed her a copper loop, little larger than a finger ring.

“Near an active carrier it darkens. Sometimes slowly. Absence of a change is not proof that someone is well.”

“Does it protect?”

“No.”

Mali attached it to the cord beneath her sash. The absence of reassurance was the kindest thing anyone had given her all morning.

They studied the map. The northern road followed the highland flank, crossed Reed Cut, passed the weir house and entered the Assembly through its southern gate. Three days if the crossings held, perhaps four with a delay. Sel marked the observatory’s name on the back, so a letter returning need not depend on Mali’s memory.

“The exhibition is the morning of the tenth,” they said again. “Today is the first. Don’t make a fourth travel day into permission to wait until the ninth to find him.”

“Will you be here?”

Sel glanced toward the book. “Yes.”

That ought to have reassured her. Instead she saw the workroom gradually emptying of ordinary life until one person and five lights remained with a turning page.

“Let the lamp-keepers stay downstairs.”

“They needn’t be endangered for my—”

“Ask them.”

Sel looked at her, then at Oren.

The old man was working a point into the broken cup handle with a tiny drill. He did not look up.

“We live here,” he said.

Mali left before the afternoon had entirely gone. Eda gave her cheese and two thick pieces of bread without calling them provisions. Oren found a roll of clean bandage in a drawer and tied it to the outside of her bundle, where she would not have to open the carrier box to reach it.

She had three coppers left after the jar and the bread at the ferry. Sel offered travel money. She refused before hearing how much.

“I’m not buying your agreement,” they said.

“I didn’t say you were.”

Eda made an impatient noise from the stairs. Mali thought of Anet kneeling over a boot she had been too proud to lace properly. She held out her hand.

Sel gave her twelve small coins and wrote the amount in the dispatch book. An advance for food and road tolls, not a teaching fee. Mali asked to see the line before it was closed.

At the door, Oren showed her the unfinished whistle. He had bored through the handle but not found the right shape for the mouthpiece. It made no sound yet.

“Your grandson can help finish it,” she said.

“He’ll make a mess.”

“Yes.”

He smiled. She went down the steps with the warning wallet inside her tunic, the duplicate in oilskin at the bottom of her bundle and the boxed carrier tied separately behind it. The arrangement made walking awkward. She preferred it to carrying everything in one hand.

Beyond the foothill farms the road narrowed. She found an empty charcoal shelter before dusk and ate half the cheese without standing up. Her ribs hurt when she lay down, so she slept sitting against a post with the bandage roll under her ear.

Near midnight she woke convinced somebody had called the next count.

There was only the shelter, the dark road and the survey box cooling in the doorway, as far from her bed as she could put it without leaving it outside.

She stayed awake until she could hear her own breathing without waiting for it to change.

7. The Broken Spear



The bridge at Reed Cut belonged to whoever could hold its middle.

That morning it belonged to an Orc, a mule and seven people in Assembly grey. One of the grey coats lay on the paving, breathing through his mouth. The others had the far end. The Orc had the near end and the mule had decided that neither arrangement justified leaving the shade.

Mali saw the bows before she saw the broken spear.

She stopped behind the last willow. The road dropped through a patch of reeds to the bridge, a low stone arch over water too deep for wading. On her map it was the only crossing before the weir, a day’s detour upstream. Sel had drawn a small circle around its name. Reliable, they had said. Wagons use it.

The Orc held an iron-headed shaft in her right hand and a shorter length of ashwood in her left. Both broken ends were pale. One grey coat rubbed his jaw. Mali could

guess when the breaking had occurred.

“Road tax,” a man called to her.

She remained behind the tree. “How much?”

“Depends what you’re carrying.”

“Bread.”

The Orc glanced back. A shallow cut crossed one short tusk and ran into the corner of her mouth.

“They don’t want bread.”

“What do they want?”

“The mule.”

Under a canvas awning on its back, someone lifted a damp cloth. An elderly female Orc sat in a wicker chair fastened across the animal’s packsaddle. Silver braids lay over her ochre shawl. Beside the chair hung a stone drum, its crack carefully bound in leather.

The sight snagged at Mali’s memory. A mural in the granary where Boon’s sword had been wrong. A great chanter standing with her head thrown back, sound painted as broken blue rings across a hillside.

The old Orc in the wicker chair looked nothing like someone who ought to be painted on a wall. She had one foot wrapped in wool and a cushion tucked awkwardly behind her neck. She was trying to reach a slate that had fallen beside her knee.

Her daughter put the short spear half beneath her arm, fetched the slate and returned it without looking away from the grey coats.

“Honoured guests travel under escort,” the man at the far end said.

“Then escort someone honoured,” the younger Orc answered. “We bought our passage.”

She flicked a paper permit onto the bridge. The wind lifted one corner. The man on the ground reached for it, missed and shut his hand on the paving.

Mali saw the fingers remain closed.

A small warmth touched the skin beneath her sash.

She looked down. The copper loop had darkened along its inner edge.

The survey box was still shut.

“Who’s teaching here?” she asked.

The leader’s eyes moved from her red wrist binding to the box. “Master Deren’s people are expected at the south court.”

“Is that where you’re taking her?”

“It’s where she is expected.”

“They moved the route,” the younger Orc said. “Third time since dawn. Now my mother has to rehearse with a house instructor before they’ll admit the drum.”

The cloth in the old Orc’s hand folded slowly into her fist.

One of the bowmen turned sideways. Mali knew that turn. A short movement to clear the string from a hanging sleeve. No part of Returning Swallow, no cosmic mystery, only a man deciding he had waited long enough.

“Down,” she said.

The arrow struck the willow where her ear had been.

She went behind the trunk, dropping the survey box into the hollow between roots. Her bundle caught on a branch. She tore it free and heard the second bow loose.

On the bridge the younger Orc moved toward the grey coats. Not a charge. She had no room to build speed and no intention of leaving the mule open behind her. The long spear turned across a bow stave. The short half drove under a wrist. A man stumbled into the parapet.

Mali crossed the road low, scabbard in front of her face. Another arrow hit stone. The grey coat with the bruised jaw came to meet her, drawing his sword through an opening he had left deliberately at his left side.

Returning Swallow.

This time she did not give him the thing it invited. She drove the end of her scabbard against his forearm. Steel scraped wood. The blade bit into the lacquer and pulled a strip free, leaving a pale scar from mouth to binding. He was stronger than she expected. She lost the scabbard and caught his coat before he could turn the sword back.

The throw she knew would have taken both of them over the parapet.

She struck his knee instead.

He sat down hard, sword still in his fist. The copper loop went black.

“Don’t finish your turns,” she shouted.

The younger Orc had already extended her right arm. The leader stepped inside the spearhead, a small satisfied movement. Mali saw where his blade would meet the unguarded ribs.

The Orc slammed the spear butt against the parapet.

The impact jarred her whole body. Her grip shortened. The iron head came back sooner than the leader expected, striking his sword near the guard. His blade fell. She put the short half across his throat and shoved him against the bridge wall.

“Like that?” she asked Mali through bloody teeth.

“Once.”

The grey coat on the ground caught Mali’s ankle. His fingers tightened. She fell sideways and struck her injured ribs against the parapet.

The world went white around its edges.

For a moment the only thing she could hear was her own effort to breathe. Then the water below returned, and the scrape of boots, and the mule stamping against its tether. She got her heel beneath the gripping wrist. The man seemed not to feel it.

“Let go,” she said.

His mouth opened. His eyes rolled toward her. His hand pulled harder.

From the mule came three dry taps.

The first had weight. The second was thinner. The third barely sounded at all.

The grey coats stopped moving together.

Mali felt the hand on her ankle open. The younger Orc had the leader pinned against the stone, her own face turned in horror toward the wicker chair. On the far bank, one bowman lowered his weapon and the other ran. A man sat in the middle of the bridge with a sword across his knees.

“Where’s my brother?” he asked.

The old chanter bent over her cloth.

Red spread through it.

Her daughter let the leader go so abruptly that he slid to the paving. She was at the mule before Mali could stand. The long spear knocked against a wheel rut. The short half fell from under her arm.

“You promised,” she said.

The elder held up two fingers.

“Not two. Not one. You promised.”

Mali bent to retrieve the short piece. The movement brought a sharp pain under her breastbone. She waited with one hand against the stone until it eased.

The leader was crawling toward his sword.

She put her foot on it.

He looked up. Without the careful arrangement of his shoulders he seemed very young.

“Permit inspection,” he said.

“You shot at me.”

“I didn’t.”

“You brought the people who did.”

He stared at the point beneath her boot. The swordsman who had asked for his brother began to cry. Beyond the bridge the remaining bowman stepped back, hands open, and fled after the first.

Mali could try to hold them. She could bind the leader and the man at her feet, search their coats, extract a clear account for Sel. The copper loop had cooled. Her side throbbed with every breath. Behind her the old chanter was struggling for air, and the daughter had only two hands.

She picked up the leader's sword and threw it into the reeds.

"Carry your man off the bridge."

He began to protest.

"Now."

He obeyed. She did not like the relief that gave her.

The younger Orc had loosened the cloth at her mother's throat and was looking for a water flask. Mali found it hanging behind the chair and passed it up. The old chanter tried to drink too quickly and coughed the first mouthful over her shawl.

"Small," her daughter said. "Please. Small."

It was the please that made Mali stop trying to help for a moment.

The elder saw her standing there. Her gaze moved toward the grey coats retreating along the far bank, then to the road beyond them. She tapped the edge of her chair with one finger.

"You still want to go?" the daughter asked.

One tap.

"You don't get to answer everything by being too tired to argue."

The old Orc raised her brows.

Despite the blood on the cloth, despite her own pain, Mali nearly laughed. The daughter saw it and gave her a look that ended the impulse.

"I'll take the mule," Mali said.

"Can you?"

"Yes."

"Because you look as if a sneeze might finish you."

"I'll avoid sneezing."

The daughter picked up both spear halves. Mali went back for the survey box. It had wedged between roots with the lid downward. She checked the catch before lifting it. The jar had not broken.

The old chanter watched her tie it behind the bundle.

"What is that?" the daughter asked.

"Something from Bell House. A lesson that learns back."

The expression on her face made Mali know she had chosen the wrong words again.

“Not a way to help your mother,” she said.

“My mother doesn’t need another thing telling her how to get well.”

The elder tapped her daughter’s wrist. A softer touch than the drumbeats, but it stopped her just as effectively.

They crossed Reed Cut together. On the far side lay the permit, recovered from the wind by the parapet. The daughter smoothed it against her knee. Mali saw the destination printed beneath the seal: the Assembly of Twelve Courts, demonstration registry. Below that, in a different hand, an instruction to proceed to the preparation house at the east gate.

“Is that new?” she asked.

“Every direction they give me is new.”

She folded it before Mali could read more. It was her paper, her journey. Mali had begun taking possession of other people’s evidence too readily.

They stopped a mile beyond the bridge under a stand of alder. The mule drank. Its name was Moss, the daughter told her, not because of its colour but because it would grow on any surface it was allowed to stand on.

Her own name was Hesh.

“Gorrath,” the elder whispered before Mali could ask.

The effort turned into another cough. Hesh held the cloth without comment this time.

“I know,” Mali said.

Gorrath looked at her, and Mali wished she had found another answer. Everybody knew. That was the trouble. Everybody knew the thing she had done, and almost nobody seemed prepared to know the body she had to live in afterward.

Hesh spread a small blanket on the ground. She unloaded the wicker chair with a set of movements practised too often to need discussion. Mali offered to take one end. Hesh considered her ribs and gave her the lighter side.

Gorrath sat with her back against a tree, the drum within reach but not in her lap.

“She gave us forty seconds,” Hesh said, finding a clean cloth. “That’s what everyone wants to hear. Forty seconds at the hillside. Forty seconds that changed the war.”

Mali said nothing.

“They don’t want to hear how long it takes her to eat a bowl of soup.”

Gorrath reached for the slate. Hesh passed it. The charcoal trembled in her fingers. She wrote two words, then shoved the slate toward her daughter.

YOU EAT.

Hesh sat down as if the command had finally caught up with her. Mali offered the remaining cheese. Hesh took it without ceremony and split it into three unequal pieces. Gorrath got the smallest. It was the one she could manage.

Mali let the quiet hold. Across the clearing, the mule nosed through wet grass. Her scabbard lay on her knees with the new scar bright along its side. She put one finger against the exposed wood, then drew it away.

“The men at the bridge,” she said. “Did they say who sent them?”

“House of the Open Palm. Recovery escort.” Hesh chewed. “I’m taking her to stop that house from selling the Shardbreak as a breathing exercise. So naturally they’ve offered us every courtesy.”

“Can anyone else perform it?”

Gorrath lifted her head.

“No,” Hesh said, before her mother could try to answer. “Not because she’s hiding a secret. Because they’ve never done it and haven’t the decency to say so.”

Mali took the warning wallet from her tunic. The leather was damp with sweat. She unfolded Sel’s original letter and put it on the blanket between them.

“Then we may be going to the same place.”

Hesh read slowly, moving her lips over the highland script. At the first mention of shared lessons she looked at the survey box. At the account of Oren she looked at Gorrath’s hand on the slate.

“So we smash the bell tower,” she said when she finished.

“I don’t know if there’s a bell tower.”

“There’s always something people think they’re entitled to ring.”

Gorrath took the letter and held it close to her face. She read for longer than her daughter, lips still. When she handed it back, she tapped Sel’s name, then Mali’s red wrist binding.

The question did not need a voice.

“I’m carrying it,” Mali said. “That’s all I know yet.”

Gorrath studied her for a moment and nodded, once. Mali accepted the small nod and sat back against the tree.

They waited until the old chanter could be lifted without coughing. Then Hesh settled her in the chair, checked the straps twice and offered Mali the lead rope.

“Only as far as the next place with water,” she said. “We don’t owe each other a whole road.”

Mali took it.

“No,” she said. “We don’t.”

8. A Voice on Paper

Hesh’s pack contained three road permits, a ledger of unpaid freight and twelve copies of a lie.

She laid them out beside the fire that evening. Mali had expected medicines, spare cloth, perhaps a letter from a healer. There were those too, but the papers took the dry ground nearest the embers. Gorrath watched from her chair with a disapproval that might have been directed at the paperwork or the distance to her broth.

The lie was printed in blue ink, under a drawing of a woman who was meant to be Gorrath. The artist had made her tusks too long and removed every wrinkle from her face.

SHARDBREAK RESTORATION.

A safe common discipline derived from the Ironlung method. Accredited instruction. Beginners welcome.

Below it stood the seal of the House of the Open Palm and a line claiming authorisation from the chanter’s own household.

“Household,” Hesh said. “That’s me, apparently.”

“Did you sign anything?”

“A receipt for the first week’s lodging. A consent for someone to copy a chant she couldn’t perform. A freight exemption. Not that.”

She jabbed the blue page.

Gorrath made a low sound. Hesh turned before it became a word.

“No. You agreed to be recorded for the history rooms. You didn’t agree to a lesson.”

The elder pointed to the ledger.

“Yes. They paid. For two weeks. I can read numbers.”

Mali moved the broth closer to Gorrath. The pot had cooled enough for the old Orc to hold it through a folded cloth. She looked up in thanks, then at Hesh, asking silently for the argument to continue where she could see it.

Hesh sat.

“They paid for this chair,” she told Mali. “And the first healer. I signed for the payments. Then the notices appeared.”

“Can you give the money back?”

Hesh’s expression changed.

Mali recognised the mistake in the silence before she spoke again.

“I didn’t mean—”

“No. Of course not. You meant I could turn a chair into coins and my mother could walk the rest of the way.”

Gorrath struck the side of the pot with one blunt nail. Hesh stopped. She pressed both palms flat on her knees until the anger had somewhere to go that was not the paper.

“My work’s in that book,” she said.

Mali looked at the freight ledger. Columns of dates, distances, loads. A handcart repaired. Six families escorted past a damaged road. Timber hauled to a sanctuary roof. Payments delayed because the authorising steward had changed. Payments never made because the storehouse had burned.

“You run passage?”

“I did.”

“For how many?”

“As many as paid. More who didn’t.” Hesh lifted her chin. “I’m allowed to mind that.”

“Of course.”

“I want a road people can use without joining somebody’s house. That’s all. Loads, names, a fair fee. No oath at the end of it.”

She put the ledger away before Mali could turn the page. The ambition sat between them more plainly than Mali’s own letter had sat inside the bundle.

Gorrath had been eating slowly, pausing between spoonfuls to let her throat recover. Now she reached for the slate. Hesh moved to help. The elder shook her head.

Her first line slanted into the edge. She wiped it with the heel of her hand and began again.

NOT A SONG.

Mali waited. Hesh watched the charcoal.

Gorrath rubbed the words out, frustrated, and wrote:

NOT ONLY A SONG.

“I know,” Hesh said.

The elder pointed at the printed notice.

“Then we’ll make them take it down.”

Gorrath shook her head again.

The next words took so long that Mali could hear the night creatures returning to the clearing between the strokes.

WHO STOPS IT?

“The listener?” Mali guessed.

Gorrath touched Hesh’s wrist. Her daughter looked toward the darkness.

“She taught me the stop,” Hesh said. “Before the hillside, when it was still a story about something no one could do. You hold the rhythm in another person’s hearing. They tell you when to leave it.”

“Did you stop her?”

Hesh did not answer.

Gorrath made a mark on the slate. Not words this time, only a long line and a shorter one beneath it.

“After,” Hesh said. “Too late.”

The elder held out her free hand. Her daughter took it, angrily at first, as though forgiveness offered without warning were another kind of trespass.

“At the bridge,” Mali said, “the taps—”

“Weren’t a Shardbreak.” Hesh rubbed a finger across the old Orc’s knuckles. “She couldn’t do one now if the whole sky came down. It interrupted a count. That’s all.”

All had been enough for the man to release Mali’s ankle. It had not taken the tears from his face or given Gorrath back the breath it cost her. Mali watched the broth darkening in its pot and tried not to turn the observation into another exercise.

“Can you make them hear that without showing them?” she asked.

“That,” Hesh said, “is why we’re going.”

Gorrath nodded. Her eyes had begun to close. Hesh put the slate beside the chair, tucked the shawl over one thin wrist and checked the damp cloth at her throat. She made no attempt to take the drum away.

Mali had expected her to. She was ashamed of how much she expected after a single day.

Beyond the fire, the survey box gave a small click.

Both women turned.

It might have been the metal cooling. The box stood on a stone well outside their sleeping space. Mali had moved it whenever the wind drove sparks toward the wool packing. Now its catch glimmered in the firelight.

“Stay here,” she told Hesh.

“No.”

Mali stopped. The word had been spoken so simply that an argument would have sounded foolish.

“I don’t know what happens if we’re both close.”

“Then say that.”

They carried the lamp away from Gorrath and went to opposite sides of the stone. Mali touched the copper loop. It was brown again, not black.

The catch had lifted a finger’s width.

“Did you fasten it?” Hesh asked.

“Yes.”

“After the bridge?”

Mali remembered the hollow under the willow, the lid downward, the effort to tie it back onto the bundle while her ribs hurt. She could remember checking. She could not remember whether the check had been the click or the pressure of her own thumb.

“I thought so.”

Hesh set the lamp where Mali could see the latch without opening it farther. The catch was bent. A pale groove ran along the underside, as if the fall against the roots had forced it sideways.

Mali had carried an open connection through the fight.

The shame arrived first. She could almost hear Deren asking whether she had failed to inspect her equipment or merely failed to understand the purpose of an inspection. Then something more useful followed it.

“We need to know whether the jar broke.”

Hesh looked toward Gorrath, asleep in the chair. “Can we move it farther?”

They found a level place beyond a low ridge of stones, far enough from the fire that the light could not reach it without the lamp. The night air cooled Mali’s neck. She could see the northern rift above the tree line. It looked no closer.

Hesh held the lid back with the short spear half. Mali lifted the wool a piece at a time. The jar was whole. The torn shirt inside it had loosened at one corner.

Light ran through the glaze.

“I don’t think it should do that,” she said.

“Does it need the lid off?”

“I don’t know.”

They could shut everything and tell Sel they had seen an unexplained light. They could open it and risk feeding it another thing to learn. Mali tried to decide which was responsible and found her need to know standing in the way.

“Do you want to look?” Hesh asked.

“Yes.”

“Then say that too.”

Mali untied the outer lid of the jar. She lifted only enough cloth to see the edge of the sheet. The branching mark had changed. This time she knew it. At its lower side lay a narrow shape like an extended spear point, broken across the middle.

She looked at the two pieces of ashwood in Hesh's hands.

Hesh lowered the lid until Mali could no longer see.

"Enough."

Mali had obeyed before she thought about it. She wrapped the jar, packed the wool, pushed the bent catch flat and used two turns of cord from her sewing roll to hold it shut. Hesh watched the knots.

"Will that stop it?"

"Stop the box opening."

The distinction mattered. Hesh nodded.

They returned without the box and woke Gorrath, because neither wanted to explain in the morning why she had been excluded while they were frightened. The elder listened to the account and held up her slate. Hesh put a fresh piece of charcoal in her hand.

DREW IT? she wrote.

"No," Mali said. "I won't copy it."

Gorrath tapped the slate once.

The night changed after that. Every ordinary movement became something Mali wanted to inspect. Hesh folding a blanket. Gorrath lifting the pot. The mule shifting its weight in three familiar steps. At Bell House she had feared the exercise. Here she began to fear anything that could be done twice, and knew that could not be an answer.

She took out Sel's warning, read the description of observation again and wished it contained less uncertainty.

Hesh watched her read.

"Does it say what to do now?"

"Don't give it another lesson."

"We have to get her into the chair tomorrow."

"I know."

"We have to walk. Eat. Sleep if we can."

"I know."

"Do you?"

Mali folded the paper along its old crease. She put it in the wallet and pushed the wallet back inside her tunic. They had nine days from yesterday morning. Now eight remained. Three people afraid of their own hands would not travel faster than one.

“We’ll leave the box outside the camp,” she said. “Make a record of the broken catch and the bridge. Tell anyone who handles it what happened. And get to someone who knows more.”

“Not smash it?”

“Could you smash the drum without hurting her?”

Hesh looked at the leather-bound stone beside the chair.

“I don’t mean the same thing,” Mali said. “Only that I don’t know enough to promise what breaking it does.”

For a while they sat watching the embers. Then Hesh rose and took a blue notice from the stack. Mali thought she would burn it. Instead she wrote on the back: No permission given for instruction. Household statement requested in person.

She signed her name and passed the paper to Gorrath.

Her mother added a slow, difficult mark beneath it. They set it beside the fire to dry.

Later, when Mali’s head began to fall forward, Hesh told her to lie down. She would take the first watch, not because she was stronger or less frightened but because she knew the mule’s habits and Mali did not.

Mali put the bandage roll under her ear. Her right side refused the ground, so she slept on her left with one knee bent. Before sleep came she heard Hesh moving the elder’s pot out of reach of a sleeping hand.

It was an ordinary kindness. She made herself leave it that way.

9. The House beside the Weir

The weir house charged for beds and gave away broth. Mali had expected the reverse.

A board beside the door explained the arrangement. Those who slept there contributed if they could. Those who needed treatment stayed whether they could pay or not. The broth was made from whatever arrived by cart; no one was to tell the cook it had been better yesterday.

Hesh read the last line twice.

“A sound institution,” she said.

They reached it an hour before noon on the third day. Rain had followed them down the highland road, fine enough to get inside a collar without looking serious from a window. Gorrath’s awning held most of it off. Hesh’s braid dripped into her vest. Mali’s ear had begun to itch under the dried blood, and she had spent the last mile wishing she could scratch it without removing the cloth.

The house keeper was a square woman named Ardel who insisted on seeing Gorrath before discussing payment. She did not recognise the name or pretended not to. She listened to the elder’s chest through a little horn and asked Hesh when the bleeding had last occurred.

“Yesterday.”

“How much?”

Hesh showed her a cloth she had kept folded away from the clean ones. Ardel’s face changed. She took a stool so she could speak level with Gorrath rather than over her.

“I can offer steam, warmth and food you can swallow. Not a new throat.”

Gorrath touched her own neck, then nodded.

“If anyone tells you otherwise here, send them to me.”

Mali had thought she would show Sel’s warning first. Instead she stood holding a wet bundle while the two women made practical decisions that had no place for her.

Ardel found them a room opening onto the garden, wide enough to get the wicker chair through without tipping it. Hesh accepted it before hearing the price. When Ardel said two coppers for the whole day if the young women did not mind sharing a pallet, Hesh went very still.

“We’re not married,” she said.

Ardel blinked. “Neither are most of my patients. What has that to do with a pallet?”

Hesh laughed for the first time since the bridge. She gave Ardel a coin and promised the second when her ledger was unpacked. Mali paid it herself.

They ate in a long room overlooking the weir. Twenty people sat at benches. Some needed help with spoons. Others fed them, took their bowls, argued about the amount of salt. A woman at the far end tapped four fingers against the table in a repeated pattern. Beside her, a man with a twisted shoulder copied it more slowly.

Mali stopped eating.

Hesh followed her gaze. “Same lesson?”

“I don’t know.”

The copper loop was brown. They had left the carrier box in a locked garden shed, with Ardel warned not to handle it. That had been a difficult conversation, conducted on the doorstep while rain ran down their faces. Ardel had demanded to know whether it might burn her tools. Mali had answered that she did not know that either.

Ardel sat down beside them with her own bowl.

“You’re watching my tables as if they’re going to bite.”

Mali put down her spoon. “Have you received comparisons from Sel’s observatory?”

“Yes.”

“New ones?”

“Last month. More legible than the old.”

She took Sel’s original warning from the wallet and unfolded it beside Ardel’s bowl. The keeper wiped broth from her fingers before touching it. She read every line.

Mali had hoped that would make the next part easier.

“No,” Ardel said.

“You can’t keep teaching it.”

“No,” the woman repeated, “I cannot suspend all supervised movement on the word of someone who hasn’t looked at the patients.”

“The letter doesn’t say all movement.”

“You just did.”

At the far table the tapping continued. Mali found herself waiting for the next four beats. She could hear the signal in that anticipation even with no evidence of a carrier. It made her furious with the people who could not see the danger she might be inventing.

“Someone at Bell House couldn’t release a sword.”

“Someone here couldn’t release a spoon in the winter. No comparison tables in the house then.”

“I saw everyone do it.”

“I believe you.”

“Then why—”

Ardel pushed her unfinished bowl aside.

“Because I have a woman who falls when she thinks about walking, and walks when someone counts for her. I have a child who can bring his knees apart only after three preparatory movements. I have people recovering from the old infection, people recovering from wounds, and people who cannot tell either from their terror. Your scholar’s warning concerns a new carrier. Show me that carrier and I’ll shut the room. Tell me every repeated thing is dangerous and I’ll ask what you propose to do instead.”

Mali had no answer that was not the walk with Caro. One walk. One patient. She hated how small it sounded now.

“Read the second sentence again,” Hesh said.

Ardel looked down. Keep food, shelter and individual care available.

“We aren’t asking you to send anyone away,” Hesh said. “We came because we need the room too.”

That shifted something. Ardel looked toward the garden door through which Gorrath’s chair had disappeared.

“I’ll show you what we use,” she said. “After the bowls are done.”

It took half an hour. Mali washed while Hesh carried water. Her ribs objected to lifting a full pot, and she had to ask a man with one arm in a sling to help her tip it. He did so cheerfully. There was no useful moral in their respective injuries. She was only glad not to have spilled.

Ardel brought out a folder of ordinary paper. No crystalline pages. The movements were described in columns: starting position, supported variation, stop if pain increased. Sel’s name stood on a covering letter. Deren’s corrections appeared on two pages.

Mali saw the private footwork stripped of its school names. It looked less like a betrayal when there was an instruction for performing the turn seated. That made her angry all over again.

“Do you have any glass pieces?” she asked.

“For weights. To hold the sheets.”

“Can I see?”

They were ordinary river glass, green and brown, smooth from long use. The copper loop did not change beside them.

Ardel watched her move it from piece to piece.

“Will that tell you?”

“Not everything.”

“Then don’t make it my certificate.”

From the long room came a shout.

Mali went through the doorway before Ardel could rise. The woman who had been tapping her fingers stood between two benches. Her mouth was open. The man beside her had risen too, caught in the same shape of reaching, his twisted shoulder lifted high enough to hurt.

A bowl lay broken at their feet.

Mali saw the preparation, the shared breath, the movement she had spent two days fearing. She caught the woman’s wrist and pushed the nearest bench away from her knees.

“Stop counting.”

The woman tried to pull back. Mali held on.

“Stop.”

Somebody was saying her name. Not the woman’s. Mali’s.

Hesh took her elbow, hard enough to turn her head.

Ardel stood at the other side of the room. “Release her.”

“She can’t—”

“Release her hand.”

The woman twisted once more and lost her balance. Mali caught her too late to prevent her knee hitting the bench. The blow made a dull, appalling sound.

Then everything moved at once. Ardel knelt. Hesh cleared the broken bowl. The man with the twisted shoulder sat down abruptly, his face grey.

The woman’s fingers opened on Mali’s sleeve.

“It’s my knee,” she said. “I was trying to tell you.”

Mali let go.

There had been no carrier. Or there might have been, and the movement had passed. Either way, she had taken a stranger’s wrist without asking, commanded her to stop, and hurt her when she tried to explain.

Ardel looked up. Mali stepped back before being told.

The woman’s name was Ferra. She had stood too quickly, trying to rescue the man’s bowl as it slid from the table. Her bad knee had locked. She had been asking him to sit because his own old wound would not support him.

Mali heard all this from the doorway while Ardel examined the swollen joint. Each ordinary detail took something away from the version she had made in her head.

Hesh came out with a bucket of broken clay.

“Go away,” Mali said.

“No.”

“I don’t want to talk.”

“Then don’t.”

Hesh stood beside her until Ardel called for a clean compress. Mali found the linen herself. She did not take it into the room. She gave it to the keeper at the door.

“Is it bad?” she asked.

“I don’t know yet.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Tell Ferra.”

She went in. Ferra sat with her leg supported on two cushions. She had stopped crying, which gave Mali no relief.

“I mistook what was happening,” Mali said. “I should have listened.”

“Yes.”

“I’ll pay for—”

“No.”

Mali closed her mouth.

Ferra was looking at her ear, at the binding around her wrist, at the scabbard with its long bright scar. “Don’t make me decide how much this costs while it still hurts.”

Mali nodded. There was nothing else she had a right to ask of the woman. She went out to the garden and found Gorrath sitting under the room’s shallow eaves.

The elder’s slate lay on her lap. She looked at Mali, then patted the stool beside her. Mali sat.

For a time neither moved. Rain thickened over the kitchen roof. Gorrath could have written a rebuke. She could have given her a story about people learning to care badly. Instead she asked for the broth pot, and Mali fetched it.

The pot needed warming. She took it to the cook, waited while he finished lifting bread from the oven and brought it back with the folded cloth. Gorrath nodded. She ate three spoonfuls and rested.

It took most of the afternoon.

Near dusk Ardel came to find them. She had found something she wanted Mali to see, and did not sound pleased about needing to ask.

The exercise room had a small brass speaking tube above the door. Mali had assumed it carried kitchen calls or the old watch warnings from the weir. Its mouthpiece was covered with a grille painted the same colour as the wall.

Ardel held a ladder while Hesh unscrewed it. Mali stood clear, copper loop in her palm. At the first turn of the metal screws it began to darken.

Behind the grille lay a wafer of translucent glass, scarcely wider than a thumbnail. The branching mark ran through it.

The keeper stared.

“Put that down,” she said when Hesh reached.

Hesh withdrew her hand. They climbed down.

“Who fitted it?” Mali asked.

“Assembly technicians. Before winter. To carry supervised instructions when we lacked a teacher.”

“Since the comparisons?”

“After.”

Ardel went into her office, came back with a maintenance receipt and sat beneath the tube as if someone had taken her chair from her.

Mali waited. She wanted to tell her about the ferry again, about Bell House, about why the sight of two bodies moving together had frightened her. She wanted to gather the afternoon’s mistake inside the discovery and let the discovery excuse it.

Ferra’s knee was still swollen in the other room.

“What do you use the tube for now?” she asked instead.

“Night calls. Ward instructions when the weir gate floods. Lessons twice a day.”

“Can it be closed without cutting the other calls?”

Ardel looked up. “I don’t know.”

“Then let’s find out.”

They fetched the maintenance worker, a deaf man named Ott who carried a slate of his own. Hesh and Gorrath both insisted on watching him explain. He took apart the local stop valve, marked three positions in chalk and showed them the little side bell that rang when the kitchen line was open. The instructions and the ward calls shared one branch. Cutting it without a replacement would leave the garden room unable to summon help.

By full dark they had strung a cord from that room to a handbell in the kitchen. It was crude. It caught twice beneath a door and had to be rerouted. Mali tied knots until her bruised forearm cramped. Nobody asked the affected patients to practise the new alarm in unison.

Ott removed the wafer with tongs and put it in an empty crock. Ardel placed the crock in the shed beside Mali’s survey box and locked the door.

The long room quietened.

Not everyone slept. Ferra woke in pain after midnight. The man with the twisted shoulder wanted to repeat his lesson and grew angry when it was refused. Ardel sat beside him until he could be offered something different, and by dawn looked years older.

Mali helped carry breakfast. The man would not look at her. Ferra accepted her bowl but declined her offered hand.

Before leaving, Mali gave Ardel three coppers and asked her to enter them against Ferra’s treatment without calling the debt settled. Ardel wrote the amount and the request in her account book. She tore a leaf from the maintenance ledger and copied the installer’s name for Mali.

“Tell the inquiry, if there is one,” she said. “Not just the masters.”

“Will you send a witness?”

“When Ferra can spare me.”

Mali put the new paper with Sel’s wallet. Hesh was already settling Gorrath on Moss. They had lost most of a day and learned something they could not have learned by arriving sooner.

At the gate, Ned’s empty chair came to Mali’s mind. The boy had left it beneath a pear tree because, for one morning, he trusted the ground.

She wondered what he would hold now.

10. A Receipt for Ash

The southern gate of the Assembly had three queues and no signs explaining which was theirs.

Students went through the left arch. Traders and travellers waited at the middle. At the right, beneath a red awning, attendants welcomed people important enough to be spared waiting in public.

Hesh took the middle queue.

Gorrath tapped the side of her chair and pointed right.

“No,” Hesh said.

The elder tapped again.

“You said we didn’t need favours.”

Gorrath reached for the slate. The effort of a night without enough sleep had slowed her hands. She wrote with the charcoal held between two fingers.

NEED TO ARRIVE.

The queue ahead moved six paces. Moss refused to take the sixth because a puddle covered it. Mali stood with one hand on the lead rope, looking at the right-hand awning. A man there had spotted the drum.

He came toward them smiling.

“Mistress Ironlung. We expected you yesterday.”

Hesh looked at Mali. Nothing needed to be said about the weir house, the locked shed, Ferra trying to move without putting weight on her knee. Yesterday had become more crowded than the word could hold.

“Your escorts delayed us,” Hesh told him.

The man’s smile thinned. “A misunderstanding at Reed Cut. We’ve already had the report.”

“Did it mention arrows?”

“Of course. A regrettable escalation. I’m glad you were unharmed.”

Gorrath held up the stained cloth in her hand. He looked at it quickly, then toward the waiting attendants.

“We have rooms prepared.”

“Where are the doors?” Hesh asked.

“I don’t understand.”

“Can we open them ourselves?”

“Attendants will see to everything.”

Mali recognised the pause before Hesh chose whether to make a public enemy of him. She had been living inside that pause for days.

“I have a letter for the council,” she said.

The man turned to her with relief. A new problem, perhaps a smaller one.

“Your name?”

“Mali. Red Eave.”

He studied her face before the red wrist binding. “The Master will be pleased.”

“No,” she said. “He won’t.”

It was becoming a habit, warning strangers against imagining affection where she still wanted it herself.

She took out the original warning. The embossed observatory edge caught his eye. His hand had begun to lift; now he put it behind his back.

“Have you submitted that through the dispatch office?”

“I’ve walked three days to give it to him.”

“All correspondence for the demonstration committee must be registered.”

“Then register it.”

He called for a clerk. The clerk came with a book, a small tray and a pot of charcoal. She could not have been more than sixteen. Mali watched her square the corners of the tray on the table.

The man introduced himself as Steward Caren. He wore no weapon. His seal hung from a chain fine enough to break with a single hard pull. Mali made herself stop looking at it.

“It’s from Sel,” she said. “About the comparison lessons.”

“Many people have concerns. The committee has set aside time after the demonstration.”

“The demonstration is the concern.”

“Which is why an orderly review is important.”

He gave the clerk a number. She entered it beside Mali’s name, wrote the observatory’s name under it and held out a receipt. Mali did not take it.

Caren put Sel’s letter in the shallow charcoal brazier beside the awning.

For a moment Mali did not understand what he had done. Her mind offered alternatives: a heat test for contaminated paper, a tray mistaken for a brazier, a fold being warmed to reveal a mark. Then the edge blackened and turned inward.

She caught his wrist.

Two guards moved before she could bend to the fire.

Caren looked down at her hand with an expression she knew too well. An official giving an unreasonable person time to recover herself.

“Please release me.”

“Read it.”

“It is entered in the register.”

“Read it.”

The signature collapsed into a red line.

The nearest guard had his palm on his sword. Behind Mali, Moss jerked its head. Gorrath’s chair rocked. Hesh said Mali’s name once, sharply enough to cut through the noise.

She released the steward.

The clerk was still holding the receipt. Her fingers had begun to tremble. Mali took it because leaving it there would make the girl hold the whole scene alone.

“Whose instruction?” she asked.

Caren smoothed his sleeve. “The committee’s correspondence policy.”

“Did Deren sign it?”

“The Master chairs the committee.”

“That isn’t an answer.”

“It is the answer I can give you.”

Mali folded the receipt over her thumb until it hurt. The second warning lay in oilskin at the bottom of her bundle. She could almost feel its sealed edges through the cloth. She kept her hands away from it.

Gorrath tapped the slate against her chair.

WRITE IT, she had put in large, laborious letters.

The clerk looked at Caren. He gave a small nod that made writing seem an indulgence he had chosen to grant.

The girl entered: Received and destroyed under committee correspondence policy. Mali made her add unopened. When it was done she asked the clerk’s name.

“Eris.”

“Keep that page, Eris.”

Caren said they had many duties, as if the survival of a page were an unreasonably large addition to them.

They were admitted through the central gate. Not the honoured guests' arch. Hesh kept Gorrath's permit in her own hand. No attendant touched the chair. At the threshold, Moss stopped again, unwilling to step from sunlit stone into the shadow beneath the arch.

Hesh put her forehead briefly against its cheek.

"I know," she said. "Me too."

The city had grown around twelve courtyards and several generations of disagreement.

Mali could see the divisions in the roofs. Red tiles on one school, green glaze on another, slate where a third had chosen to spend its money elsewhere. Balconies hung above narrow streets. Swordsmiths hammered behind kitchens. Traders had taken possession of the strips of paving between jurisdictions, paying fees to whichever house sent a collector first.

Refugees slept beneath the covered walks. A boy mended shoes beside a fountain whose water had been diverted into three washing troughs. Above him hung a banner promising REST WITHOUT FEAR. The letters were the same blue as the notice Hesh carried.

Mali counted the remaining days. Today was the fourth. Six days until the demonstration. Six days to make a city stop trusting the thing that let people sleep in its streets.

Hesh studied the gate receipt.

"Good thing you kept the other."

"Yes."

"Does he know?"

"He will when I give it to him."

"Personally?"

Mali looked up at the house seals hung across the lane. Red Eave's stood over the next turn. The sight tightened her back before she could decide what she felt.

"Personally."

They found water first. Ardel had told Hesh to let Gorrath drink often, before the journey made her ask. The public trough was too high for the old Orc to reach. Mali filled a cup and passed it up. Hesh checked the chair straps while her mother rested.

A recovery instructor was teaching children in the nearest courtyard. Three little boys and a girl with her arm in a soft splint. They moved slowly beneath the banner. The instructor lifted the girl's elbow and smiled into her face.

Mali stopped beside the trough.

“Ask her,” she said.

The instructor turned. “What?”

“Before you lift it. Ask where it hurts.”

“We know where it hurts.”

The girl watched Mali. The splint was clean. A little flower had been drawn on the cloth.

Mali could feel Ferra’s wrist inside her hand.

“Does she know what you’re going to do?”

The instructor looked annoyed now, but the question had made him loosen his grip. The girl’s elbow dropped an inch. Her face changed with relief.

“It’s easier there,” she said.

He looked down.

Hesh took Mali’s sleeve before she could say anything else. They went on. Behind them the instructor was asking the girl to show him again.

“You got an answer,” Hesh said. “You don’t have to take the whole court.”

Mali pulled her sleeve free, then wished she had not.

They needed somewhere to sleep before they needed another argument. The first lodging house wanted a whole silver piece for two nights. The second had room only upstairs. The third looked at Gorrath’s tusks and said the beds were too narrow without letting them see the beds.

Hesh stood so still that Mali looked for the long spear half. It lay on the mule’s other side, tied down. Hesh had deliberately put it there.

“My mother can hear you,” she said.

The owner looked at the wicker chair. “I didn’t say she couldn’t.”

“No. You said something else.”

They left. Gorrath wrote on her slate while the mule walked, the letters shaken into a steep slope.

HIS FLOOR TOO WEAK.

Hesh read it and snorted. Mali did not ask whether it was forgiveness or a plan to come back with more weight.

At the next turn a poster had been pasted across a cracked wall. Four women in dark performance clothes stood beneath a silver crescent. VESPER, in large letters, followed by the name of the Assembly celebration and the date of the demonstration. Someone had written SOLD OUT along the bottom in red.

Below the poster, a side door stood ajar. A woman came out carrying a coil of cable and backed into Hesh’s shorter spear half.

She turned, took in the spear, the mule and Gorrath’s chair, and closed her eyes briefly.

“If you’re debt collectors,” she said, “you’ll have to wait until after the show.”

“Are you receiving honoured guests?” Hesh asked.

“Never on purpose.”

Gorrath leaned forward. Her gaze had gone to the cable, the ink on the woman’s thumb, the practical boots repaired with wire. She tapped the cracked drum.

The woman’s face changed. Not recognition of a great name this time. Recognition of an instrument that ought not to have survived being cracked through.

“What happened to that?”

“The world,” Hesh said.

“Yes. Fair.”

The woman set down the cable and opened the side door wider.

“Can the chair come off? The passage turns sharply.”

“Who are you?” Mali asked.

“Rin.” She pointed at the poster with her thumb. “That’s me before they invented cheekbones.”

Mali looked between the painted face and the woman. The painter had removed her frown, straightened her nose and given her both boots unbroken. It had become a kind of public language, improving people until their own lives could no longer be recognised in them.

“Why are you helping?” she asked.

“Because you’re blocking the door and I can’t get the cable past the mule.”

Hesh laughed. It was not a large laugh, but it made room for Rin to pick up the coil and for Mali to help unfasten the chair.

Inside, the passage smelled of dust, lamp oil and something frying. Voices argued above them. Someone shouted that if the masters wanted a revised entrance, they could carry the benches themselves.

Rin looked up the stair.

“That’s Mae. She means it.”

Mali took the light end of Gorrath’s chair. For the first time since the gate, there was a door open wide enough to get through.

11. Four Names on the Door

There were four names on the rooming agreement and one bed with a proper mattress.

Sori showed Mali the paper before offering the floor. She had a long dark braid, a plum-coloured panel at her waist and the expression of someone who had found a stranger’s emergency inside an already impossible afternoon.

“We don’t own the room,” she said. “We can invite guests. We can’t promise lodging after the ninth.”

“We can pay,” Hesh said.

“That would make us a lodging house. We aren’t licensed for that.”

“Of course you aren’t.”

“Free guests,” said a woman from beneath a table. “Tell them we’re collecting relatives.”

Mae emerged feet first, short auburn hair full of dust. She had been trying to level a table leg with folded cardboard. The table remained crooked.

Sena stood on a chair beside an open lantern, tools arranged on a cloth on the windowsill. Her dark curls were tied in a bun that had begun to escape its cord. She looked down at Gorrath’s chair, then at the single bed.

“That’s hers,” she said.

“You’ll have to move your things,” Sori told her.

“Then I’ll move my things.”

Rin put the cable on the floor. “The mule doesn’t fit.”

“There are stables behind the kitchens.”

“They’ll want an authorisation.”

“Everything wants an authorisation,” Hesh said. “The mule has three.”

They laughed. It was a brief, exhausted sound, but Mali felt the distance between that room and Red Eave so strongly that she had to set her bundle down.

Nobody noticed, or they chose not to say so. Mae was unfolding a blanket. Sena climbed off the chair to measure Gorrath’s wicker seat against the doorway. Sori

asked about food, medicine and whether any of them needed a person found in the city. Rin inspected the split spear, careful not to touch it without permission.

Mali began to explain the letter at the gate.

Sori raised a hand. “Before that. Is there anything here that might hurt the people in the next room?”

The survey box lay beside the threshold.

Mali looked at it. She had carried it through the door with every other possession, as if a stranger’s welcome had turned it into luggage.

“Yes,” she said.

Rin stepped away from the cable.

“Tell us that first.”

So she did. The ferry, Bell House, Sel’s workroom, the open catch at Reed Cut. She did not open the box to make the account more convincing. Hesh supplied the parts Mali had not seen on the bridge. When they reached the weir house, Mali described Ferra’s fall before the discovery of the wafer.

Sori listened without helping her past it.

“Would you do it again?” she asked.

“No.”

“You don’t know that.”

Mali wanted to dislike her. The effort found nothing easy to hold.

“I would ask before I touched her.”

Sori nodded, provisionally. They all seemed to understand provisional agreements. At Red Eave, agreement had lasted until a master withdrew it.

They put the survey box in a disused coal cupboard behind the washroom. The wall was stone, the door iron-bound and the adjoining store empty except for broken benches. Rin hung a notice on it: Do not open. Tell Sori before moving. Sena drew a small box on her floor plan to mark its location.

“That’s a cupboard,” Mali said. “Not the mark.”

Sena looked at her, then at the pencil. “I know the difference.”

Mali apologised. It was becoming tiring, discovering how many apologies could be fitted into an ordinary day.

Hesh took Moss to the stable. Mae went with her, carrying a bucket, and returned with an argument about whether the animal’s rear left shoe needed replacing. Hesh said it did but would hold another week. Mae said the stable hand would do it for an evening of help clearing old tack. Hesh agreed before being asked twice.

Gorrath had fallen asleep while they talked. Sena moved the lantern work to the windowsill so the bed could be used. They lifted the elder carefully. She woke long

enough to complain in a ruined whisper that she could sit up herself, then accepted the pillow with her eyes closed.

Mali found a place beside the wall.

Sori gave her water and a bowl of beans. She had been counting bandages when they arrived, and now divided them into two piles before the food was cold.

“For the show?” Mali asked.

“For the infirmary after. We said we’d give the performance share.”

“Not the whole fee,” Rin said quickly.

“I know.”

“Tell them the part we own.”

Sori looked up. “The part we own goes to the infirmary. The advance paid travel and the amplifier repair. The rest settles debts from the river tour.”

“And buys us a road home,” Sena added.

Mali had seen their faces on a poster. She had assumed the poster belonged to a life without small arithmetic. She looked down at the beans.

“Is there a home?” she asked.

“Several,” Mae said. “Which is the trouble. None in the same direction.”

She said it lightly. Rin did not smile.

The room had contained an argument before the strangers came in. Mali could feel its shape now: a postponed decision, money already spent, people trying not to call the same thing duty and resentment in the same breath.

“What did they ask you to perform?” she asked.

“Our songs,” Sori said. “One new arrangement at the end. Then the demonstration follows without an interval.”

Rin put down her spoon.

“The arrangement came yesterday.”

“From where?”

“House desk. We complained about the balance. They said the teachers needed a common entrance cue.”

“Can I see?”

Rin did not move.

It took Mali a moment to understand that the question was not enough. Seeing the paper meant drawing someone else into the thing she had brought. Asking would be easier if she could promise they were already involved without knowing it.

“If you’re right,” Sori said, “what would you want from us?”

“A way to Deren. Somewhere they can’t take the letter before he sees it. And someone who knows where the tubes run.”

“Why us?”

“Because you opened the door.”

The answer sounded ugly. It was also true. Mali had not come with a plan for four performers. She had come cold and sore through a city that had burned her first warning, and Rin’s door had opened.

Sori rubbed her forehead.

“There’s a small court behind the rehearsal hall. Teachers watch preparation there. He comes after supper sometimes.”

“Then I can wait.”

“You could. If he doesn’t come, you’ll have used the evening. If we carry your request into the office, they’ll ask why.”

“Say I’m a former student.”

“Then they can send you to his steward.”

Mali heard the dry edge of the original letter catching fire. Her hand closed around the spoon.

Rin saw. She did not point it out. “We’re also not leaving patients to shout through dead pipes because we got excited about an interruption.”

“You’ve seen the wafers?”

“No. I’ve seen an infirmary with two attendants for a corridor full of people. I don’t need your mystery to know what cutting their calls would do.”

They were useful before she knew how to use them. Mali tried to put the thought away as soon as it formed.

“Can you show me the arrangement without playing it?”

Rin looked at Sori. Sori looked toward the bed, where Gorrath slept with one hand open beside her face.

“After we’ve moved the evening meal,” Sori said. “Mae promised the west ward we’d help. That stays promised.”

Mali finished her beans and helped stack the bowls.

The west ward stood below the rehearsal hall, reached by a narrow stair and a door with a catch too high for some of the patients. Sena noticed it before anyone said anything. She measured the distance with her palm and asked an attendant who kept the tools.

“Don’t start,” Rin told her.

“I can lower it.”

“They’ll charge us for the hole.”

“They can add it to the lantern.”

There was a real dispute beneath the familiar words. Sena had broken a lantern casing three days before because she refused to use a badly fitted stand. The house office had taken it from their fee. Sori had argued for an hour and recovered half. No one had thanked Sena for preventing a fire that had not occurred.

Mali carried the food tray while they talked. Her ribs warned her halfway down. Mae took the heavy end without comment and put it on the table inside.

The patients knew Mae by name.

A woman asked whether she had eaten. A little boy wanted to see the bruise on her elbow from a rehearsal fall. An attendant told her the man in the third bed had found his missing letter and would want to read it again, if she had time. Mae said she had one bowl’s worth, then stayed for three.

Sori checked the bandage count with the senior attendant. Rin inspected a grille above the doorway and did not touch it. Sena found a carpenter’s apprentice willing to lower the latch in exchange for help carrying boards.

Mali stood in the middle of all this with empty hands. She had expected artists to be careless about practical things. She wondered which parts of her own life strangers dismissed when they saw the sword.

The man with the letter asked her to read. She said Mae would be there soon.

“You can read, can’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Then you’re soon enough.”

She sat beside him. The letter was from a daughter who could not come north because her youngest had a fever and the road required three permits. It contained no revelation, no hidden courage, no account of how to live after a catastrophe. The daughter wanted to know whether he still liked pears and whether the neighbours had returned his long saw.

He asked Mali to read it twice.

When she reached the line about the saw the second time, he laughed.

“They’ll never bring it back.”

“Should I write that?”

“Write that I’ll come for it.”

“Will you?”

He looked at his legs under the blanket.

“Not yet.”

Mali found paper. She wrote his answer and asked him to approve each sentence. When he fell asleep, she left the unsigned sheet where he could reach it. She could not keep all the small promises the room offered. She could keep that one unfinished.

Upstairs, Rin had taken out the revised arrangement.

Ordinary paper. Notes and timing marks, a set of stage cues, an instruction for a shared breath before the final chord. Near the bottom someone had drawn a branching shape beside the cue desk's number.

Mali did not need the copper loop. She knew the mark.

Rin saw her face.

"That," Mali said, "was under the platform."

Sori put the bandages down.

"We cancel."

"They'll use the track," Sena said. "And say we're ill."

"Then we make them say why."

"Through the tubes we don't control?" Rin asked.

Mae leaned over the paper. "We can take the amplifier apart."

"They own half the components."

"We can take apart our half."

The argument rose quickly. Nobody accepted the first proposal. Nobody was struck for interrupting. Mali listened until the shape of it stopped feeling like a quarrel and became four people making room for a decision none could safely make alone.

Rin held out her hand.

"Let me see the copper."

Mali took it off its cord. For a moment she had to fight the desire to keep the only instrument she understood.

"It isn't protection," she said.

"You've told me."

"It doesn't prove—"

"Mali."

She gave it to her.

Rin closed her fingers around the loop without looking pleased or reassured. Then she picked up Sena's floor plan.

"Before we take anything apart," she said, "we find out where it goes."

12. The Arrangement Desk



The first tube led to a storeroom full of chairs.

Rin had expected it to reach the central court. She checked the tag again, then asked Sena to unfold the old plan. Sena knelt on the floor with the plan spread beneath a lamp and drew a line through the old route.

“This was before they added the west gallery.”

“The pipe’s older than the west gallery.”

“Yes. That’s why it’s in the wrong place.”

Above them, rehearsal benches scraped across the ceiling. Every sound arrived as proof that the building was full of ordinary work, much of it inconvenient. Mali followed Rin between the stacks, trying not to let the dark glass shape on the arrangement paper become the only thing she could see.

They had left that paper upstairs. Sori was writing a plain-language account of what they had found, without reproducing the mark. Mae had gone back to the ward with the reply letter. Hesh stayed with Gorrath. She had asked to come down and changed her mind when her mother woke unable to swallow the first spoonful of water.

It was nobody’s failure. Mali repeated that privately until she believed it.

The copper loop darkened beside a covered junction in the wall.

Rin stopped. She held her fist away from the brass, opened it, then closed it again. Her mouth tightened.

“How close?” Sena asked.

“Here. Not there.”

She moved back two paces. The copper did not immediately clear.

“It takes time,” Mali said. “Sel warned me.”

Rin looked at her. “Tell me before I spend ten minutes measuring an echo.”

“I didn’t know that’s what you were doing.”

“I’m trying to find the edge.”

They waited. Sena counted the chairs instead of seconds, first along one stack, then another. Mali was absurdly grateful that nobody asked her to say a private memory. The loop lightened slowly.

Under the cover, through a gap beside the screws, something pale reflected the lamp.

They did not remove it. Sena marked the junction with a square on her map. One of twelve, if the brass tags on the wall told the truth.

“The local houses are joined for announcements,” Rin said. “Not all one tube. The central desk selects which courts receive the call. These side junctions return a reply.”

“Words?” Mali asked.

“Whatever the mouthpiece picks up. Voice, bell, stage feed if the valves are set. Brass carries sound. The thing they fitted to it is new.”

The explanation helped because it was small. A pipe did not need to become a cosmic metaphor to be useful to a cosmic enemy.

They followed the route toward the dressing rooms. At the second junction the tag had been replaced. At the third, Sena found fresh screws. The copper blackened again. Rin swore under her breath.

“Yesterday,” she said. “They sent us for a final fitting yesterday afternoon.”

“Access?” Sena asked.

“An hour with the desk unattended.”

Mali looked back toward the stair. “Who had the keys?”

“House technicians. We signed them over.”

“Names?”

“Not mine to remember until it mattered.”

The admission was angry, mostly at herself. Mali heard a version of her own voice and found it difficult to answer gently.

“There may be a record.”

“There is. Sori’s got the receipt.”

A footstep sounded above. All three went still.

Another step, a murmur, the cough of someone waiting behind a curtain. Then a man’s voice travelled down the tube.

“Is the quartet prepared?”

Mali’s back straightened.

She had not heard Deren’s voice for two years. She knew it before the words reached their end. It was thinner through the brass and unmistakable. She saw the masters’ bench, the boundary post, her boot refusing the swelling.

Rin looked at her, then at Sena. Neither spoke.

A second voice answered. Sori. “Rehearsal can begin after supper, Master. We have a problem with the revised arrangement.”

“House Vale will advise.”

Mali gripped the cold wall.

Vale. Not only Bell House’s teacher now. A house named in the city, given standing before the demonstration. While she walked north, he had acquired another thing to lose.

“The quartet would prefer to use our own—” Sori began.

“The timing has been agreed.”

A pause.

“Then we’d like that instruction in writing.”

Deren did not answer at once. Mali felt a small, disloyal satisfaction. He had always disliked being asked to make a spoken order durable.

“It will be supplied.”

The tube went quiet.

Mali realised she had been waiting for the dismissal she had been trained to hear. She took her hand off the wall. The stone had left grit on her palm.

“Can he hear us?” she whispered.

“Not unless the return valve’s open,” Rin said. “Keep whispering anyway.”

They went upstairs. Sori stood beside the cue desk with the receiver in her hand. She put it down when she saw Mali’s face.

“You know him.”

“He taught me.”

“Will he see you?”

“He’ll send me to the steward.”

“Then what would make him stay?”

Mali looked at the practice floor beyond the curtain. A narrow rectangle of polished boards, scuffed by boots and equipment stands. Someone had put a student’s wooden sword against the wall.

“A correction,” she said.

Rin folded her arms. “What sort?”

“A public one. A former student can ask to demonstrate an error before the masters.”

“An error of yours?”

“Yes.”

Sori considered her. “Are you planning to attack him?”

“No.”

“To humiliate him?”

Mali opened her mouth. Nothing came out quickly enough to be credible.

Sori waited.

“I want him to read the letter,” Mali said. “And I want him to know he can’t make it disappear by sending me away.”

“Those aren’t the same thing.”

“I know.”

“Do you?”

It would have been easier to face an enemy who asked fewer reasonable questions. Mali sat on the edge of the floor, careful of her side.

“I thought being able to beat him would mean he had to hear me. For years. I know it’s foolish.”

“It might not even be true,” Sena said.

Mali laughed once, without amusement. “That too.”

They did not ask her to promise she would stop wanting it. Sori asked instead what happened if Deren hurt her in public. Did the custom permit stopping? Could a witness request it? Was a weapon required?

“A practice sword,” Mali said. “A witness can record a refusal.”

“Can the witness stop it?”

“Only the chair.”

“Deren.”

“Yes.”

Rin made a small, disgusted sound. “A fine custom.”

“It gets me into the room.”

“That’s also what a trap does.”

Mali looked at the sealed oilskin. The second warning had survived the gate because Sel had agreed it should exist. She had asked for a backup before she knew she would need one. She could ask for another now.

“If he won’t stop,” she said, “call Ardel.”

“The keeper from your story?”

“She’ll be angry with me.”

“She’s a day away.”

Mali rubbed both hands over her face. “Then call a healer. Not a student of his. Someone who’s allowed to say I’m hurt without failing an examination.”

Sori nodded to Sena. Sena wrote it down beside the court plan.

“And if he doesn’t accept?” Rin asked.

“Then I keep the letter. We take it to the other schools.”

She had not considered that until she said it. The city was full of rival roofs. Deren chaired an Assembly, not every mind beneath it. She had been making him the only door because she knew the sound it made when it shut.

Sori picked up the receiver.

The request passed first through an attendant, then an office, then a long silence in which Mali could hear people moving behind the wall. At last Deren’s voice returned.

“Who asks?”

Sori looked at Mali. “A former student of Red Eave. Mali.”

Another pause.

“From whose teaching?”

“Yours,” Mali said, close enough to the mouthpiece for him to hear.

For a moment the room held only the hiss of the tube.

“Bring her sword,” Deren said.

Sori waited. “When?”

“Tomorrow. Second morning bell. The small demonstration court.”

“Witnessed and entered?”

“Of course.”

The return valve closed.

Mali stood too quickly. Pain under her ribs made her stop. Sena pretended to be checking the lamp so she would not have to watch.

Tomorrow was the fifth. Five days before the great demonstration. It was enough time to change something if the warning worked, too little to waste on being relieved he had finally agreed to look at her.

Hesh came in as the others began laying out the map. Gorrath could swallow again and had sent her downstairs with an instruction to stop hovering. Hesh read the squares marking the junctions.

“They built twelve,” she said.

“At least twelve,” Rin corrected.

“What’s in the middle?”

Sena drew a blank circle where the main court stood. “We haven’t been admitted below the central platform. Lighting power comes from the south. Everything on this plan returns here.”

Mali looked at it. “Then we need to see below.”

“Not by pulling up the floor during rehearsal,” Rin said.

Mae came in carrying a tray of cold tea and two letters to be posted. She put the letters beside Sori’s notebook.

“There are service stairs behind the ward,” she said. “The porters use them for clean linen.”

“Do they reach the main court?”

“They reach everything nobody important wants to carry.”

Before copying it, Sori and Mae joined them at the curtain. Rin held the brass cover clear while Sena kept the lamp steady. All four women could see the pale wafer inside the junction; Mali stood back with the copper loop open in her palm. Mae pointed to the branch that carried the ward call, and Sori wrote its route beside the time. They put the cover back without lifting the contact.

They copied the plan twice. Not the mark, only doors, turns and junctions. Sena kept one. Sori put the other in her contract folder. Rin returned the copper loop to Mali, who threaded it onto its cord with an embarrassment she could not name.

“Keep a record when it changes,” Rin said. “Tell us where, not only that you were frightened.”

Mali nodded. She wrote the locations in the margin of Sel’s map. Store room, second side corridor, cue desk. The small act steadied her. Fear could become a record without becoming a lesson everyone had to perform.

After supper Mae found a healer from the performers’ lodging and asked her to attend the morning correction. The woman demanded a fee. Sori began counting coins. Mali stopped her and paid from Sel’s advance. Four coppers for an hour and a promise to return if summoned. She wrote the amount beside the route costs, wishing responsibility were less expensive.

Before sleeping, she opened the duplicate warning. The seal broke cleanly. She read Sel’s signature, the account of Oren’s hand, the request not to turn people away.

Then she folded it into her tunic, where the original had been.

Across the room, Gorrath slept. Hesh lay beside the door with the spear halves within reach. Sena had lowered the lantern until its light fell across the floor rather than the beds. Rin and Mae were still arguing softly about how much of the new cue track they had heard.

Mali drew her sword a few inches and inspected the edge. It was whole. The guard had worked loose at Reed Cut; she tightened its binding with a strip from the sewing roll. The scabbard’s scar caught her thumbnail.

She had come north to ask a man to stop teaching something dangerous. In the morning she would hand him another opportunity to teach her.

She put the sword down where she could reach it, then moved it a little farther away.

13. The Correction



Deren had grown thinner.

That was the first betrayal. Mali had carried an unchanged man inside her anger, and time had been working on him without her permission. His charcoal robe hung loosely below the muted red collar. The black hair tied at his neck had more grey in it. He stood beside the practice rack, turning a wooden sword in his left hand.

The court was smaller than she remembered from the map. Four balconies, a tiled boundary, a narrow gate opening onto a service lane. Students had gathered on the upper walks. One was holding breakfast in a bowl. They had come to watch a former pupil corrected before the day’s real work.

Sori stood by the gate with the healer. Her name was Adra. She had already asked Mali how far she could lift her right arm and what made the rib pain worse. Mali had answered truthfully enough to make the woman frown.

“No throws,” Adra had said.

“It isn’t that sort of examination.”

“Then you can agree without difficulty.”

Mali had agreed.

Hesh stayed outside with Gorrath. Rin and Sena were taking the plan through the service corridors again. Mae had brought water to the gate and gone back to the patients. All the practical arrangements made it harder for Mali to pretend she stood alone because nobody understood what it cost to be there.

A clerk waited beside the master’s bench. Slender, brown-haired, ink on the cuff of his plain grey vest. He held a slate with a fresh stick of charcoal clipped to it.

Deren looked at Sori, then at the healer.

“You’ve brought a delegation.”

“I brought a warning.”

“Then why ask for correction?”

“Because your steward burned the first copy.”

A student on the balcony shifted. The clerk glanced at his slate.

Deren’s gaze came back to Mali. “Caren follows committee policy.”

“Did you write it?”

“Warnings concerning the demonstration are to be registered. We have received accusations from every house with a financial interest in stopping another.”

“Did you tell him to burn them?”

Deren’s right thumb moved against his forefinger.

“Paper bearing potentially active material is not to circulate unattended.”

“It was ordinary paper. He didn’t open it.”

“Then let me see this warning.”

It was what she had come for. She had nearly talked herself past it.

Mali took the duplicate from her tunic. She laid it on the bench between them, keeping her fingers away from his. He opened the fold and read.

She watched him reach the account of Bell House. The small pull beneath his eye told her where it offended him. At Sel’s name he drew a breath through his nose. At the request to suspend shared lessons he looked up.

“The Codex supplied comparisons,” he said. “I corrected them.”

“The instructor at Bell House knew Returning Swallow.”

“Good principles recur.”

“He knew where I would put my ribs.”

Deren looked at her right side. For a moment she saw concern. Then he set the warning down.

“You always struck too early.”

The old answer entered her body before anger could keep it out. She was standing wrong. The pain had made her lift one shoulder. She lowered it and hated him for making her want to.

“Did you send the private footwork?”

“Under restrictions.”

“It reached men with bows at Reed Cut.”

“So you have said.”

“I can bring witnesses.”

“An escort dispute is not proof of a corrupted lesson.”

“It isn’t proof that there wasn’t one.”

“No. Which is why I prefer to examine rather than accuse.”

He picked up the wooden sword. With his left hand he offered another to Mali.

“Show me the failure.”

Adra spoke from the gate. “No throws. Her ribs are injured.”

Deren looked at her. “I heard.”

“Then it belongs in the record,” Sori said.

The clerk made a mark. Mali wanted to turn and thank her, but Deren had already taken his place on the paving. She put her steel sword on the rack and stepped opposite him with the practice blade.

The weight was familiar. Lighter than steel, the balance nearer the guard. She had learned on such a sword, grown angry with such a sword, once fallen asleep with one across her knees while waiting for an examination she was too tired to pass.

Deren bowed. She returned it.

He came at once: two short cuts and a rising thrust. She knew the sequence. He knew she knew. Her parry arrived where his sword should have been, and his wrist turned. Wood touched her shoulder with a flat, humiliating crack.

“Early,” he said.

She stepped back. Her right foot found an old mark between tiles, worn shallow by generations of students waiting in exactly that place. He had chosen this court for its traditions. Of course he had.

She attacked his flank.

He closed it and touched her knee. Not hard enough to injure, just enough to make her know the opening had been offered. Above them, the student with the bowl stopped eating.

Mali felt her world narrow toward the next correct answer. One foot here. One breath held until the guard turned. Her ribs hurt less when she concentrated on the diagram of the exchange. There was relief in it. She could live inside that relief for a little while and leave the questions outside.

The copper loop warmed beneath her sash.

She did not look down. Looking down would make her late.

Deren shifted into Returning Swallow.

Her hand answered before she chose.

She saw it happening: the blade moving toward the line he offered, her wrist preparing the turn. He was waiting at the far end of the lesson. She had asked him to examine a failure and given it a perfect path through both of them.

Mali let her arm drop.

His practice point stopped a finger’s breadth from her temple.

The court became very quiet.

“It is here,” she said.

She pulled the copper loop free. It was black.

Deren looked at it. His face changed so little that she might have missed it in a stranger.

“You brought it,” he said.

“The box is locked away.”

“You carry something you don’t understand into an Assembly full of recovering people and claim we are the danger.”

It was not entirely false. That made it worse. She could explain the metal lining, the broken catch, every choice that had seemed least bad. He would turn each uncertainty until it faced her.

“Stop the exchange,” she said.

“You requested correction.”

“Then correct me by stopping.”

He struck again.

This time she did not parry. She caught his sleeve with her empty hand and took the blow along her forearm. Pain burst hot beneath the skin. She nearly let go. She clung because the alternative was another movement they both knew how to finish.

“No throws,” Adra called.

Mali kept her feet planted. With her practice sword trapped against her hip, she leaned close enough for Deren alone to hear.

“Ask me to stop.”

“Yield, then.”

“You. Stop your hand.”

His sword remained raised. Tendons stood out beneath the skin of his right wrist. The thumb she had watched before the letter now pressed against the grip so tightly its nail had gone pale.

He looked at it.

For the first time since she entered the court, she did not know what he would do next.

She released his sleeve and stepped back. She gave him the space he had taught her to hold: the interval in which an opponent could choose not to cross.

His hand moved.

The blade came down between them with a force that drove its wooden tip into the paving. It split along the grain. A narrow piece spun toward the bench and came to rest beside the clerk’s shoe.

Deren stared at the broken sword.

Nobody clapped.

The clerk’s charcoal scratched once across his slate. Deren’s eyes went toward the sound, then to the balconies. Mali saw the decision arrive. Not a seizure. Not the alien certainty she had felt at the ferry. A choice made by a frightened man who still had several choices left.

“Remove her,” he said.

Mali kept the black loop in her open palm.

“You felt it.”

“Your interference is entered.”

“Enter that your hand wouldn’t stop.”

The clerk did not write. Deren looked at him, and the young man lowered his eyes to the slate.

On the upper balcony Mali recognised a woman she had known in her first year. A little older, hair cropped shorter, a healed cut across one brow. Anet stood with both hands against the rail.

For two years Mali had made her absence into a judgement. She had imagined the unanswered letter filed beside the failed examination, all of them proof that leaving meant being forgotten.

Anet looked straight at her now.

Mali wanted to say her name. She wanted her to come down. She wanted so many things from her in one instant that the desire felt like another closed fist.

Two guards entered the court.

Sori stepped beside Adra. “The warning is to remain in the record.”

“Take it with you,” Deren said.

Mali bent to pick it up. Her bruised arm refused to straighten properly. The nearer guard reached as if to help, thought better of it and waited. She took the paper with her left hand.

The healer asked whether she could feel her fingers. Mali moved them. Slowly. She could.

“Then we walk,” Adra said.

Mali collected her steel sword. For a moment the weight at her hip felt like the only thing she had not lost. She knew that feeling was dangerous and could not make it less comforting.

At the gate Deren spoke softly enough for the balconies not to hear.

“There are people who cannot sleep unless I tell them what to do. Would you take that away?”

She turned.

His right hand trembled. He had lowered the broken sword, but not put it down.

“I would tell them why,” she said.

“You think explanation feeds a frightened child.”

“I think the child should know what’s in the bowl.”

He looked toward the clerk, whose head had not lifted.

For a moment she thought he might ask her to stay. That would have been unbearable in a way expulsion was not.

Instead he nodded to the guards. The gate closed.

Hesh was waiting in the lane. She took one look at Mali’s forearm and reached for the long spear.

“No,” Mali said.

“He did that in front of them?”

“Yes.”

“Then they can watch something else.”

Gorrath struck Hesh’s wrist with the flat of her slate. Not hard. Enough to be heard.

Hesh stopped. Her breath came through her nose. Mali watched the anger move from the spear to the hand holding it and stay there, contained but not gone.

Adra sat Mali on a low stone bench and examined the arm properly. Deep bruising, she thought. It needed rest. She wrapped it loosely and made Mali promise to come back if the hand lost warmth or feeling. Mali paid the agreed fee and refused the additional ointment until the woman told her it was included.

Sori had taken out her notebook.

“Tell me what he said while you held his sleeve.”

Mali closed her eyes. “Must we?”

“You wanted a record.”

So she told her. Not the version in which the master had been shown undeniable truth and refused it because he was cruel. The words. The raised hand. The decision after the broken tip. Sori wrote until the account could stand without Mali’s anger holding it up.

From behind the gate came the sounds of another class beginning.

Deren’s voice did not lead it.

Mali sat until the nausea passed. When she finally stood, the court receipt inside her tunic brushed the place Sel’s original warning had occupied. She had given Deren a second chance to read it, and he had. It had not been enough.

Anet had not come out.

14. An Unsigned Map

Pell came after sunset, while Hesh was helping replace the mule’s shoe.

He had changed out of the grey vest he wore in the correction court. Without it he looked younger, his plain sand-coloured tunic too thin for the evening. He stopped at the stage door and asked for Mali without naming the school.

Sori let him inside only as far as the passage.

“If you’ve come to collect the warning,” she said, “it isn’t yours.”

“I haven’t.”

“Then what have you come for?”

He lifted a small parcel wrapped in brown paper. “Her.”

Mali had been washing her face with her left hand. She came out with water still in her hair. The clerk looked at the fresh binding on her forearm and then deliberately looked away.

“My name’s Pell.”

“I know your work.”

He flinched. She had meant the slate, not everything the slate had failed to hold. She was not sure she wanted to rescue him from hearing both.

He offered the parcel.

“Where from?” Sori asked.

“The small court.”

“Who sent it?”

Pell looked toward the open outer door. Voices passed in the lane. Someone was selling roasted nuts. A child objected to going to bed. The ordinary sounds made his fear more visible.

“May I shut that?”

“Not lock it,” Sori said.

He shut it gently. Mali took the parcel with her good hand and laid it on the passage table.

Inside lay the broken practice-sword tip.

It was longer than her palm, one side smooth from years of use, the other rough with the pale split. A little dust had dried near the end where it struck the paving. Wrapped around it was a service map of the Assembly, carefully copied, with one door circled in charcoal.

No signature.

Mali looked up. “Deren.”

Pell did not answer.

“He sent you.”

“I work in the registration rooms.”

“You were at his bench this morning.”

“Yes.”

“Did he ask you to bring it?”

The clerk glanced at Sori’s notebook. She had put it on the table, unopened.

“I can’t give you words I wasn’t given.”

Anger rose in Mali so swiftly that the arm began to throb. He wanted to help without being seen helping. Deren wanted to be understood without speaking. Between them they had sent her a fragment of the thing that hurt her and expected her to call it courage.

“Then take it back.”

Pell’s face emptied.

Sori put one hand on the table, not on Mali.

“Wait.”

“I don’t need a souvenir.”

“You may need the map.”

Mali looked down. The circled door stood beneath the east infirmary, reached by a service lane rather than a teaching court. A narrow line led from it toward the old root rooms under the city.

She recognised a junction Rin had not yet been able to place.

“Why that door?” she asked.

Pell swallowed. “Because it is not in the public plan.”

“What’s there?”

“A sanctuary.”

“Whose?”

He looked at her for a moment, trying to decide whether the answer could possibly be something she did not know.

“Virelia’s.”

Sori moved the lamp closer.

The name made the passage seem smaller. Mali had seen Virelia painted in a crown of branches, offering the world a green bowl. She had imagined a forest guardian who could be asked questions too large for the people on the road. She had not imagined her beneath the Assembly while gate stewards burned warnings overhead.

“Why isn’t she in the programme?” Sori asked.

“The patients aren’t part of the programme.”

“Does she know about the demonstration?”

Pell looked at the map. “I don’t carry messages for her.”

Mali sat down. The moment she stopped standing, her exhaustion became something physical that could not be argued away.

“The sword tip,” she said. “You picked it up?”

“After you left. I was clearing the court.”

He looked at the splintered end, then at her bandaged arm.

“I thought you should have it.”

She left it on the map. She could decide what to do with it after she knew where the circled door led.

Sori opened the notebook. “May I enter your account?”

He took a long breath.

“Not the name. Not yet.”

“Then I’ll enter that a clerk delivered a map. You can add your name when you’re ready.”

“That could be never.”

“Yes,” Sori said. “It could.”

She did not assure him that nobody would be harmed by his silence. Mali found she respected her more for leaving the possibility in the room.

Pell had another folded paper in his sleeve. He kept one hand over it. Mali waited until he took it out himself.

“This isn’t from the court.”

Sena had come down the stair quietly and now stood behind Sori. At the sight of the second page she stepped forward.

“Is that a section?”

Pell nodded. “Central court. Old floor measurements. Before the new fittings.”

“Let me see.”

He held it a moment longer. “I need it back.”

Sena took it with both hands. Her attention sharpened so completely that Mali could see the others waiting for it to find words.

“There’s a chamber under the dais,” Sena said. “That’s why the return doesn’t match the pipe route.”

“A return from what?” Mali asked.

“The courts. The local lines. Whatever they built into the platform, they mounted it above an old instrument room.”

Pell said, “There’s a vertical fitting through the floor.”

“Did you see it?”

“I registered the delivery. Bronze collar, two half-rings, a central glass seat. The artisans were paid from the exhibition fund.”

“How much?” Sori asked.

He gave an amount that made Rin, arriving from the stair, stop with one foot raised.

“They said they couldn’t afford replacement cables.”

“Who signed?” Mali asked.

“Three houses. Vale’s steward received it.”

The names had begun to form something larger than the private failure in the correction court. Mali wanted to put them in a row and call it the conspiracy. She had learned enough at the weir to distrust how satisfying that would be.

“Can you prove what it does?”

“No.”

“Then we find out before we cut it,” Rin said.

Sena copied the measurements onto clean paper. She asked Pell to check each figure, including a distance he could not immediately read because the ink had bled at the fold. He went over it with the lamp, turned the sheet and made a correction.

Sori wrote down that the copy contained a correction. The small precision took time. Mali found the time easier to bear when it was spent on something other than Deren’s reputation.

Pell took back the original section. He left the map and the wooden tip. At the door he turned toward Mali.

“He didn’t teach the afternoon class.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know.”

“Then don’t make that a kindness yet.”

Pell nodded. He opened the door himself and went out into the lane. Sori watched until the shadows took him.

Mali sat with the tip beside her injured arm. Part of her wanted to use it as proof that the master had asked forgiveness in the only way he knew. Another part wanted to throw it into the brazier and keep the account simple.

Neither version required him to do anything else.

She put it back on the map.

When Hesh returned from the stable, smelling of iron filings and horse sweat, Mali told her what had arrived. She expected fury on her behalf. Hesh gave it a more practical inspection.

“Useful wood,” she said.

“What?”

“Close-grained. Seasoned. If you don’t want the symbol, keep the wood.”

Mali stared, then began to laugh. It pulled her ribs and made the laughter worse. Hesh waited for her to finish.

Gorrath wanted the map. Hesh carried it to the bed, where the old chanter sat propped against two folded blankets. She studied the circled door, looked toward her daughter and tapped the end of her own staff.

“Not tonight,” Hesh said.

Gorrath’s brows drew together.

“You slept three hours last night and bled at breakfast. We can find a door tomorrow.”

The elder reached for her slate.

“Write as long as you like.”

She did. The first line was angry. The second crossed it out. On the third she wrote, TOMORROW I GO.

“Yes,” Hesh said. “Tomorrow you go.”

Mali left them to it. Sori had spread the papers across the table: gate receipt, Sel’s signed duplicate, Ardel’s copied maintenance entry, Sena’s junction plan, the unsigned service map. The account had become something more than a warning carried in a sore woman’s tunic.

“Other schools,” Sori said. “That was your second way in.”

“After him.”

“It is after him.”

Mali nodded. She could feel how badly she wanted to spend the next day waiting for Deren to call her back. The wish had disguised itself as strategy: give him time to

think, let the private map become a public decision, don’t frighten him into further denial.

Five days remained before the demonstration. Waiting had been the decision he made for everyone else.

“Who has reason to oppose the comparison tables?” she asked.

Rin took out a new sheet of paper.

“Every house that didn’t get to write them.”

“That isn’t the same as being safe.”

“No,” Sori said. “It’s somewhere to begin.”

They made a list, not of allies but of people who might agree to listen. Sena marked the routes that avoided the main cue junction. Mae added two patients whose families belonged to different schools. Hesh named a freight steward who had paid fairly before the war and might still remember why.

Mali put the wooden tip inside her sewing roll. It fitted diagonally, sharp end covered by a scrap of leather. She tied the roll shut and stored it at the bottom of her bundle beneath the road-school letter.

If Deren wanted to make it mean something more than a piece of wood, he would have to speak.

Before bed, she opened Sel’s duplicate once more. She smoothed the fold where Deren had creased it and wrote on a separate scrap, in her own hand: Received by Deren, fifth morning. Read. No suspension ordered. Carrier response observed during correction. Clerk present.

She wanted to add he knew.

She left it out. The rest was enough to require an answer.

15. The Other Schools

The first master offered Mali breakfast and refused to sign anything.

Her house stood beside the eastern market, where porters leaned long poles against the wall before going inside to exercise. They were not disciples. A few wore the house cord around one wrist, but most came in work clothes, paid a copper or a favour and left by the service gate in time for the morning loads.

Iven of Hollow Cedar was a heavy woman with one clouded thumbnail and a whistle she used only to summon the cook. She read Sel’s warning standing up. She read the gate receipt twice.

“Caren always did enjoy a clean desk,” she said.

“Will you support a suspension?” Mali asked.

“No.”

“Why?”

“Because I don’t know which parts you’ve made larger by being angry.”

Mali had asked Sori to come. Now she regretted it. The notebook on Sori’s knee looked suddenly like another set of eyes waiting for her to mishandle the answer.

Iven sat, pushing two breakfast bowls toward them.

“Eat. Then show me what you have that isn’t a conclusion.”

They laid out the papers. Mali kept the carrier box in the coal cupboard and did not regret it, despite the absence of a thing she could point to. The maintenance entry from the weir helped more than the account of the correction. Iven knew the installer’s company. She had paid it to replace a valve on her own house’s line.

“When?” Sori asked.

“Three weeks ago.”

“With new glass?”

“A balance piece, they called it.”

Iven put down her spoon. She summoned her deputy, told him to stop the morning tube lesson and asked the porters to wait in the market. Then she led them to the practice hall.

The exercise here had no cuts. People stepped over low poles, lifted weighted baskets, learned to move a load without wrenching the back. A man with a missing foot sat on a broad bench, showing a younger worker how to distribute weight through his hips. Mali could see the school’s doctrine in the placement of objects. Their forms had grown around things people actually had to carry.

Above the hall door lay a brass grille.

The copper loop darkened near it.

Iven said something unkind about the installer’s ancestors and told her deputy to fetch the house mechanic. She did not wait for Mali to finish explaining what the loop could not establish. When she returned to the breakfast room, she had made two decisions.

“I’ll suspend lessons from the shared feed. I’ll sign a request for inspection. I won’t sign that all comparison work is corrupt.”

“That isn’t what Sel wrote,” Mali said.

“It’s what you’re asking me to fear.”

Sori drew a clean sheet from her folder. “Then write what you can support.”

Iven looked at her with approval Mali found difficult to bear. Together they composed three sentences requesting an independent inspection of active fittings and a delay to the demonstration until affected patients could be consulted. Iven signed. Her deputy added his name beneath hers.

“Don’t call those two houses,” Iven said. “He’s mine.”

They went next to White Reed.

Its courtyard was white gravel with a smooth strip down the centre for formal exchanges. Students carried long, narrow swords wrapped in pale cloth. Nobody practised beside a cooking pot or a load-bearing pole. Mali could have called it vanity if she had not seen how patiently an older student helped a younger one unwrap a damaged hand.

The master was away. His secretary met them with an expression of cultivated alarm.

“Deren’s pupil,” he said. “An unfortunate business.”

“Which one?” Mali asked.

“The morning correction.”

“Yesterday.”

“Of course.”

He had heard of it before she arrived. She had expected that and was still unprepared for the smoothness with which her failure had become public property.

White Reed would gladly host an independent demonstration, the secretary said. A smaller one, avoiding the contested materials. Its master had concerns about Red Eave’s custodianship of the comparative project and the unusual standing recently

given to Bell House. If Mali wished to make a formal statement about Deren’s fitness to chair, White Reed could ensure a wide hearing.

“Patients first,” Sori said.

“Certainly. Their safety is our principal concern.”

“Then sign the inspection request.”

He read it, made several suggestions that transformed the request into an indictment of Red Eave, and smiled when Sori restored the original wording.

“We should not rush a matter this serious.”

Outside, Mali sat on the low step long enough to get her breath. The short walk had done nothing to her ribs. The room had.

Sori waited.

“He could have got us heard,” Mali said.

“Yes.”

“If I said what he wanted.”

“Would it be true?”

“Some.”

Sori turned the folder in her hands. “Then decide where to put the rest before you let him borrow it.”

They went on.

At the House of the Open Palm, the blue Shardbreak notices hung between two carved pillars. Mali recognised the false portrait before she saw Gorrath’s name. She went cold, then hot. Hesh should have been there, but someone had to remain with Gorrath, and they had agreed to gather information before making a demand in her name.

The registrar gave them a catalogue.

“Concession rates for former service families,” he said. “Demonstration places are nearly full.”

Mali turned the pages. Breathing, balance, release of traumatic holding. Near the end, under a programme labelled Ironlung Preparatory Work, stood an instruction to complete every cycle once begun.

“What if someone wants to stop?” she asked.

“An instructor judges readiness.”

“What if they want to stop after they begin?”

The registrar’s face lost its welcoming brightness. “Interrupted practice can be distressing. We provide support.”

“Does support include letting them leave?”

“We have never detained anyone.”

She thought of Ned’s sleeve. “Where do you keep the attendance records?”

“Those are confidential.”

“So is a person’s refusal.”

Sori moved beside her. Not to draw her away, only to be visible. Mali heard herself breathing and slowed it without turning it into a count.

“We have a statement from Gorrath’s household,” she said. “She has not authorised instruction in the Shardbreak. Whom should we give it to?”

The registrar stood.

“An accredited household representative may apply through the licensing office.”

“Hesh is her daughter.”

“Then she should come herself.”

“She has.”

“Excellent. We’ll look forward to receiving her.”

He had already begun closing the catalogue.

They left with a printed copy of the application requirements. There were seven, including two witnesses to the claimant’s identity, a fee and an undertaking not to disrupt teaching while the application was considered. Sori read the last condition while Mali looked back at the false portrait.

“What will Hesh say?”

“Something precise,” Sori said. “And probably loud.”

By noon they had one signed inspection request, two evasions and a new debt for a bowl of noodles Mali had been too hungry to decline. The fourth house offered to sign if they could bring a patient prepared to describe current difficulties. Iven’s report about a piece of glass was not enough. Nor was a former student’s quarrel with a master.

“Ardel,” Mali said outside.

“A day away,” Sori reminded her.

“Teren.”

“Farther.”

“Ned. He’s at Bell House.”

Sori did not answer. Mali knew why before she looked up. A boy asked whether his lessons would be taken away. A woman she had injured. A man whose fingers she had broken. She had come looking for someone else to pay the price of making her warning persuasive.

“There are patients here who know us,” Sori said. “We can ask. Once. They can refuse.”

They returned through the west ward. Mae was sitting beside the man who had dictated the letter. His name was Leth. His daughter had sent a reply through a neighbour already travelling north. It contained a sketch of the borrowed saw and a promise to make the neighbour carry it home if he found it.

Leth wanted Mali to read it. She did before asking about the petition.

He listened with his hands folded on the blanket.

“Will this stop the afternoon exercise?”

“Possibly.”

“It hurts worse without it.”

“I know.”

“No,” he said. “You know that I say it does.”

She looked down. “Yes.”

Mae sat very still beside the bed. She was not helping. Mali understood that as a kind of help too.

“I don’t want you to say the exercise never worked,” Mali told him. “Only whether you can choose to end it.”

Leth looked at the window. Below it, someone was repairing a trolley wheel. The blows had no regular rhythm because the hammer kept slipping.

“I’ve never asked.”

“Would you like to?”

He turned back. “Would you like me to?”

The question found the place she had been trying to protect.

“Yes.”

“Then give me until tomorrow to decide.”

She did. Walking away from the bed without an answer felt harder than any of the morning’s refusals.

They found Anet in the passage outside.

Mali stopped. Sori took one look between them and said she would wait at the stair.

Anet held a basket of practice bindings. She had not come to apologise. That was plain in the way she stood, one foot slightly behind the other, ready to continue with her day.

“He shouldn’t have struck again,” she said.

“No.”

“You shouldn’t have asked for a correction with your side like that.”

“No.”

The agreement made Anet frown. “Have you learned to say anything else?”

“I’ve been practising.”

For a moment they almost smiled. Then the two years returned.

“I wrote,” Mali said.

“I know.”

“You didn’t answer.”

“My sister died that winter.”

The basket handle creaked beneath Anet’s hand. Mali remembered saying you don’t have to stay. She remembered what an easy sentence it had been.

“I didn’t know.”

“No.”

“How?”

“Fever. Before the starfall. Nothing for a hero to fix.”

The words were not cruel, only flat. Mali could not turn them into an argument about the school. She stood with the petition folder under her arm and felt how little an account of her own hurt had contained.

“I’m sorry.”

“Of course.”

“I wanted you to come out yesterday.”

“I know that too.”

Anet shifted the basket. “I’m not his hand. I can’t make it stop from a balcony.”

“You could have said something.”

“Yes,” she said. “I could have.”

They looked at each other. The admission gave Mali none of the pleasure she had expected from hearing someone else say it.

“Will you sign?” she asked, showing the petition.

Anet read it. She lingered over consultation with the patients, then over independent inspection.

“He’s being asked to turn away the people who trust him,” she said.

“I’m asking him to tell them what happened.”

“He thinks you’ll make them afraid.”

“They’re already afraid. That’s why they came.”

Anet handed back the paper unsigned.

“I need to see the junction.”

Mali nearly demanded why her word was insufficient. She thought of Ferra’s swollen knee and stopped.

“Tomorrow?”

“Early. Before practice.”

She went on with the basket. Sori came down from the stair when she was gone.

“An ally?” she asked.

“Someone I knew.”

“Those can be harder.”

In the rooming house, Hesh read the application requirements without swearing. That frightened Mali more than the expected anger.

“They want to decide whether I’m her daughter,” she said.

“They want you to go through the office.”

“They want me to promise not to tell the people they’ve already sold her to.”

Gorrath took the paper. She read it slowly, set it down and wrote on her slate.

WE GO TOGETHER.

Hesh looked at the bed, the shawl, the hands holding the slate. For once she did not argue immediately.

“Tomorrow,” she said.

The elder nodded. Not a victory. An appointment.

Sori copied the petition while Mali rested her arm. Names, houses, evidence requested. At the bottom she left space for witnesses who chose to add their own account. Mae returned before dusk with two names, given willingly: Leth wanted to see how the exercise could be stopped, and a woman named Bela wanted to know why her son had been moved to a stricter recovery class after asking to leave.

Mali wrote both on the consultation request.

She asked whether they understood it would go into the house office.

“Yes,” Mae said. “I told them.”

Mali put down the pen.

“Then tomorrow we take it in.”

She could feel the relief of having names. She did not yet know how much those names would cost.

16. The Price of a Safe Lesson

Anet came before the practice bells.

Rin met her at the storeroom and showed her the junction through the gap beside the cover. Mali held the copper loop. It blackened. No one asked Anet to make a familiar movement or wait for her hand to seize.

She looked for a long time.

“Could this be in every house?”

“We’ve found three on our route,” Rin said. “Iven found another. We haven’t opened the rest.”

“Then why put people’s names on a petition before you know?”

“They chose to speak,” Mali said.

“Did you tell them what the office could do?”

Mali had explained the audience, the inspection request, the possibility of losing the new exercises. She had not asked Mae to promise anything about housing or rations because it had not occurred to her that these could become part of the exchange.

Anet saw the answer.

“Deren doesn’t have to order a punishment,” she said. “People anticipate him.”

“Is that an excuse?”

“No. It’s a warning.”

She asked for the petition and signed only the inspection clause. Beside her name she wrote: Active fitting observed. Does not establish source or full effect.

Rin read it over her shoulder. “That’s fair.”

Mali nodded. The qualification felt like mistrust until she remembered how much she had asked people to take on trust already.

They went to the committee office at the fourth morning bell. Sori carried the papers. Mali carried nothing with a crystalline mark. Hesh and Gorrath had a separate appointment at the licensing room. None of their business would be made safer by calling it one cause.

Caren met them in a room with four windows and no brazier.

He apologised for the destruction of material at the gate in terms so smooth that Mali could not find the place where responsibility had been taken. Then he looked at the signed request.

“Iven,” he said. “Anet. And two of our guests.”

“Patients,” Sori said.

“Certainly.”

He rang a small desk bell. A clerk took the papers away to be copied. Mali watched until they were out of sight.

“Will Deren see them?”

“The Master has asked Vale to respond to clinical concerns.”

“He should respond to his own hand.”

Caren folded his fingers. “Mali. The correction was entered as an injury during voluntary examination. If you’d like to dispute the entry—”

“I would.”

“Then a separate application is appropriate.”

Sori had a fresh page ready before he could move to another subject. “Take this as notice that the account is disputed. We will supply the healer’s statement.”

Caren’s gaze sharpened. “You’re accustomed to contracts.”

“To people changing what they said after we’ve done the work.”

“I see.”

Mali let Sori speak. It was difficult. Everything in her wanted a sentence that would break through the room’s agreeable surface. Sori was laying down words it would have to step over later.

Vale arrived carrying a cup in each hand.

He set one before Caren and one on the empty space beside Mali. Tea, pale enough to see the bottom. His hands were steady.

“I heard you reached the observatory,” he said.

“Yes.”

“How is Sel?”

“Frightened. Are you?”

“Of course.”

Again, the direct answer deprived her of an easier opponent.

He sat. The soup stain had been washed out of his sleeve. The blue belt was new, or newly pressed. An official seal lay against his chest where there had been no seal at Bell House.

“Joss sent an account of the courtyard,” he said. “I suspended the shared session until he could tell me what happened.”

“Then you resumed it.”

“With observation.”

“By whom?”

“Myself, before I returned here. We reduced the group. No weapons. The lesson did not repeat the effect.”

Mali looked at Sori. The notebook was open.

“That doesn’t mean it can’t.”

“No,” Vale said. “It doesn’t. It means the people who need it have an option while we find out.”

“Do they have the option to stop?”

Caren answered before Vale could. “Always.”

Mali kept her eyes on the teacher. “Then put that in the instruction.”

“It is already understood.”

“By Ned?”

Vale’s face changed.

“He misses you,” he said.

The turn was so soft that she almost followed it. Then she saw the boy adjusting his sleeve.

“Does he understand?”

“He’s a child who spent four nights hiding beneath a ferry while grown men walked into the river. He doesn’t understand why his hands hurt when nothing touches them. He understands that Bell House is where he can sleep.”

“So he can leave?”

“He can be moved to a less supervised room if he’s ready.”

“That isn’t what I asked.”

“No,” Vale said. “You keep asking for a simple answer to a thing people have to live through.”

Mali’s cup had cooled. She had not touched it. Caren sipped his own as if the tea could demonstrate a composure the rest of them were failing to maintain.

A knock came at the door. The clerk returned with Bela.

She was a small woman in a washed brown dress. Her hands held the same scrap of cloth so tightly that it looked like a bird trapped between them. Mali rose. Bela did not seem to know whether they had met.

“Your son,” Vale said. “Evin. How was his breakfast?”

“He ate.”

“All of it?”

“Most.”

“And the hand?”

Bela looked down at her own. “He held the spoon.”

Vale smiled. Not triumphantly. The relief in it was real.

Mali could see what Bela had seen the first time: a teacher whose happiness at the smallest recovery was not staged for anyone important. Caro’s empty cup. Ned leaving his chair behind. Teren sleeping until morning.

“We asked you here because you had concerns about the new class,” Sori said.

Bela’s eyes moved toward Caren. “I asked why it had to be every day.”

“Practice is cumulative,” Vale said gently.

“He cries before it.”

“He cried before the first walk too.”

“That was different.”

“Yes. And we listened.”

Mali watched Bela’s mouth. She could see the words gathering and being turned aside by something she owed this man. The cup, the spoon, the first morning a boy remembered how to eat without assistance. Gratitude could fill every space an objection needed.

“What did he say he wanted?” Mali asked.

Bela looked at her. “A day.”

“Then can he have one?”

Caren set down his cup. Vale’s thumb rested against the rim of his own, still, very still.

“We can review it this afternoon,” he said.

Bela’s shoulders fell with relief.

Mali had wanted an admission about why the boy had been moved. She wanted a promise in writing, a witness, a clear statement that nobody had ever been obliged. Bela wanted the afternoon to be less frightening for her son.

Sori wrote: Individual rest day to be reviewed today. Outcome requested by evening.

“May she take the note?” she asked.

Caren glanced at Vale. Vale nodded. Bela received the copy as carefully as she might have held a meal.

The meeting ended without delaying the demonstration. Caren promised an inspection committee. Vale promised to review the local fittings. Deren had not appeared.

Outside, Mali stood under the office awning while Bela returned toward the wards.

“He made it sound as if we’d never asked,” she said.

“Some things we hadn’t,” Sori answered.

“Don’t help him.”

“I’m helping the record.”

Mali turned on her, anger rising fast enough to frighten them both. She saw Sori’s face close. They had met only two days before. The woman owed her neither patience nor another attempt to say something useful.

“I’m sorry,” Mali said.

Sori looked toward the lane, where two porters were manoeuvring a bed frame through a doorway.

“I don’t have to keep doing this,” she said.

“I know.”

“No. You know it in the conversation. Remember it when you’re looking at him.”

She went back toward the rehearsal rooms. Mali followed a little way behind, giving her the distance she had not asked for aloud.

They found Hesh outside the licensing room with the application unsigned.

“Two independent witnesses,” she said. “Not people who travelled with us. Not her daughter. They’d accept the receipt for the money as proof of permission, but not the person who took the money as proof it wasn’t given.”

Gorrath sat in the wicker chair with her eyes closed. She had used her voice. Mali could hear it in the small, dry catch on every breath.

“Why?” Hesh asked her mother, too softly for an argument.

Gorrath did not open her eyes. She laid one hand on her own chest, then let it fall.

Because it was my name. Because I was here. Because I still thought a voice could reach something paper could not. Mali could imagine the answers and refused to choose one for her.

They brought the chair back slowly. Mae took Gorrath’s broth to the bedside. Sena ran to fetch the healer who had attended the correction. That would cost money too. Nobody asked whose advance should pay until Gorrath could breathe comfortably again.

By evening the ward staff had changed Bela’s son’s room.

The new room was not worse. It had clean linen, a lamp and one fewer bed. It also stood behind a guarded door in the east preparation house. An attendant explained

that the boy’s distress required a quieter environment and that family visits would be arranged after the final class.

Bela waited outside with Sori’s note.

Mali arrived with Mae and tried to get the door opened. The guard was a patient man with a scarred cheek. He read the note and said it authorised a review, not a move. He could summon the supervisor if they wished. The supervisor was in session.

“How long?” Mali asked.

“Until it’s done.”

Bela gripped the note until the paper tore at a fold.

Mali put a hand on the door. The impulse to break it was almost peaceful. She could measure the wood, choose the weakest joint, hit it until something happened. She would be doing something instead of standing beside a woman whose request she had carried into a room and made dangerous.

Mae caught her eye.

“Bela,” she said. “What do you want us to do?”

The woman looked from one of them to the other.

“Stay.”

So they stayed.

The supervisor came after an hour. Evin was asleep, he said. He had received a mild night treatment because of agitation. Visits tomorrow would depend on how he woke. No, the treatment was not a punishment. Yes, he was aware of the rest request. Master Vale had approved the change personally.

“Write that,” Mali told him.

He frowned. She pointed to Sori’s damaged note.

“Your name. His name. What you gave. Who approved it.”

Mae had fetched a clean sheet. The supervisor protested that this was not standard practice. Bela said she would wait until it was written.

They waited another half-hour.

When they finally walked away, Bela had a name, a time, the name of the night treatment and no son beside her. Mali could not pretend the paper was an adequate return.

Bela stopped at the ward gate.

“Don’t put his name anywhere else,” she said.

“I won’t.”

“Not even to help.”

Mali nodded. The promise would make gathering other witnesses harder. That was what keeping it meant.

In the rooming house the others were marking the service map. The circled door remained below the east infirmary, outside the guarded preparation house. Virelia’s sanctuary. A way to someone who might know more than the committee wished to hear.

Mali took Sel’s duplicate from her tunic and set it beside the map.

“We go tomorrow,” she said.

Hesh looked toward her sleeping mother.

“All of us?”

“Whoever wants to come.”

The distinction felt smaller than it should have. It had taken her most of a week to begin saying it before someone made her.

17. The Green House



The circled door had no handle on the outside.

Mali found it beneath a flight of steps behind the east infirmary, where the service lane narrowed enough to scrape both sides of Gorrath’s chair. A drain ran along the wall. Above it a window stood open, letting out the smell of boiled linen. Somewhere inside, a woman was singing to someone who did not answer.

Hesh put down the light end of the chair.

“Pell’s idea of an entrance.”

“There must be a way.”

“A good thing doors aren’t literal.”

Gorrath tapped the frame with her slate. The sound was soft, ordinary, lost under the rattle of a trolley passing overhead. She tapped again, then pointed to a narrow seam

beside the lintel.

Mali felt along it with her good hand. The wood was warm. A small root lay beneath the frame, its pale end curled around an old iron staple.

They waited.

The root withdrew. A bolt lifted on the other side.

A young attendant opened the door with a basin against one hip. She looked first at the chair, then at Mali’s sword.

“No weapons past the wash table.”

Hesh rested the long spear half against the wall. Mali hesitated. The attendant waited without trying to make the request sound less definite.

Mali removed the sword and put it beside the spear. She kept the scabbard with it. Under her sash the copper loop had already begun to darken.

Inside, a narrow passage sloped downward through warm air. Roots pressed through the mortar, thickening as the light from the door diminished. Ordinary lamps stood in niches between them. No flame touched the living wood.

The attendant gave her name as Tovan and asked Gorrath whether she needed to be carried or could bear weight for a few steps. Gorrath held out two fingers. Tovan took one elbow. Hesh took the other. Mali moved the empty chair ahead of them.

At the foot of the passage lay a room as large as the teaching court, full of green light and sleeping people.

Mali had expected a guardian.

She found a girl sitting barefoot beside a cradle, holding a woman’s hand.

Virelia’s dark hair fell across one shoulder. Her layered moss-coloured clothes had been mended beneath the arm, where the cloth caught on a root each time she rose. Green light moved faintly beneath her brown skin. Her face had the stillness of someone trying not to disturb a creature that might begin to hurt again if she looked away.

“You’re injured,” she told Mali.

“So are they.”

The girl looked down at the sleeping woman. “Less than before.”

Tovan led Hesh to an empty space beside the wall and helped settle Gorrath’s chair. Nobody moved the elder without asking. That made the rest of what Mali saw harder to dismiss.

Linen lay neatly over living cradles. Cups stood where attendants could reach them. Names were chalked on small boards. At the base of each cradle a glass tile rested between the roots. Every tile carried the branching mark.

Mali stopped beside the nearest one.

Her copper loop had turned black.

Virelia followed her gaze. “That detects activity, not harm.”

“Who told you?”

“Vale.”

“Did Sel?”

“Sel isn’t here.”

The answer had a child’s sharpness beneath all the weariness. Mali recognised it and had to stop herself answering as if she were the older student sent to manage it.

“I have a letter from them.”

Virelia did not hold out her hand. “Another?”

“They sent one before?”

“A request for further observations. We sent the sleep records.”

“When?”

“Five days ago. Before they decided observation wasn’t enough.”

Mali did the count. The second day, while she crossed Reed Cut. Sel’s warnings had left the observatory on the first; not all had outrun her. Requests and replies were moving past one another on roads crowded with people who might not wish to carry them.

She put the duplicate warning on a dry stone beside the cradle.

“This was written the morning of the first. Deren read it two days ago.”

Virelia looked at the signature. Her fingers remained around the sleeping woman’s hand.

“Sel worries about everything the Codex does.”

“They should have worried sooner.”

That made the girl look up.

Mali let the anger stand. She had no reason to protect Sel from a true account. But she did not want it to become permission for Virelia to look away from the letter.

“They sent the comparisons. They say the new carrier is learning through trusted movements. We found fittings in the public tubes. The exercises are not staying inside the rooms where people agree to begin them.”

Virelia’s eyes went to the tiled roots.

“The patients here can’t make those movements.”

“They breathe.”

“So do we.”

“Yes.”

Mali could hear the inadequacy of it. Breath alone could not be the enemy. Shared movement alone could not be the enemy. They needed to understand the things that made repetition into an instruction somebody else could own.

Hesh had knelt beside a severed root channel at the wall. It was broad enough for two hands. Inside the cut, pale fibres had dried into a frayed rim. A line of glass fittings bypassed it, running into the floor beneath the cradles.

“What was this?” she asked.

“The old connection.”

“To the forest?”

Virelia nodded.

“Why cut it?”

“It wouldn’t hold the arrangement.”

Mali looked at the roots under the patient’s bed. “Why not?”

“Because it remembers.”

The girl’s voice broke on the last word. She looked angry about it, as though she had allowed a private thing to enter a room where it might be handled badly.

“The roots hold pain as well as healing,” she said. “A person settles, then a touch or a dream or a memory in the network wakes them. Again and again. They asked me to let them rest.”

“Did they ask for the connection to be cut?”

“They asked me to help.”

Tovan set down her basin. She had been listening from the next cradle. Mali saw the attendant preparing to say something, then closing her mouth.

“Ask her,” Mali told Virelia.

The girl turned toward Tovan. For a moment she seemed unable to understand that a person who had been in the room for weeks might contain a fact she had not heard.

Tovan wiped her hands on her apron.

“We agreed to quieter rest,” she said. “We didn’t know the visits would stop.”

“They disturb the sleepers.”

“Sometimes.”

“Alis hadn’t slept for six nights.” Virelia looked at the woman whose hand she held. “She said she couldn’t do another.”

“How long now?” Mali asked.

“Nine days.”

The number made Mali look at the little board. Alis. Admitted fourteen days earlier. In a second hand, beneath that: daughter outside south ward, inform before transfer.

“Has she woken?”

“Enough to drink.”

“Has she spoken to her daughter?”

Virelia’s jaw tightened.

The room smelled of damp earth, clean linen and the slight sourness of bodies kept too long in one position. One attendant turned a patient with great care, asking another to support the shoulder. Whatever held them asleep had not removed the labour of keeping them alive.

Mali knelt beside a narrow-faced man with a missing ear. His eyes were open. A root cradle held his head comfortably enough, but another small loop rested against his jaw. The tile under his bed shone with a soft branch of light.

She looked at the name board.

“Rovan,” she said. “Can you hear me?”

His mouth moved.

“Don’t exhaust him,” Virelia said.

“What does he want?”

“He’s resting.”

“He’s looking at me.”

The girl’s free hand tightened against her knee.

Mali leaned close enough to see the shape of his effort. No sound came. The root at his jaw did not look cruel. It looked exquisitely fitted, soft where bone pressed against it, responsive to the little movements of his skin.

She had seen splints made with less care. She had also seen a man unable to release his sword.

“Rovan. Is there someone you want us to fetch?”

The root struck her before she could move back.

It caught her uninjured wrist and pinned it to the cradle. Her shoulder twisted. The bruised ribs pulled hard enough to make her cry out.

Hesh reached for a weapon she had left at the wash table. She caught the chair arm instead. Roots rose beneath her boots and locked around her ankles.

“Stop,” Mali said.

Virelia was crying.

“I know what he feels.”

“Then let him say it.”

“You don’t know what that would do.”

The walls tightened. Tovan picked up the basin before a root could overturn it. The practised movement told Mali this was not the first time the sanctuary had answered Virelia’s distress.

Gorrath held both hands open on her lap.

Virelia did not look at her. Her eyes had gone toward a distance the room did not contain.

“Inside the cathedral,” she said, “there wasn’t earth. There wasn’t anything that knew me. I put my hands down and they were all there.”

Mali could not picture it. She knew the public account: five people walking through a rift, a dragon confused, the signal fracturing. She had heard the tale told to children beside kitchen fires. In those tellings the heroes knew what every sacrifice meant before they made it.

“All those worlds,” Virelia said. “Not one after another. Together. A woman trying to find her son in a house that wasn’t a house. Someone laughing because the rain had come before the crop failed. A room with no doors and people who thought it was a church. I can’t remember which of them were mine to keep.”

The root tightened on Mali’s wrist.

“When I sleep, someone else is dying.”

Tovan came to stand beside the girl’s chair. She did not touch her.

Virelia looked up at her with sudden pleading. “Here they stop.”

“Sometimes,” the attendant said again.

The word hurt her. Mali could see it. She wanted to give the girl something kinder, and had only the man whose mouth was still moving beside her trapped hand.

“Let him answer one question,” she said.

“You’ll make him scream.”

“He might.”

“You don’t know.”

“No.”

The answer left them nowhere to hide. Mali could not promise that choosing would hurt less. She could not offer to carry a thousand worlds, could barely keep her own small set of errors from turning into an account that excused the next one.

She looked at Rovan.

“One question,” she repeated.

Virelia stood motionless. Tovan waited. Hesh had stopped fighting the roots around her boots. Gorrath’s open hands trembled with the effort of keeping them where the girl could see.

At last the loop beneath the man’s jaw loosened.

“My sister,” he whispered.

Virelia bent toward him at once. “She’s safe.”

“Let her in.”

“She’s outside the ward.”

“Then let her in.”

“Visitors disturb—”

“Please.”

The word came from him like something dragged across broken stone.

Virelia sat down so suddenly that Tovan reached for her. The girl flinched away, then caught the attendant’s sleeve before she could withdraw.

The root loosened around Mali’s wrist.

She did not pull free at once. She waited until the wood had drawn back, then lifted the hand slowly enough for her own shoulder to remember where it belonged. Hesh stepped out of the roots around her boots. She did not go for the spear.

“Her name?” Mali asked Rovan.

“Lysa.”

“Tovan,” Virelia said. “Will you fetch her?”

The attendant looked from Rovan to the door.

“You can stay,” Hesh said. “I’ll go, if someone shows me the room.”

Virelia nodded. A second attendant took Hesh toward the passage. The girl watched them until the light beyond the door disappeared.

Mali settled on the floor beside Rovan’s bed. The bruise on her forearm throbbed beneath its loose binding. Her left wrist bore a red line where the root had held it. Virelia saw both and put her hands in her lap, palms up, as if she needed to be certain they were empty.

“I still want him quiet,” she said.

Rovan had shut his eyes. He was awake; Mali could see him waiting.

“Then don’t be the only person who decides,” she said.

It was too small for the room. It was what she had.

18. The Sister at the Door

Lysa arrived carrying a bag of laundry.

She had been waiting above the east ward since morning and had left three messages nobody could find. She told Tovan this before asking whether Rovan was dying. When the attendant said he was not, she began to cry with such anger that Mali had to look away.

“I’ve brought his shirt,” she said. “Again.”

Virelia rose, then stopped herself.

“The loose garments don’t catch on the cradles.”

“He hates them.”

“They’re easier to change.”

“He knows they’re easier. He’s told me five times.”

Lysa put the laundry bag on the stool and went to her brother. The root at his jaw withdrew farther without being asked. He opened his eyes.

“You look terrible,” she told him.

He made a sound so faint that Mali first thought it was pain. Then his mouth moved.

“So do you.”

Lysa took his hand and laughed. It came out broken by tears. Rovan’s own laugh was a scrape of air, appalling to hear after all that stillness, and unmistakably his.

Virelia listened as though it hurt.

The quiet around the next cradle broke. A woman turned her head. Farther along, someone began to moan. The glass tiles brightened by degrees, pale branches moving through the beds in a sequence Mali could not read.

Virelia’s hands rose.

Tovan said her name.

The girl lowered them slowly.

“It’s connected,” she said.

“Through the roots?” Hesh asked.

“Through what I asked the glass to hold.”

“What did you ask?”

Virelia looked at Alis, asleep with her face toward the wall. “Enough rest. No gaps. No one waking another before they were ready.”

Mali thought of Sel asking the archive for safer movements. A request with a good reason could be a place to put a bad answer. That did not mean every requester had chosen the whole harm at once. It did not mean nobody had chosen it later.

“Can one tile come out?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“Now?”

“I don’t know what it will feel like.”

“Ask him.”

Virelia moved beside Rovan’s cradle. She knelt so he would not have to turn his head far to see her.

“There is something holding the rest in place,” she said. “I thought it was helping you. I think it’s doing more than I asked.”

Lysa looked down at the tile.

“What more?”

“It makes returning to the rest easier than leaving.”

Rovan listened. Sweat had gathered at his hairline, though the room was cool.

“Will it hurt?” he asked.

“It might. The pain you had before. Perhaps something I haven’t seen.”

“Can you put it back?”

Virelia looked at the little glass piece. “I don’t know if that would be safe.”

Mali kept her mouth shut. She wanted him to say yes. Everything depended on somebody saying yes soon enough that they could begin. He had spent weeks being useful to someone else’s idea of mercy. He did not owe hers a more convenient answer.

Lysa held his hand.

At last he nodded.

“One,” he whispered.

“Only yours,” Virelia said.

They made space first. Tovan asked two attendants to stay with the neighbouring patients and sent another for warm water. Hesh moved the empty chair from the aisle. Gorrath watched from her own, slate on her lap. Mali took a folded blanket when Lysa offered it and put it where Rovan could be supported if the cradle shifted.

Nobody counted.

Virelia loosened the root holding the tile. Mali and Hesh lifted the glass together because the lower edge had grown into a seam beneath the bed. The copper loop warmed sharply against Mali’s hip.

Rovan arched.

His grip crushed Lysa’s fingers. The sound he made was not speech and not anything a person could be asked to hear calmly. Virelia jerked forward. Hesh caught the tile before she could reach for it.

“Ask,” she said.

Rovan’s eyes were shut. His jaw trembled. Lysa kept saying his name, not because it was a spell but because she had nothing else to put between him and the pain.

Virelia did not put the tile back.

It took an hour for the shaking to ease. During it, the next patient began to scream. Tovan kept the woman’s head supported while another attendant removed a cup from reach. She was called Meret. She could not say whether she wanted her own tile lifted. They left it where it was, wrote down the time and told her what was happening even when she seemed unable to hear.

When Rovan could speak again, he asked for water.

Lysa held the cup. He drank two mouthfuls and turned his head away.

“Enough?” she asked.

He nodded. It was such an ordinary exchange that Mali had to swallow before she could look at Virelia.

The girl sat on her heels, shaking. Her hands had not moved for several minutes. Gorrath tapped her slate against the chair arm, waited for Virelia to notice, then pointed to the words she had written.

YOU TOO.

Virelia stared at it.

Tovan took another cup and sat down beside her. She did not put it into the girl’s hands. She held it out until Virelia reached.

The second tile came out from beneath a woman who had been awake through most of the first removal. Her name was Daia. She had listened to every sound Rovan made and asked anyway, because she had three children above the ward and wanted to recognise their voices without the room deciding when recognition should end.

She cried before the glass was free. She cried after it was free too. There was no moment Mali could point to and call improvement. When her eldest came downstairs, Daia knew his name. The boy sat on the floor rather than in the chair offered him and put his head against the bed.

They took out two more before afternoon. One man vomited until he had nothing left. A young woman slept almost at once, more deeply than she had under the tile, and woke frightened because she could not immediately remember where she was.

Four pieces of glass lay in a lined basket. The room contained more than thirty beds.

Mali looked at the remaining tiles and understood how easily the number could become an instruction to hurry.

“We can’t do all of them today,” Tovan said.

Virelia nodded. Her lips had gone white.

“We can’t leave it all night,” Hesh said.

“We can’t do all of them,” Tovan repeated.

Gorrath wrote slowly on her slate. Hesh began to read, reached the middle and stopped talking.

NOT ONLY YOU.

The same words could be given to the healer or the patient. Mali thought the old chanter knew that. She sat where the aisle narrowed and asked for a list of people who could be brought in to help. Family, local attendants, anyone trusted by the person in the bed. No blanket call to every house. Names first, journeys second, so they would not create a crowd at a locked door.

Sena would know how to route the arrivals. Sori would know whom to ask about supplies. Mae knew patients whose relatives might assist people alone in the room. Rin could check whether their local call line was fitted to the same branch.

They did not need four performers to become medical experts. They needed four people who could do something useful without pretending it was the whole task.

Hesh took the first list upstairs. She asked her mother whether she wished to remain or return to the rooming house. Gorrath considered the bed being offered nearby, then the people who might need someone to say enough.

She wrote STAY on the slate.

Hesh did not argue. She put the damp cloth and the broth where her mother could reach them, showed Tovan which one was which and left with both spear halves still at the wash table.

Mali watched her go.

“She’s allowed,” Gorrath whispered.

The cost of the two words brought tears to the old Orc’s eyes. Mali shook her head quickly, not to disagree but to stop her spending another breath to explain.

“I know.”

Gorrath gave her a look that said knowing would have to become something she did.

By late afternoon Virelia had allowed a narrow Silverroot connection to grow into the room.

She did not reopen the severed channel. Too much of the lattice depended on the arrangement she had installed in its place. Instead she knelt at a small patch of bare earth beside the wash table and waited for a pale new root to find the surface.

It took longer than Mali expected. The forest had not been waiting with a convenient answer under the tiles. Virelia’s forehead shone with sweat. Twice she drew back to breathe. On the third attempt a root no thicker than a finger touched her palm.

She closed her eyes.

Mali saw her flinch.

“Does it hurt?”

“Yes.”

“What did it say?”

Virelia listened. Whatever language passed between them, it did not arrive as words available to everyone in the room. She took time to make the answer small enough to speak.

“It remembers what I cut.”

“Will it forgive you?”

The girl looked at her. “That isn’t what it’s asking.”

“What is it asking?”

“Who else is here.”

Mali looked toward Tovan, Lysa, the sleeping elder and the young attendant carrying clean cloth between the beds. They had been there all along. The question was not a revelation so much as a refusal to let Virelia leave them outside her account.

“Tell it,” Mali said.

Virelia did.

The new root remained no wider than a finger. It could carry a report outward, the girl thought, if she gave it time and did not ask it to hold the room. She asked Tovan to compose the report with her. Tovan began with the visits that had been stopped. Virelia’s mouth tightened. She did not cross it out.

Mali wrote her own letter to Sel in the corner while they worked.

Day seven. Reached Assembly day four. Original warning destroyed unopened under committee policy. Duplicate read by Deren day five. No suspension. Active fittings in local tubes. Sanctuary uses marked tiles, old root link cut. Four removed with consent; effects severe and varied. Remaining patients need local help. Do not send new shared exercises.

She described Rovan, the slate, the active copper response. She did not draw the mark or include Evin’s name. She added the cost at the weir and her responsibility for Ferra’s injury because Sel needed to know what their messenger had done too.

Virelia offered to pass the words along the new connection when it had settled. Mali gave her a copy and kept the original for a road courier. A message in two forms could disagree. She dated both and asked for the date to travel with the words.

Toward evening the girl wrote a warning of her own.

It did not claim the entire arrangement had been proven to be an enemy. It said she had restrained patients and visitors, interrupted family access and severed a forest check on her judgement. It asked the north infirmaries to send attendants who would be willing to disagree with her.

Her signature came slowly.

Mali thought of Deren's unsigned map. She looked down before the comparison could make this child's admission into an excuse for the adults around her.

Tovan asked Mali to eat. She had forgotten lunch. The bread was stale and the broth had a skin, and she ate both so quickly that Virelia watched her with alarm.

"I'm not dying," Mali said.

"I wasn't thinking that."

"What were you thinking?"

"That you should have asked sooner."

Mali looked at the empty bowl. They were both quiet for a moment. Then the girl made a small, astonished sound, almost laughter, and covered her mouth as if laughter in that room had to be justified.

It did not last. Meret had begun to moan again. Virelia rose, went to her bed and asked whether she wanted Tovan. She did not reach for the tile.

Mali retrieved the sword from the wash table before going upstairs. The weight settled against her hip with an old comfort. Hesh met her in the passage, carrying a clean pillow and the news that Sori had found two attendants willing to take a night turn.

"Mother stays," Hesh said.

"Yes."

"I'll stay near enough to fetch. I won't sit on the floor making her fight me every time she needs a cup."

Mali nodded.

They stood together beside the open door. Below, Rovan's sister was arguing with him about a shirt. Above, a bell began the evening practice hour. Mali waited until the sound had finished and found she had not moved with it.

Inside the room Virelia called her name.

The girl stood beside the first cradle, her hands empty.

"I still want them quiet," she said.

“I know.”

“I might do it again.”

Mali thought of Ferra. Of the ease in her own voice when she had told a stranger to stop.

“Then tell Tovan before you do.”

Virelia looked toward the attendant. Tovan was changing water, sleeves rolled to the elbow. She glanced up and waited.

The girl went to her.

Mali left the sanctuary with the sword, the stained letter copy and no promise that morning would be safe. The door remained open behind her because someone beside it had agreed to keep watch.

19. A Rest Day

Bela was still at the preparation-house door when Mali came upstairs.

She had eaten nothing since morning. Mae knew this because the bread she brought at noon remained wrapped beside the woman’s foot. The guard had changed. Iss was gone, replaced by someone younger who kept glancing toward the last page of the duty book. He had been told there was a dispute. Nobody had told him whether a dispute ended when one side went to sleep.

“Is he awake?” Mali asked.

Bela looked up. “They won’t tell me now.”

“Why?”

“I keep asking.”

Mae stood from the step. Her knees made a small sound. She was wearing the same stage clothes as yesterday, with the ochre panel folded out of the way beneath her belt. A pin at the shoulder had come loose. Mali wanted to fix it because that would be something she could do without needing another person to consent to being helped.

“Go eat,” she told Bela.

“No.”

The woman did not even look annoyed. The refusal had been offered so many times it had lost the energy of an answer.

Mali sat down instead.

“I won’t move your place.”

“If he wakes—”

“Mae can come for you.”

Bela looked at the guard. He shifted his weight.

“I can tell you if they call,” he said.

It was the first useful thing anyone at the door had offered in hours. She studied him before she rose, as if trying to discover where the words would be kept when another guard came. Mae took the wrapped bread. They went no farther than the kitchen turn.

Mali stayed on the step.

The night air had begun to cool the stone. She kept her bruised forearm across her lap, palm up. There were two days of colour in the bruise now, dark at the centre, greenish at its fading edge. It looked less like an event than a slow piece of work a body had been left to perform alone.

“Did you ask to stand here?” she said to the guard.

He looked startled. “It’s my watch.”

“What are you watching for?”

“Visitors.”

“People trying to get in?”

“Yes.”

“People trying to get out?”

He touched the duty book. “The house attendant manages patients.”

“Then if the boy comes to the door, you won’t stop him?”

“I’ll call the attendant.”

She could push. Make him say a thing sufficiently clear that tomorrow’s record would have another man’s name. She looked at his young face and recognised the wish to carry out a difficult job well enough that someone else remained responsible for its meaning.

“Tell him his mother is nearby,” she said. “If he asks.”

The guard nodded.

Mali took out Virelia’s new warning. She had the copied text, not the signed original, which Tovan had kept below. The girl had described restraints and stopped visits. She had asked for other people to check her work. A hero’s admission ought to open a door, Mali thought. The thought had the same old shape: find the right name, make it do the work consent had failed to do.

She folded the copy away.

When Mae returned, she was carrying a basin and a towel.

“Bela’s eating. The cook gave her soup.”

“Where are you going?”

“To collect the linen we promised.”

“At this hour?”

“It’s clean linen at this hour too.”

The guard looked relieved to be given an ordinary task. He opened the door far enough to speak to an attendant, then let Mae enter with the basin. Mali stood.

“Not you,” he said.

She looked at Mae. The performer did not ask him to change his mind. She looked back at Mali and held her gaze until Mali understood the choice. Mae had been bringing food and letters for days. Mali had brought a confrontation and a list of things nobody wished to enter. They could resent the difference or use the access the person with it had earned.

Mali sat down again.

The door closed.

Waiting made her angry in a way the sanctuary had not. There she could fetch a cup, hold a tile, ask a question that somebody in the room might answer. Here her work was to remain without converting impatience into a command. She could feel why masters preferred lessons that let them correct a student’s body. The body gave them something to move while the difficult part stayed inside.

Bela came back with the empty bowl. She sat beside Mali and wiped its rim with her thumb.

“He never used to be quiet,” she said.

Mali waited.

“Even asleep. Grinding his teeth. Kicking at the blankets. His father said we could rent him out to keep a mill running.”

“Where is his father?”

“South road.”

“Travelling?”

“Buried.”

Mali looked at the doorway, unable to bear being seen failing to find a useful word.

Bela gave her none to repeat. “The first night he slept, I stayed awake. Kept putting a hand beneath his nose.”

“To feel the breath.”

“Yes. Vale showed me how without waking him.”

A small part of Mali wanted to disbelieve this kindness. It would make the rest easier if every good thing the man had done could be unmasked as preparation for a bad thing. Bela did not seem to be asking which account was more convenient.

“I thanked him so much,” she said.

“You could thank him for that.”

“I know.” Bela turned the bowl. “I didn’t know how to stop thanking him.”

They sat until the guard changed.

The new man read the last page, saw Bela and sighed. Mali introduced herself before he could say anything. She gave him the name of the guard leaving, the time Mae

entered and the purpose of the basin. The younger man remained long enough to confirm it.

This was not an escape plan. It was an account difficult enough to keep that she understood how people went missing between two ordinary shifts without anyone deciding to make them disappear.

Mae returned with the basin full of folded sheets.

“He’s awake,” she said.

Bela stood so quickly the bowl struck the step.

“He knows you’re here. He wants you to come in.”

The new guard looked toward the door. “The supervisor—”

“Is coming,” Mae said. “I asked him.”

Something in her voice made the man stand aside from the threshold rather than across it. Mae set down the basin. Her hands were steady until she drew them clear of the linen; then Mali saw them shake.

“What happened?” she asked quietly.

“Nothing yet.”

The supervisor came with a candle and an expression meant to end the conversation before it gathered detail.

“Evin needs settling. Familiar faces can agitate him before sleep.”

“He’s asked for his mother,” Mae said.

“He asks for several things when he wakes.”

“Did he ask for her?”

“Yes.”

“Then let her answer.”

Mali recognised the point at which the man felt his judgement challenged. She had stood at it with Deren, Ardel, Joss, an instructor beside a trough. She moved closer to Mae and made herself remain silent.

Bela held the empty bowl against her skirt.

“I can sit where you tell me,” she said. “I can leave when he asks. You can stay.”

The supervisor looked at the guards. No public audience. No master whose name would settle the matter. Only a tired mother, two troublesome women and a boy whose request would now have to be refused aloud.

“Ten minutes.”

“Will you tell him that before we go in?” Mae asked.

He gave her a look of deep dislike. She did not move.

At last he opened the door.

Mali carried the basin. It was a reason to enter that made no claim on the boy's attention, and she used it carefully. The room was smaller than the west ward, cleaner along the walls, warmer because the window had been shut. Evin lay on a narrow bed with both hands folded beneath the blanket. He was younger than Mali expected, still with the roundness of a child in his cheeks.

He saw Bela and put one hand out.

She crossed the room before anyone could tell her where to sit. His fingers closed around two of hers. Nothing in the movement resembled the rigid grip at the ferry. He held on because he wanted her there.

The supervisor explained the ten minutes.

Evin looked at him. "Why?"

"You need your rest."

"I've been resting."

"You've been unwell."

The boy turned back to his mother. He had heard enough adult answers to know when a question was being put away.

Mae brought a stool. Mali took the used cups to the basin. On a side table stood a treatment slip with Vale's initials. She did not read the rest over the boy's shoulder. Bela could ask for her son's record. Mali could help without taking possession of it first.

The supervisor stayed by the door. After a while he let his shoulders drop. There was no agitation to manage. Evin told his mother that a girl in the next room had a pet beetle in a box, that he had not liked the rice, that the attendant had promised paper and forgotten.

Bela listened to every complaint as though it were water.

When the ten minutes ended, he had begun talking about his father.

The supervisor cleared his throat. Bela's hand tightened. Mae looked toward Mali, not asking her to attack but making certain she was listening.

"Tell him," Mali said to the supervisor.

He frowned.

"You set the time. Tell him it's finished."

The man went to the bedside. Evin listened, then looked at the candle. He had no clock. They had brought him into a room in which other people controlled the day's lengths and now asked him to trust their account of a visit.

"Can she stay until I sleep?" he asked.

The supervisor opened his mouth.

“There is room,” Mae said. “The stool is already there.”

“It isn’t the room.”

“What is it?”

“An expectation. If one family—”

“Then one family is here tonight,” she said. “You can decide another when they come.”

Mali looked at the basin so she would not make the moment into a victory before a decision had been made. The water smelled faintly of soap. A cup chipped at the handle lay above two unbroken ones. She could do this much: keep carrying ordinary things while the person who had earned the room asked an ordinary question until someone answered it.

The supervisor said Bela could stay until the next watch, then they would review.

Bela thanked him. Mali hated how grateful she sounded and knew it was not hers to forbid. The woman had the thing she needed for this hour. Nobody had to lose that because Mali wished the permission had never been required.

Before leaving, Mae found paper for Evin. He asked whether she was one of the women from the poster. She said yes, the untidy one. He asked if she would draw the others.

“They won’t like my version.”

He considered this, then smiled. “Do it anyway.”

She drew four small figures. Sori’s braid became too long, Rin’s hair too square, Sena’s bun like a pot lid. The boy recognised the silver crescent even when it was no more than an untidy curve above their heads.

“That’s enough,” he said when she tried to improve it.

Mae put down the charcoal.

Outside, she leaned against the wall with her face tilted toward the night air. Mali took the heavy basin from her and set it on the step before her arm could object.

“You were good,” she said.

Mae shook her head. “Don’t make a form of it.”

“I wasn’t.”

“You were looking for the part you could repeat.”

Mali almost denied it. Then she sat down.

“Yes.”

Mae rubbed her forehead. “I knew his name. I knew which attendant had promised paper. I’d carried the rice he didn’t like. You can’t bring all that into a room just because you learn the right way to ask.”

The words stung because they left no shortcut. Every visit had become a little work she had wanted someone else to complete more quickly.

“Will you keep coming?” Mali asked.

“For now.”

“Even if we leave?”

“I don’t know yet. I want stages too. Rooms where people buy tickets and I don’t have to spend half the song worrying about how much it costs them to sit up.”

“That doesn’t sound wrong.”

“I didn’t ask if it was.”

Mali laughed softly. Mae did too. The laughter lasted only long enough for them to lift the basin together.

They found Sori awake over the equipment papers. Rin was asleep on the floor beside an open tool case. Sena had fallen asleep sitting up with a plan beneath one hand. The room looked like a place people lived, not a command post.

Mali entered the visit in the notebook. Names, request, refusal, permission, time. She asked Mae to check it. The performer crossed out persuaded and wrote agreed after Evin asked.

“He did that part,” she said.

Mali read the sentence again and left the correction.

Below them the city prepared another morning in which everyone would be told the right way to begin.

20. The Attendance Book

Ned arrived with the Bell House party on the morning of the eighth.

Mali saw his chair before she saw him. It stood on top of a wagon, lashed between rolled sleeping mats and a basket of empty jars. The boy walked beside the rear wheel, carrying a small bundle with both hands. Joss sat up front. His knuckles were bandaged. The woman with the weak shoulder had one arm through his, holding him steady whenever the wagon crossed a rut.

They had come by the lower road. No Reed Cut, no ambush, no weir house. Three days, Joss told her, beginning after Vale sent for the demonstration pupils. The roads had been quiet.

Mali stood beside the stage door, trying not to let her relief turn into questions too quickly.

Ned inspected her ear.

“Looks bad.”

“Thank you.”

“Better than before.”

“I’ll tell the healer.”

He smiled, then looked toward the little courtyard where the preparation house clerk was sorting names. He had kept the chair, after all. Mali wondered how many times he had chosen whether to bring it before the wagon left.

“Does Vale know you’re here?” she asked.

“He asked us.”

“Not that. Here with me.”

Ned’s smile went. “Should he?”

It was a child’s question, made small because there might be a rule behind it. Mali had to answer the rule before she could ask anything useful.

“You can speak to me if you want. You don’t have to.”

He adjusted his bundle. “I’m supposed to put this in the room.”

“Then do that first.”

The instruction nearly came out as a dismissal. He watched her, waiting. She shifted aside so he could pass without brushing the sword.

The woman holding Joss had heard. Her name was Enna. She looked older than Mali remembered, the bad arm held close after the wagon journey.

“They said you’d come north.”

“Yes.”

“To stop the lessons.”

“To stop what made him strike.”

Joss looked down at his hands.

“I can remember it now,” he said.

Mali waited.

“Not why I did it. The movement. Where my palm would go. I knew it before I knew you were in the way.”

“Have you told Vale?”

“He said the table was too advanced for the class.”

“Was it?”

“I chose it.”

Enna tightened her good hand around his elbow. He did not seem to notice.

“Because of me,” she said. “I asked when the next level would come.”

Mali thought of Sel correcting the comparisons, of Deren offering his private steps, of herself carrying a carrier because she wanted a witness to believe her. The system did not need one monstrous decision if enough useful decisions could be joined without anyone keeping the whole account.

“Do you want that entered?” she asked Joss.

“Where?”

“In a record of what happened. Sori keeps it. You can read it before anyone else sees it.”

He shook his head quickly.

“No. I’m teaching tomorrow.”

“The demonstration is the day after.”

“A preparation class. With Master Vale.”

Enna looked at him. She had not known.

“I can help,” he said. “The new pupils will know me.”

Mali saw the appeal before the danger. Whatever had happened in his courtyard, Joss could still be the person others trusted to help them stand. Taking that from him would not make the months he had worked there cease to matter.

“Then tell him before you teach,” she said.

“I have.”

“Tell him you still can’t explain it.”

Joss looked toward the clerk. The Bell House names were being called. He gave a small, strained nod and went with Enna into the courtyard.

Mali wanted to follow. Mae put a hand against the doorframe beside her, blocking nothing, making herself available to be noticed.

“We have the west records at noon,” she said.

“So you keep telling me.”

“Because at noon the clerk eats and someone else takes the key. I can’t ask him a third time.”

Mali turned away from the wagon. “What did you promise?”

“To help carry the register back upstairs. It’s heavy.”

“Does he know why we want it?”

“Yes.”

“And he’s still helping?”

Mae looked at her. “Some people do.”

They had permission to inspect departure entries for the patients who had asked them. Not the whole register, not every name that might become useful. Bela had refused further use of Evin’s, and his page remained closed. Leth had agreed. So had two women who could not discover where their brothers had gone after leaving the ward.

The records room had a high window and three kinds of dust. Mae seemed to know which cupboard each belonged to. She fetched the right ledger without asking twice and carried it to the table with Mali supporting the other end.

“You’ve done this before,” Mali said.

“I’ve been bringing letters since we got here. People ask where the last one went.”

“Why you?”

“Because I come back.”

There was no self-importance in the answer. That made it harder to absorb.

They found Leth’s name first. Transferred from the west ward to evening instruction, then returned after a missed session. Beside the missed session stood a small red mark. No explanation.

One of the brothers had left for the road. The register gave a departure date and a permit number. They could send for the permit rather than assume disappearance. The second had been moved to the east preparation house under a recovery supervision order. That entry carried two initials, one a clerk’s, the other Vale’s.

Mae copied the exact words. Mali watched her leave space where the reference number was hard to read instead of guessing it.

“What do the red marks mean?” she asked the clerk.

“Missed instruction.”

“What happens after one?”

“Someone checks why.”

“After three?”

He looked at the ledger. “Review.”

“Where?”

“Preparation house, usually.”

“Can they refuse?”

The clerk leaned back. He was not an official with a seal. He had a patched sleeve, spectacles repaired at one hinge and a half-eaten lunch cooling beside the blotter. Mali could see him deciding whether helping them had been a mistake.

“I enter where they’re sent,” he said. “I don’t send them.”

“Who does?”

“The instructor certifies. The ward supervisor accepts. I enter.”

She wrote those distinctions down. They were not absolution. They were the places an inquiry would have to ask separate people separate questions.

Mae found a loose sheet folded inside the cover. Not a secret, only a list of medicines dispensed during transport. One column described a night draught; another, a needle treatment restricted to named teachers. Vale’s initials appeared beside four withdrawals.

“May I copy this?” she asked.

The clerk looked. His expression changed.

“Not without the supervisor’s leave.”

“Then can you enter that we asked?”

He did. Mali kept her hands off the paper. She had never found obedience to a reasonable boundary so difficult. The thing was there. She could read it, could memorise enough to carry away. Nobody could stop her knowing what she had seen.

That did not mean she could make every name on it theirs.

They returned the heavy book to its shelf. Mae wrote the request number in Sori’s notebook, then went to find the two sisters who had asked about their brothers. One had a road permit to follow. The other had a new closed door. Mae told them both without making the first answer stand in for the second.

Mali waited in the lane. The preparation house windows were too high to see through from the ground.

Vale came out as she was preparing to leave.

He held Ned’s chair.

For a moment the sight was so strange that she had no idea what to say. Then he set it on the paving and nodded toward a loose rung.

“He’ll sit only if it doesn’t move,” he said. “The wagon loosened it.”

“Give it to a carpenter.”

“I used to repair furniture.”

“Before Bell House?”

“Before the starfall.”

He crouched and tested the knot. His hand was shaking. Not much, but there was no performance to hide it now. Mali stood close enough to see the work required to put his thumb where he intended.

“How did you get it back?” she asked.

He did not pretend to misunderstand.

“The first weeks after the Convergence, I couldn’t hold a cup. I could think about holding it perfectly. Knew the weight. Knew the movement. Then it would be on the floor.”

“Who taught you?”

“A woman in a recovery house. Before we had a name. She counted while I lifted. Sometimes it worked.”

“And the Codex?”

“Made the sequence repeatable.” He pulled the knot too hard and had to loosen it. “I stopped spending all day trying to eat. I could help someone else.”

Mali looked at his fingers. There was an injury beneath the tremor, some old learned damage the relief had not erased. He had built a life around the return of an ordinary hand and now feared that life falling to the paving with another cup.

“Then tell people that.”

“They know.”

“Tell them it comes back when you stop.”

Vale’s head lifted.

A door closed at the end of the lane. Two children ran past, chasing a hoop. He waited until they had gone.

“It doesn’t always.”

“Does it for you?”

“Yes.”

There it was, without room for an argument. He looked down at the chair as if ashamed of having surrendered a fact that could be used against the whole house.

“I watched you under the bell,” Mali said. “The night I stayed.”

His hand stopped moving.

“Were you afraid of me then?”

“Yes.”

He gave a small, bitter nod.

“Not because you were shaking.”

“No?”

“Because the jar warmed when you stopped.”

For the first time, he looked at the locked service doors rather than her face. The movement was too quick to call deliberate. Mali saw it anyway.

“Do you still have the sheet?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Bring it back.”

“No.”

“Joss needs it.”

“Joss needs to be able to ask why he struck.”

Vale stood. The chair remained between them.

“He has asked. I’ve answered.”

“Then answer again where Enna can hear.”

“You don’t get to decide how we treat—”

He stopped. Mali waited. His hands shook against his robe.

“What do you give the people who refuse?” she asked.

“Care.”

“And the needles?”

“Sometimes their bodies need sleep before they can think about choosing anything.”

“Who chooses the needle?”

He looked at her injured arm. “The same sort of person who chooses to break fingers before a frightened man cuts his face.”

She had known the comparison would come. Hearing it did not make it easier.

“Teren can tell anyone what I did,” she said. “He can say I was wrong. He doesn’t have to keep coming to me for his hand to work.”

“He may never use it properly again.”

“No.”

The word left a small, bare space between them. She would not make him fill it for her.

Vale picked up the chair.

“You’ll take away something you don’t know how to replace.”

“Yes,” Mali said. “If it’s holding people who want to leave.”

He went inside. The door closed without a slam. That absence of violence frightened her more than anger would have. He had listened. He understood what she was asking him to relinquish. He was still carrying the chair somewhere a boy would be glad to receive it.

Mae found her standing in the lane.

“Did he tell you anything?”

“Enough that I need to write it before I decide which parts to hate.”

They returned by the rehearsal rooms. Rin sat on the floor with the cue equipment open. Sena had taken two lamps into the ward. Sori was arguing with an attendant about permission for Bela to see her sleeping son. Hesh had gone back to the stable to earn the promised shoe repair. Gorrath remained below with Tovan, and had sent word that she had eaten enough and did not wish to be fetched.

Mali sat beside the open cue case and wrote Vale’s words. She left out the parts she had only seen in his face. Then she wrote the name of the restricted dispensing sheet and the request number beneath it.

The record did not release a patient. It did not stop tomorrow’s preparation class. It was still more than she had known that morning.

She asked Rin where to put it.

“With the things we can lose only once,” Rin said.

Sori’s contract folder was getting too full to close.

21. Ash at the Kitchen Door



Ember Glow came through the kitchen because no one would let him through the front.

The guards had been polite. So had he, at first. After a discussion about the danger of open flame in a crowded Assembly, he had asked whether the kitchens possessed a door large enough for an Orc. The guard had interpreted that as a question about catering. Ember had interpreted the directions as permission.

Hesh found him arguing over a pot.

“It’s a cooking pot,” the cook said. “It likes being hot.”

“The handle melted.”

“Then it was a bad handle.”

“I can pay.”

“Can you mend?”

Ember looked down at his hands. The fire there was low, amber light gathering between the fingers rather than the vast blaze Mali had seen painted beneath his name.

“Yes,” he said. “If you have a hammer.”

“You’ve brought one.”

He glanced at the tool tied beside the sack of potatoes at his belt, as if it had only just occurred to him that an ordinary hammer remained an ordinary hammer even when carried by a hero.

“That will do.”

Mali stood in the doorway with two bowls of water. She had been taking them below. For a moment she could not move past the sight of him: broad shoulders bent under the lintel, old forge scars across dark olive skin, filed tusks pale against the shadow. The cook was telling him where to sit so the floor would take the weight. Hesh had begun clearing a space beside the hearth.

“Virelia,” he said when he saw Mali. “I was told I could reach her here.”

“Who told you?”

“Boon.”

He untied a narrow packet from his belt and held it away from the fire. Mali set down the bowls to take it.

The letter was dated the sixth, late evening, from the north survey station. It had travelled with Ember after a relay operator reached Boon with Sel’s warning. Boon had moved from his lower field site to the station on the fifth, found the first message waiting and spent the next day comparing reports from six recovery houses. On the seventh, Ember had met the road courier there on his way out of the ash plains. The remainder of the journey had taken a night and most of a day by the north freight road.

Mali read the dates twice. The warning had reached the relay before it reached Boon. A day at the wrong field station might have left the measurements waiting in an operator’s drawer while the demonstration began.

Boon’s account was precise.

The new carrier seemed to recruit familiar movements completed in shared sequences. An active crystalline element could collect the responses and adjust the instruction. Copper showed some active sites, not all damage. Irregular movement delayed a learned answer; it became predictable in turn. Severing one local junction interrupted the new feed there but did not remove habits or compulsions already installed in a person.

At the bottom he had written, in a heavier stroke: Do not make this observation a universal exercise. It will learn that too.

Mali handed the paper to Rin, who had come down at the sound of the argument. Rin read it and did not look surprised enough for comfort.

“So a better song won’t do it.”

“No,” Ember said.

“Not even if we change the timing.”

“Then they’ll have a song with different timing.”

The answer made Hesh laugh once. Rin gave her a look and continued reading.

Ember set down the potatoes. They were cold, already boiled, enough to feed several people if nobody minded that some had been crushed in the sack. The cook examined them and ordered him to put them beside the onions.

“I’ll mend the pot,” he said.

“Later. They need you downstairs.”

He looked at the broken handle once more, then followed Mali through the passage.

The sword was not asked of him at the wash table because he carried none. Tovan looked at his hands and asked whether he could keep the flame low. He said yes, and whether he should remain outside if that changed. She said yes to that too.

He entered sideways. Patients stared at his tusks, the width of him, the low fire that moved under his scars. Some recognised the hero. A man near the water table told him he was blocking the cups.

Ember moved.

Virelia sat beside Alis’s bed with Tovan’s report on her lap. The new Silverroot thread lay curled in a dish of damp earth beside the wash table. It had carried the first short message outward during the night. A reply had come from a forest attendant who would try to reach them by the next evening. Sel’s words had not yet returned.

“Sel sent you,” Virelia said.

“Boon. Sel’s keeping a book from opening.”

“Are you here to burn the lattice?”

Ember looked at the tiles stacked in the lined basket. Four. None removed since the first day; Tovan had decided the room needed a full night’s observations before the next withdrawal. Rovan slept with his own shirt folded on the chair beside him. Lysa had finally gone upstairs to eat.

“Is that what you want?” Ember asked.

“Yesterday I would have said yes to anything that made this stop hurting.”

He sat on the floor. It was the only place that put him level with her without making a chair suffer for it.

“Yesterday I nearly answered my father.”

The room did not become still all at once. Tovan went on changing water. Someone coughed. Meret moaned and was answered by the attendant beside her. But Mali saw

Virelia’s attention go to him with such force that she wondered how often adults had allowed the girl to hear anything that did not require her strength.

“Where?” Virelia asked.

“An old forge vent. On the ash plains.”

“Your clan-hold?”

“Near enough.”

He rubbed a scar across his thumb. The flame gathered there and thinned again.

“It had his roughness. The word he used for a tool he couldn’t be bothered to name properly. Said the next harvest could restore them. Bodies, memories. Said we’d misunderstood the cost.”

“Could it?”

“I don’t know.”

Mali had been waiting for a hero to say it was impossible. That would have made the refusal simpler. Ember did not give her that.

“I stood there until sunset,” he said. “Wanting to know.”

“Why did you leave?”

“It never asked what they’d want.”

Virelia looked at the sleeping woman beside her.

“The cathedral didn’t either.”

“No.”

“Did you hear them afterward?”

“Yes.”

“All the time?”

Ember considered it. “When I tried hardest not to.”

Tovan put a cup beside his knee. He waited for the fire to leave his fingers before touching it. Mali watched that small restraint and understood a little of what the cook had seen at the kitchen door.

Virelia told him about the visits, the root she had cut, Rovan asking for his sister. He did not tell her she had meant well. He did not use his own dead to make her guilt seem smaller. When she ran out of words, he asked whom she wanted beside her for the next removal.

“Tovan,” she said.

The attendant looked up.

“And someone who doesn’t need me to be right.”

Gorrath tapped her slate from the bed near the wall. She had been listening with her eyes closed. On it she had written, NOT TOO MANY AT ONCE.

Ember read it and nodded. No request for a song. No reverence that required a response. Hesh came down with the plan a few minutes later and found her mother asleep again, one hand resting on the slate.

They moved into the empty linen room to talk.

Sena spread the maps across a table, weighted with ordinary stones. The twelve court routes stood in pencil. Beneath the centre she had added Pell’s section: a room below the dais, a bronze collar through the floor, a glass seat joining its halves. She had not drawn a disc because no one in their group had seen it yet.

Ember took out another paper.

“A clerk met me at the north delivery yard,” he said. “Pell. Said you’d know him. He saw Boon’s name on the instrument case I was carrying.”

“What did he give you?” Mali asked.

“Measurements. Said they’d arrived after the old floor plan. He couldn’t leave the office long.”

Sena compared them with her copy. Two distances differed. One referred to the old chamber, the other to the new fitting mounted inside it. The discrepancy had made their routes seem impossible. Now she could draw the clearance around it.

“The central piece,” Ember said. “A disc, they called it on the freight list. Glass, man-high. Mounted above the platform, collar through the floor. Return chamber beneath.”

“Above,” Rin repeated, tracing the section. “That’s what the cover is hiding behind the main rail.”

“What’s it returning?” Hesh asked.

“Boon thinks observations. Shared sequences from the courts. The model that writes the next lesson.”

“To the Codex?”

“He needs Sel to confirm. They’ve a private wire through the survey relay. The instrument I brought will reach the local operator from the old maintenance line, if the terminals are intact. No public speaking tubes.”

Sena pointed at an unused service box on the floor plan. “We can get you there.”

“What do we do until he confirms?” Mali asked.

“Keep people from closing it together,” Ember said. “He doesn’t know whether breaking it early releases what it’s already holding.”

They studied the map. Twelve local junctions. A central disc gathering returns. Patients in rooms below, some dependent on lessons already changing them. A scholar holding a book shut somewhere three days down the road, unable to know what the city was about to offer it unless a message reached the right hand.

The problem did not look smaller with a hero sitting beside it.

“We can stop the stage feed,” Rin said. “It’s mine to disconnect. But not the ward calls.”

“Separate them,” Sena said.

“If the valves let us.”

“Then we see whether the valves let us.”

Hesh looked toward the doorway. “Patients out first.”

“Some can’t move,” Mae said. “And some won’t. We can’t make evacuation another command nobody can refuse.”

A silence followed. Mali could feel them all looking for the person who would tell them which risk to bear. Ember kept his hands flat on his knees. He had not come north to become Deren with fire.

“We need a route that can be stopped halfway,” Mali said. “A place to wait. People at each door who know where the next one goes. And a way to get someone to answer when we say it isn’t clear.”

Sena began marking doors. Mae named the beds that needed more than one attendant. Sori divided her notebook into supplies, access and witnesses. Hesh put a small mark at the north gate, where the freight yards opened onto a wide road.

Mali looked at the line leading to the main dais.

“Deren can dismiss the teaching ranks.”

Hesh looked up. “He could have done it yesterday.”

“Yes.”

“What makes tomorrow different?”

Mali put a finger beside the little square marking the correction court.

“I don’t know. So we build a way that doesn’t depend on him deciding well.”

It was the first plan she had made about Deren that did not begin by imagining his recognition. The absence left her frightened and almost lightheaded.

Outside the linen room, a patient asked for more water. Tovan called for someone to bring the clean jug. Mae put down her pencil and went. The discussion waited until she returned.

22. A Junction Cut Too Soon

They chose the dressing-room branch because the old plan showed nothing beyond it.

That was the first sentence Sena wrote in the account afterward. She refused to write the branch was safe. It had not been safe. They had believed it could be isolated, and the difference had filled a corridor with people unable to get out.

In the afternoon of the eighth, before the evening ward call, Rin closed the stage valve and asked Mae to confirm the west ward could still hear a message. Mae returned with the words repeated correctly. Sena checked the dressing rooms. Empty. Sori put notices on both doors asking anyone who needed the stage to wait in the rehearsal room. Hesh stood at the corridor turn so no porter would come through carrying a load.

Mali watched the copper loop blacken beside the junction. The test had been made as small as they knew how to make it.

Rin loosened the cover. Sena held the lamp. Beneath the metal, a crystalline wafer had been pressed into a brass seat with a narrow copper tongue touching its edge.

Not a balance weight. Not an innocent plate someone might have mistaken for it. The mark inside branched toward the return line.

Rin used wooden tongs borrowed from the laundry. She did not pull at the glass itself. She lifted the copper tongue clear of its contact.

The speaking tube gave a note so low that Mali felt it through her teeth.

Then a shutter fell behind them.

It hit the stone with a noise that took all their breath. Hesh spun toward it. The corridor to the west ward had closed behind a slab of iron-strapped wood, leaving them on the stage side.

Sena set down the lamp before moving. Rin held the tongs away from the contact. The copper loop in Mali’s palm cooled abruptly.

From the other side of the shutter came a shout.

“Leave the contact,” Sena told Rin.

“If I set it back—”

“We don’t know what else it moves.”

Mali had already drawn her sword. She looked at the edge, the thick shutter, the gap no wider than a fingernail between wood and stone. It was a tool she knew how to use in a place where it was almost useless.

She put it away.

“Mae?”

“Here.” The voice came from farther away than it should have. “Doors are closing.”

“Which doors?”

“The side rooms. People are in the passage.”

Hesh put both hands against the shutter and pushed. Nothing moved. She stepped back, looking for a point the spear could reach. Sena was already kneeling at the base of the wall.

“Fire closure,” she said. “Look for a manual lift. The building had one before the tubes.”

“There wasn’t a fire.”

“No. They used the same control.”

The old plan had shown a dressing-room branch. The new work had run ward safety controls through its casing. A lifted contact was read somewhere as a broken service line. The house closed its lower compartments before smoke, water or the loss of a master cue could spread. Some technician had made three different things into one reassuring idea of safety.

Mali could understand it. Understanding did not open the door.

Sena found a square plate beneath the dust at the wall. Four screws. Two came out; one turned without loosening, its head stripped. Hesh handed her a knife. She jammed it beside the screw and lifted until a strip of plaster broke free with the plate.

Inside lay an old iron spindle.

“No handle,” Sena said.

“Shape?” Hesh asked.

“Square. Small.”

Hesh tried the hollow of her spear’s broken end. Too wide. Mali found a pair of pliers among Rin’s tools. The jaws fitted the spindle, slipped and fitted again.

Sena turned.

A click. A second click. The shutter rose a finger’s width.

Hesh got the short spear half under it before it could drop. The sound of wood taking strain ran up Mali’s spine. She had heard it at the correction and never wanted to hear it again.

“Not through,” Sena shouted as someone on the other side knelt to the opening. “Wait.”

A woman was crying. Someone else said the air would run out. Mae answered, close now, telling them there was no smoke, that the room still had a window, that someone needed to help the man who had fallen sit upright. No chant. No borrowed confidence. Practical things one at a time.

Sena turned the spindle again. Her hand slipped on the pliers. Blood showed across her knuckles.

Mali reached. Sena jerked her chin toward the lamp.

“Light. I can’t see.”

Mali held it low. She wanted the heavy task, the action that would justify how frightened she was. Light was what had been asked of her.

The shutter rose to Hesh’s waist. She put a shoulder beneath it. Mae crouched through, took one look at the spindle and went back.

“How many?” Mali asked.

“Eleven in the passage. More in the rooms. Nobody trapped under a door.”

“Yet,” Hesh said through her teeth.

Sena found the ratchet catch. The pliers’ handle held it open, allowing the spindle to turn without dropping into the previous notch. It meant she had to keep one hand against a lever under tension while Hesh lifted. Mali could not give enough help with her injured arm. They needed someone from the other side who could be asked without being drawn under the weight.

Mae brought two porters. One was shaking. The other told him exactly where to put his shoulder, asked whether he could hold and waited for the answer. Together they took enough weight for Hesh to move.

They opened a space wide enough for a trolley.

Rin came back with the loose contact tied clear of the brass seat. She had closed the local tube and found an independent call bell above the stage door. It rang badly, the clapper catching one rim, but the kitchen heard it.

People began moving past them.

Not running. Mae stopped the first man who tried, asked him to carry a bucket of clean water to the garden passage and sent him ahead with a task that would take his hands. Sena directed the trolleys around the turn. Mali held the lamp until her wrist ached. Hesh remained beneath the shutter with the two porters, each asking the others before shifting weight.

It took less than half an hour. It felt much longer.

When the last trolley passed, a supervisor arrived with a key that did not fit the spindle and a demand to know who had interfered. Rin put the wooden tongs on the floor. Mali gave her name.

“We tested a local branch,” she said. “The plan was wrong.”

“You are not authorised to test anything.”

“No.”

Sena looked up. “The closure’s connected to a service contact without a local warning. That needs an entry too.”

The supervisor glanced at her bloody hand and the broken plate. “You’ll be charged for damage.”

“Enter it,” Sori said behind him.

She had come with two more porters and the carpenter who lowered the latch. The carpenter found a proper handle in a locked cabinet upstairs. When the shutter was finally secured in its raised position, Hesh sank onto a bench without pretending her knees were steady.

Mali stood in the passage where the patients had been. On the floor lay a small slipper nobody had collected. She picked it up and found a child waiting by the water trolley, one foot tucked beneath the other.

“Is this yours?”

The child nodded. Mali gave it back without trying to put it on for her.

Vale arrived after the worst had ended.

He took the supervisor aside. Mali could not hear all the words. Unsafe interference. Patients frightened. The exhibition preparations required confidence. Then he came to the broken cover and looked at the lifted copper tongue.

“You see why we supervise,” he said.

“We see that the drawings don’t show the changes.”

“You could have asked.”

“We did,” Sori said. “The office gave us the old plans.”

Vale looked at her, then at Sena’s notes. He did not answer.

“Someone was nearly crushed,” Mali said.

“Yes.”

“Not because they missed a lesson.”

“Because you opened a fitting you didn’t understand.”

She could not deny it. He watched the admission enter her face, then turned to the supervisor.

“Lock the service covers. No unsupervised access before the demonstration.”

Rin took a step forward. “That includes our stage line.”

“Especially your stage line.”

“If your changes keep our ward call on the same—”

“Then send your concern through the committee.”

He had learned the phrase quickly. Mali wondered whether he heard Deren in his own voice and found it reassuring.

They were escorted out of the corridor. Sena carried the plan. Rin carried the tongs because she would not let the supervisor claim she had cut a tube. Sori made him acknowledge that in the incident book. Mae stayed with the patients until every one had a place to wait that did not depend on the closed passage opening again.

Ember had not come down the corridor. Mali found him at the kitchen with the mended pot, listening to Hesh’s account. The handle would hold, he said, though the grip would always be crooked.

“Could you have opened it?” Mali asked.

“The shutter?”

“Yes.”

“Probably.”

“Then why—”

“Nobody sent for me. By the time they did, you had people under it. I’d have put heat through the frame.”

The limitation should have been obvious. She had made him into the answer after the danger, because that was easier than accepting how close they had come with only themselves.

Sena set the updated map on the table. She had marked the failed branch in red and written the time beside it. Under that, she wrote: Manual closures must be staffed before any contact is lifted. Original plan incomplete.

“Not safe,” she said when Mali leaned over it. “Understood a little better.”

Mali nodded. That night she wrote her own part of the account, including the moment she drew a sword before remembering the shutter had no body to threaten.

She did not ask Sori to make the sentence kinder.

23. Separate Tasks

On the ninth, Sori returned the performance contract.

Caren read the cancellation clause before reading her explanation. He sat beneath the same four windows, his desk orderly, no sign of the two witnesses who had spent the night waiting outside ward doors. Sori had come alone. Mali waited in the lane because Sori asked her to.

The meeting took nearly an hour.

When she came out, she had lost the remaining fee and gained a bill for the advance. The Assembly would keep the apparatus already delivered to its stage. Public cancellation would be described as a technical dispute unless the quartet chose to publish a breach notice, in which case the committee reserved the right to dispute every sum in court.

“Can they?” Mali asked.

“They can begin.”

“You don’t have the money.”

“No.”

Mali looked at the folded contract. “I asked you—”

“Don’t take it.”

“What?”

“Don’t make this your sacrifice. We argued. We signed. All four.”

The words struck harder than the debt figure. Sori had room for her own fear and anger. She did not need Mali to turn them into another reason to carry the whole city alone.

“What do you need?” Mali asked.

“People who will say we didn’t choose this because we couldn’t perform.”

“I can say that.”

“You haven’t heard us.”

Mali looked up. Sori’s mouth moved, almost smiling.

“After,” Mali said.

“After.”

They went back by the north gate. Hesh was meeting three freight workers there, drawing the shutter mechanism on the dust with the short spear half. The northern bar was counterweighted and dropped at a general closure signal. A wedge beneath it could buy time but not hold the gate against repeated attempts from the winch house. The workers could disengage the winch if they reached it before the first lock.

“Who has the key?” Mali asked.

“Ordinarily?” Hesh said. “The man who owes me for two loads of timber.”

“And now?”

“Still him. He’s decided yesterday’s incident makes the old debt worth discussing.”

The nearest worker grinned. He was missing two teeth and wore a rope belt braided with bright scraps of cloth.

“I didn’t decide. She became persuasive.”

“She threatened you?”

“Worse. Asked for the account to be read in public.”

Hesh handed him her freight ledger. He put his name beside the unpaid sum and wrote a date for settlement after the exhibition. Then he signed a separate note authorising her to keep the gate approach clear for emergency loads. It did not give her command of the guards. It gave her an ordinary reason to remain where people would need her.

They did not plan a crowd rushing the exit. Trolleys first by the broad north route. Walking patients through the west service lane, with a waiting area at the kitchen court. Anyone who wished to remain could do so with an attendant who knew how to summon help. No family would be split to improve the speed of a tally.

Sena made three copies. One for the kitchen, one for the ward, one for the north gate. None depended on a tune, a cue or a perfect count.

Rin had spent the night examining their own half of the amplifier. The shared stage feed could be disconnected from the desk without touching a local wafer if the switchboard remained accessible. They had been barred from the lower covers, not the control they needed to play the show. Cancelling the show made that access uncertain.

“Then don’t tell them we’re taking our equipment,” Mae said.

“We are taking it.”

“After we inventory it.”

Sori looked at the contract. “They asked for a supervised inventory.”

“Excellent,” Rin said. “I’ll inventory every screw.”

It was a thin plan, dependent on a clerk’s willingness to let four troublesome performers be troublesome in a familiar way. Rin would not call it reliable. She found the physical disconnect behind the cue desk and showed Sena, then Mae, then Sori how

to identify it without touching any of the marked additions. A plain red cloth tied to their own cable would keep it distinct in poor light. Not a signal to a crowd. A label on a possession.

“Who stops you if the cover is different tomorrow?” Mali asked.

Rin pointed to Sena.

“And who stops Sena?”

“Whichever of us sees her doing something foolish first.”

Sena did not argue. Her bruised knuckles were wrapped. She had written the failed contact test across the top of the equipment list so nobody would treat her confidence as proof.

Mae spent the morning with the attendants.

Mali followed her through the ward and saw that evacuation was mostly asking questions that made their old plan wrong. One woman could walk but not down steps. One man could be moved only lying on his left side. A girl refused to leave without the neighbour who had slept beside her since the winter. The neighbour’s relatives wanted a different route.

Mae asked them to sit together and decide before the doors filled.

By midday their clean map had become crossings-out, notes and alternate paths. It looked less like a plan made by heroes. It looked more likely to survive the people inside it.

Gorrath remained below with the sanctuary patients. She had no intention of letting them be forgotten because getting the people upstairs to a gate looked more achievable. Hesh brought her the freight ledger to show the signed debt. The elder read the entry and tapped her daughter’s hand once in approval.

“After this,” Hesh said, “I’m taking the spring loads again.”

Gorrath nodded.

“You can come. You can’t make me put every road beside a healer.”

Another nod, slower.

“And when you need to stop—”

The elder held out the slate before Hesh could finish.

I ASK.

Hesh sat on the end of the bed. She looked toward the stone drum, which stood against the wall beyond easy reach. It had not been confiscated. Gorrath had asked that it be placed there while she slept.

Mali left them together. She had learned not to stay until every private conversation produced something she could use.

Virelia had permitted two more tiles to be lifted that morning. One patient was settled. The other was awake and confused, calling for someone who had died before the

starfall. Tovan said they would do no more until the next watch arrived. The girl agreed, then went behind the wash table where Mali could see her clenching both hands.

The desire to take the room back had not vanished because she had confessed it.

Mali waited at a distance. Virelia noticed and waved her nearer.

“The message reached Sel,” she said. “Not a reply yet. The forest attendant brought confirmation to the boundary relay. They sent it by the observatory runner.”

“When will they hear about the central return?”

“Ember’s trying the instrument. Boon’s with the north operator. He says they need Sel’s eyes on the Codex margin.”

Mali looked at the thin root in its dish. “Could you send it?”

“Yes. Not while I hold every door.”

“Then don’t.”

“It would be faster.”

“Until you couldn’t let go.”

The girl looked at her. “You don’t have to keep telling me.”

Mali thought of Vale saying the same thing with different words. Then of herself wanting Sori to stop asking whether she understood.

“I know. I’m frightened.”

Virelia’s expression changed. She seemed almost relieved to be told something that was not an instruction.

“So am I.”

They went to Tovan together. The attendant agreed to put someone at each sanctuary door. Virelia would open one passage at a time, on confirmation that the next person was ready, and withdraw when asked. Gorrath would remain close enough to touch her wrist, but not be made the only safeguard. The forest attendant, a quiet woman named Den, would watch the new root connection and interrupt it if Virelia began reaching too widely.

Ember came back from the maintenance box with an operator’s notation in his hand. The line worked. A message had reached Boon. The engineer wanted no destructive action on the central return until Sel confirmed the order. Breaking the wrong part first might let the gathered lesson complete without the archive’s further help.

“How will you know?” Mali asked.

“Local handset in the chamber,” he said. “The old maintenance line reaches it. Sena found the terminal.”

“And if it fails?”

“I wait until I can tell what the return is doing.”

“For how long?”

He looked at the ceiling, where the central court stood. “I don’t know.”

Nobody thanked him for an assurance he had not given.

They marked the route down to the chamber. It ran behind the service stairs, passed the lower shutter and entered below the main dais. Mali would take the upper branch toward Deren. She knew the teaching custom, the ranks and the route through which he would reach the platform. No one else in their group could get close by calling him master and make the word sound ordinary.

“Don’t ask for another correction,” Hesh said.

“I won’t.”

“What if he tells you to leave?”

“I tell him the doors are being opened. Ask him to dismiss the ranks before someone is hurt.”

“And if he doesn’t?”

Mali touched the map, not the sword.

“Then you keep opening doors.”

That evening they ate at the same table.

It was not a ceremonial meal. Mae was late because a patient needed help finding her shoes. Rin and Sena argued over the equipment debt. Hesh wanted more onions. Gorrath’s portion went downstairs because the stairs had become too much, and Virelia ate beside her. Sori read three lines of the inventory with her bowl balanced against the folder and was told by the cook to put one of them down.

Mali’s arm had begun to heal. It still ached when she closed the hand hard, and the bandaged wrist where Virelia’s root had held her was tender. Her ribs hurt less at rest and more after the day’s walking. Adra examined her in the kitchen passage and told her she had been using the word rest creatively.

“Tomorrow,” Mali said.

The healer looked at her. “Say nothing, if that’s all you’re prepared to promise.”

Mali said nothing. Adra gave her fresh cloth anyway.

Before sleeping, Mali took the broken wooden tip out of the sewing roll. She set it beside the road-school letter and looked at them until they stopped pretending to be two different lives. She had wanted to teach, wanted the seal, wanted the man who hurt her to prove the wanting had not been foolish. Tomorrow she would need him to do something useful without first becoming the man she needed.

She wrapped the tip again. It stayed in the bundle. The duplicate warning went back inside her tunic. She added the route note beside it and put the spare clean bandage in her belt pouch, separate from every carrier and every stained cloth.

Her steel sword she checked last. The guard was tight enough. The edge was clean. The scabbard retained the scar from Reed Cut. It would carry no lesson she had not chosen to bring.

Outside, the city rehearsed its morning welcome. Bells without clappers answered the tube calls with notes that travelled through the frames of buildings. For a moment Mali felt the old anticipation in her right hand.

She set the sword down, opened her fingers and waited.

They opened.

She did not call that a guarantee. She lay down before the relief could turn into another thing she needed to prove.

24. The Perfect Student

The Assembly opened with a hundred blades leaving their scabbards together.

Mali heard them from the service stair. The sound was beautiful. She had expected a threat to sound wrong. Instead the clean release ran along the walls and found every year of training inside her body.

She paused with one hand against the rail.

Above her, Deren was welcoming the houses. His words reached the stair through a narrow window, ordinary air rather than a tube. He spoke of recovery, of knowledge given freely, of the danger in leaving wounded people dependent on five extraordinary survivors. A city should not need a hero every time a child could not sleep.

Mali could agree with every word until it became his reason not to stop.

She had come by the lower route before the teaching ranks entered. Ember had taken the branch beneath the main floor. She had seen him test the maintenance handset once, heard the local operator answer and gone on before knowing what he said next. The rest of the plan was no longer hers to watch.

At the top of the stair stood the guard with the scarred cheek, the one who had read Bela’s note. His name was Iss. Mae had learned it while bringing water during the night watch.

He looked at Mali’s wrist binding.

“Not this way.”

“I need to reach Deren.”

“He’s on the platform.”

“I know.”

“You can enter with the petitioners after the first demonstration.”

“After is too late.”

His gaze moved to the sword. “That’s what everyone says about the thing they want.”

She could hear movement behind him. Not ranks of soldiers; the clerks who would carry schedules and cups onto the dais. She looked through the open door at the main court.

A cloth-covered disc rose behind Deren, taller than a man, its frame mounted into the platform. Light pressed through the fabric in the shape of a branch. Below its edge, the new bronze collar disappeared through the dais floor. Sena's section had become a real thing in the morning air.

Vale stood beside the release cord.

He saw Mali.

For a moment his face held recognition without decision. The woman who had carried Caro to the wall. The intruder who had broken Joss's platform. Someone who knew his hands shook at night. Then he looked toward Iss, and Mali saw the needle between his fingers.

"Down," she said.

Iss turned toward her voice.

The needle struck his cheek beneath the old scar.

He touched it, frowning. His knees loosened. Mali caught his shoulder before his head struck the stair and lowered him awkwardly, pain flaring under her ribs. His eyes remained open. He was breathing.

Vale came through the doorway and closed it behind him.

"What did you give him?" she asked.

"Sleep."

"Did he ask?"

"He was reaching for his sword."

"He was turning his head."

Vale looked down at the guard. For a moment doubt appeared, small and recognisable. Then the noise of the court reached them, and he drew his short blade.

Mali got Iss onto his side, clear of the stair edge. There was no time to know whether it was enough. She called his name. His eyes moved. She told him she would get someone and heard the promise as an instruction she might fail to keep.

"You could have left the lesson," Vale said.

She rose. "So could you."

He came before she had the sword free.

A closed-hand strike turned beneath her guard. She caught it on the scabbard, but his short blade crossed the narrow space below her elbow. Cloth opened along her left sleeve. The cut burned before she saw blood.

She drew.

The stair was too narrow for the first form Deren had taught her, too steep for the second. Vale knew that. He pressed into the place her recovery step would need, a

movement from a school that taught fighting in doorways. She had seen it in a market demonstration once and dismissed it as cramped.

It was very good at what it was for.

Mali struck the wall instead of his blade. Stone chipped. He flinched, then answered before she could use the space. His palm hit her injured ribs.

The breath left her so completely she could not make a sound. She folded against the rail, sword still in her hand, and saw his blade settle beneath her chin.

Above them the audience applauded.

He was breathing hard. Not the serene teacher from the preparation meeting. Sweat darkened his collar. His left hand had begun to shake around the blade, and the fact that it could still hurt her did nothing to diminish the tremor.

“I used to spend an hour holding a bowl against my chest,” he said. “So it couldn’t fall. Then someone would have to feed me anyway.”

Mali tried to draw air. The point rose with her throat.

“The first lesson gave me my hands back. Why should your fear be more important than mine?”

She could smell oil on the steel. From the other side of the door came Deren’s voice, thanking the houses for their patience.

Mali moved her thumb against the hilt. Vale saw.

“Don’t.”

She let the thumb stop. Her other hand had closed around the copper loop beneath the torn sash.

“You can ask for help,” she said.

He smiled without pleasure. “From you?”

“No. From someone you’ll let tell you when to stop.”

“That isn’t how recovery works.”

“It hasn’t been how yours works.”

Anger moved the point half an inch.

She threw the loop into his face.

He caught it. The movement was too quick for choice, the old answer to a small object flying toward the eye. For half a breath his sword arm opened. Mali slid down the rail, letting the point scrape beneath her jaw rather than trying to force it aside, and kicked toward his knee.

He was already moving.

The kick struck air. The copper loop fell between the steps and vanished into the dark. Vale’s short blade drove toward the place she would have been if she had followed the kick with its natural recovery.

She did not. She fell two steps instead.

Her heel caught. She went down hard on the stone edge, losing the clean line of her guard. His blade missed her throat and opened another strip of cloth at the shoulder. It was not a victory. She had made an untidy choice and remained alive inside its cost.

He followed.

From somewhere beyond the wall came Sori’s voice, louder than speech, smaller than a microphone. She was saying the infirmary doors needed room. The words cut off as a second door closed.

“They’ve begun,” Vale said.

Mali backed toward the lower landing. She had studied Sena’s map until she could see the turn with her eyes closed. It led toward the service shutter, then the maintenance shaft. Beyond the shutter, if it was raised, a narrow stair could bring her behind the dais.

She had promised no more corrections. She had not promised never to retreat.

Vale followed without hurrying now. His confidence had returned with the movement. The tremor diminished as the sequence gave him another next step.

Mali tried to let him pass her, turned toward the wall as if losing balance, brought her guard low. He answered the feint before she finished choosing it.

It was learning her departures as readily as the forms.

She could not be random enough to escape something that had already seen her deciding to be random. The thought almost stopped her. Then Iss made a weak sound above them, and she remembered there were people in the stair who did not have the luxury of waiting for a perfect method.

She hit the rail with the flat of her sword.

The noise brought Vale’s eyes aside. It also brought a footstep from below.

“Service route,” Pell called. “Who’s there?”

“Stay back,” Mali shouted.

Too late. The clerk appeared at the turn, a key ring in one hand and a delivery slate in the other. He took in Vale’s blade, the blood on Mali’s sleeve, her position three steps below where she should have been standing.

He did not ask for an explanation.

He ran toward the shutter lever.

Vale’s face changed. He lunged past Mali.

She drove her shoulder into him, not to throw him, only to slow the turn. Pain made her vision narrow. He struck her arm aside and reached for Pell.

The clerk caught the lever with both hands.

Wood groaned above the landing. The shutter began to fall.

25. Beyond the Shutter



“Step left,” Pell said.

Mali had no reason to know what he meant. She moved because he had seen something she could not, and there was no time to inspect his right to say it.

The shutter came down between her and Vale.

Not cleanly. Vale’s blade struck its edge and lodged. Pell had pulled too early or too late; the wood caught on the crooked guide, paused, then fell another hand’s breadth with a violent crack. Mali’s own sword hit the moving crosspiece. The brass guard jarred against stone. Pain opened in her torn palm, and the hilt went out of her hand.

The sword slid beyond the descending wood.

She reached.

Pell shouted something she did not catch. His right hand still held the lever. The

shutter’s iron shoe struck his wrist as the guide snapped free. He made a sound so abrupt that Mali stopped reaching for the sword.

She caught him beneath the arms and pulled.

His hand came away from the lever. The shutter fell the last distance and hit the floor. On the far side, Vale struck it once with something heavy. The trapped blade rang in the wood.

Pell sat on the stone, staring at his wrist.

“I can’t feel my fingers.”

Mali knelt. Her own ribs were a dull, continuous hurt, past the sharpness that told her where they began. She found the clean bandage in her belt pouch and pulled it out with her good hand. It was the clean roll Adra had given her, still dry inside the pouch.

She made the sling too tight at first. Pell flinched. She loosened it and asked where it hurt before moving the arm again.

“Don’t try to move your fingers,” she said.

“I wasn’t.”

A thin edge of humour, or shock. She could not tell. She secured his forearm against his chest and helped him sit with his back against the wall.

Through the shutter, Vale called her name.

Pell’s eyes went toward the voice.

“Don’t answer,” Mali said, then stopped. “You can. I won’t.”

The clerk shook his head.

Above them, the applause ended. A bell sounded, though no clapper hung in the tower. The note came through the building itself, through a brass route with crystalline fittings she had not reached in time.

“He’ll call the sequence early,” she said.

Pell closed his eyes. “The programme has a reserve cue.”

“What?”

“If the performance doesn’t finish. If equipment fails. They go straight to the demonstration.”

Mali thought of Rin’s hand above the cue desk, Sori giving back the contract, Sena marking closures onto an old plan. They had not expected cancellation alone to stop it. They had expected time to move people before the teachers chose to begin.

“Can you walk?” she asked.

Pell tried to get his feet beneath him. His face went grey. She held him until he was seated again.

“No,” he said.

“The kitchen route?”

“Behind you. Left at the narrow turn. Two doors. You’ll hear them.”

She did not want to leave him. She also could not carry him, reach Deren and fetch the person who might carry him all at once. She looked at the little slate beside his knee.

“Can I take that?”

He nodded.

She wrote with her left hand, large and badly: Injured clerk. Lower service shutter. Bring healer. Guard Iss injured at upper stair; breathing when last seen. She added the time as nearly as she could judge from the opening bells and ran the few paces to the kitchen turn.

A porter stood there holding a basket of clean towels. She knew him from the failed junction test, though not his name.

“Read that,” she said.

He did. He looked at her bloodied sleeve.

“You too?”

“After. Please get them.”

He put down the basket and called into the kitchen. Another voice answered. Mali waited until she heard the words repeated, then returned to Pell.

He had not moved. On the other side of the shutter, metal scraped against wood.

“Someone’s coming,” she said.

“The guard?”

“Yes. I sent his name too.”

Pell nodded. His mouth had gone slack with the effort of bearing pain without making decisions about it. Mali wished she could offer water, a safe bed, a promise about the hand. The first was around the corner. The others were not hers to give.

She took off the scabbard. It dragged at her belt without its blade, caught on the broken guide and might catch again in the shaft. She laid it beside the wall, away from Pell’s feet, scar upward. The sword lay beyond the shutter, within a yard she could not cross.

She had drawn it out of a house two years ago because she refused to make leaving into an act of noble self-denial. Since then it had bought her work, space on a road, the right to be listened to by people who would otherwise have seen a young woman carrying too little money. She did not want to leave it here.

Pell followed her gaze.

“I’ll tell the porters,” he said.

“Don’t go after it.”

“I can’t.”

The answer shamed her into a small, helpless laugh. He almost smiled.

Beyond them, the first ranks began the opening count. She could hear it through the stone now, not the words but the shared pace. The copper loop was gone beneath the stairs. She had nothing left to blacken and tell her what she already knew.

Pell nodded toward the maintenance shaft.

“Not the stairs. They’ll have closed the upper door.”

“Does it reach behind the dais?”

“Old inspection hatch. Above the return room. The grate lifts inward.”

“Locked?”

“Not on this side.”

The map had shown it as a narrow line beside the vertical fitting. Sena had asked why it remained when a new stair had been added. Now Mali understood the answer: someone still had to reach a pipe after the important people had covered it with a platform.

She looked up.

The shaft was dark, wide enough for shoulders, fitted with old iron rungs. Dust lay thick on the first. She tested it with her foot while both hands held the wall. The iron did not move.

Pell looked at her injured arm.

“I know,” she said.

“He’ll hurt you.”

“I’m already hurt.”

It was not an answer to what he had asked. She stopped with one foot on the rung.

“I need him to hear me before they finish. This is the way I can reach him.”

The clerk nodded. She was glad he did not call it brave.

At the kitchen turn, footsteps were coming. Mali heard the porter telling someone to mind the wet stone, then the clatter of a water jug. She waited until the healer came into sight.

Adra saw her and opened her mouth.

“Pell first,” Mali said. “Then Iss above. Vale gave him a needle. He was breathing.”

The healer went to the clerk. She asked him his name, told the porter where to set the water and began making the room smaller than the disaster, one question at a time.

Mali climbed.

The first rung hurt her palm. The second made her ribs pull. She found a way to keep most of the weight in her legs, using her forearms to brace rather than hauling

herself upward. It was slow. Dust entered the cut beneath her jaw and made her want to wipe it with the hand she needed to keep holding on.

Halfway up, she stopped.

Not because she had reached a locked door or felt the signal seize a limb. Because she was exhausted and the shaft gave her no room to pretend a better posture would fix it. She pressed her forehead against cool stone. Below, Adra asked Pell whether he felt pressure or only pain. Above, a hundred people inhaled together.

Mali thought of Anet at the examination gate, kneeling to loosen a boot. Of Hesh telling her they did not owe each other a whole road. Of Sori refusing to let her claim four women’s decision as her own sacrifice.

None of them was in the shaft. Their help had not become strength she could spend without limit. It had made a route, and now she had to climb the part that was hers.

She took the next rung.

Near the top, a narrow inspection slit showed the central court in a thin strip. The cloth still covered most of the disc. Beneath it the brass collar glowed pale, light moving down toward the return room. She could not see Ember. She could hear no great blow from below.

He was waiting for something she did not know how to give him.

She went on until the grate was against her shoulder. It lifted inward as Pell had said, scraping the frame. She waited for a shout. None came. The audience watched the dais, the beautiful ranks, the person appointed to tell them suffering could be brought into order.

Mali pushed through onto a narrow ledge behind the platform rail.

Her hands were raw. Her belt was empty. Across the court she could see the west service door opening and Mae helping a woman into the light.

Deren stood less than six paces away.

She said his name without the title.

26. The Reserve



At the observatory, the copper wire broke.

Sel heard it from the stair. They had been helping Oren carry water, a task deliberately too ordinary to become a vigil. Eda had insisted the workroom remain empty for a quarter-hour while they ate. Sel had agreed and spent every mouthful listening to the floor above.

The note of breaking wire was thin, almost pretty.

Every Starborne light went dark.

Not extinguished. Hidden. Sel saw Warden draw Quill beneath the table, Initiate dart behind the old press. Transcriber stayed near the closed door for a moment, then joined them. Nova’s light thinned to a point against the stone.

Sel set down the bucket.

Oren did not ask what had happened. He put his own bucket against the wall, out of the path, and opened the kitchen door. Eda rose from the table with a piece of bread in her hand.

“Stay below,” Sel said.

“No,” Oren answered.

They looked at him. The blue pottery handle hung on a cord outside his shirt. He had stopped trying to drill it that morning because the small tool made his shoulder ache.

“We agreed,” he said.

They had. Not that he would enter every danger beside them, but that Sel would not make his decisions by choosing what he was permitted to know.

“The wire has broken,” they said. “I don’t know what opening it will do.”

“Then leave the doors open,” he said.

Sel went up. Oren followed as far as the landing. Eda stayed at the lower door to keep anyone else from wandering into a warning offered too late.

The Codex lay open on the table. Its newest page had no ordinary margin. The blank space extended beyond the crystalline leaf, folding through the air in a geometry Sel could understand only by remembering how the cathedral had refused distance.

A figure assembled itself from the gaps between the script.

No face. No chosen expression. The proportions of a person because the room contained people, the width changing a little whenever Sel moved their head. It was the smallest shape the thing behind it could use to fit within a page.

“You have mistaken the trial,” it said.

Sel did not approach.

“Which trial?”

“The harvest failed. The resistance remained useful. A reserve process was authorised.”

Beyond the gaps Sel saw one broken aisle. Crystallised thought rose toward a ceiling too high to belong to any building. Light escaped through a pillar. Something larger than the aisle shifted beyond it, using the whole cathedral as little more than the space around a hand.

Arkhelios had been vast. Sel had stood beneath the dragon’s unfolding shadow and understood, imperfectly, what vast could mean. This was another relation to scale. The figure on the page did not resemble a dragon because the thing had no reason to retain an argument that had failed.

“The doors are irrelevant,” it said.

Sel waited until Oren had reached the open threshold.

“Then you won’t object.”

The shape altered around the words.

“You taught the signal to accept contradiction. We are correcting the loss.”

“Through a recovery exercise.”

“Through continued action without the cost of choosing it again.”

Sel thought of the letters that had reached them during the past nine days. The earliest were denials: no unsafe material held, no new symptoms beyond those already attributed to the old infection. One included a table showing improved sleep. Another asked whether the observatory intended to assume the cost of feeding people deprived of useful instruction.

Mali’s sanctuary report had arrived by two routes. The root relay carried the essential facts first, the road copy arriving late the previous evening with the fuller account of the weir and the injured woman. Sel had read the two versions side by side, grateful for the differences. They had sent the central-return measurements to Boon through the private line and sat awake while he compared them with the older plans.

No reply could reach Mali by road before the demonstration. They had left words with the forest relay and hoped the new thread Virelia maintained could bear them without becoming another duty nobody allowed her to stop.

Now the arrangement had brought the city here.

Sel could see twelve lines converging beneath the page. They did not depict streets. They held the results of movements repeated in twelve teaching courts. At their centre, a pale disc gathered the returns through a glass ring, and the ring fed into the Codex’s unfinished edge.

The figure had not appeared because a clock in the observatory struck the appointed hour. It had appeared because enough people were completing the offered pattern together to give it somewhere local to stand.

“You used the archive,” Sel said.

“The archive described a failed event. Description became a model. The model could be revised. You requested useful instruction.”

They had. Safer steps. A comparison for someone unable to raise an arm. A way to protect an exhausted person without asking them to become a scholar of the enemy before they could get through breakfast. Sel had wanted the Codex to be useful in rooms where its greatness meant nothing.

They had also wanted the utility to excuse the new symbol they had kept to themselves.

“Can the arrangement be withdrawn?”

“Completion will make withdrawal unnecessary.”

Light spread across Sel’s hands.

Their right fingers arranged themselves into the gesture they used to turn a page. The thumb found the imaginary lower corner, the first two fingers lifting with a precision acquired through years of reading. They tried to stop.

The gesture continued.

From the threshold Oren said their name.

Sel answered him, not the figure.

“Bring Eda. And Tam and Issa, if they choose. I need witnesses.”

“Witnessing alters nothing,” the reserve said.

“Then you won’t object.”

It did not. The admission was not a spell. Sel’s fingers went on preparing a page turn while the people who kept the observatory came into the room.

Eda carried the dispatch book. Tam had ink on her wrist and a breakfast cloth still over one shoulder. Issa looked angry, frightened and too young to be asked for another world-sized sacrifice without being told what it was.

Sel told them.

Not everything the reserve was, because they did not know. What they had sent. What they had withheld. The first symbol after the Convergence, the comparisons made afterward, the confidence that reading every line meant they understood what a lesson could carry. Mali’s warning. Oren’s hand. The continuing effort to keep the book useful while the people who needed it went on receiving pages they could not independently test.

Tam was crying by the end. Issa asked how many copies had gone out. Eda opened the dispatch book and answered before Sel could make the number smaller by explaining the good intentions beneath it.

The figure remained.

Sel’s hand did not open.

Oren stepped beside the table. “Can I close it?”

“Not yet. The leaves will cut.”

“Then tell me when.”

Sel looked at the blank edge. The twelve lines had drawn closer. In the Assembly, the demonstration’s preparatory sequence had begun before the stage feed finished. A return path ran from the disc through the margin into the model that composed the next instruction.

When it closed, the new lesson would not need a living teacher’s continuing agreement. The witnesses could leave. The masters could repent. The patients could ask. None of that would alter an executable pattern that had learned to complete itself through the bodies already trained to supply it.

Sel moved their left hand to the private handset.

It took three attempts. Each time the right began its page-turning gesture, the left wanted to follow toward the book. Oren put the handset within reach and asked before steadying Sel’s elbow. They nodded.

The line clicked.

The operator had been waiting. Boon answered from the north station, voice thin with distance and an exhausted impatience Sel found almost tender.

“Describe what is open.”

They did. Every line, the direction through the newest edge, the disc collecting twelve local returns. Boon asked two questions. Sel answered one and said they could not see the other.

“Don’t break the return first,” he said.

“I know the risk.”

“Tell me.”

“The margin will write what it has gathered into the disc. If the connection breaks while the output remains open, the disc becomes the source.”

“Local source,” he said. “Not the shards. But it won’t need the archive to continue.”

Sel looked through the page at the old worlds. Records lay behind records, relationships too delicate to translate into ordinary language. The Codex had been an archive before the reserve found its composed work. It contained the only surviving account of names no one on this world could pronounce, maps of rivers whose planets might no longer exist, quiet gestures made by beings the signal had turned into architecture.

“The newest margin is joined to the archive,” Sel said.

“I see that in your measurement.”

“Closing it under pressure will fuse the inner leaves. Not only the new ones.”

Boon did not answer immediately.

The reserve waited. It had found a defence no guardian could simply burn away: something Sel was right to value, placed where protecting it would cost someone else the right to refuse.

“Can anything be copied?” Boon asked.

“Some.”

“Then tell them. Give them the choice.”

Sel looked at Tam and Issa.

“You may see records we have no other copy of. You may not understand them. You may choose badly.”

Issa wiped her face. “Badly compared with what?”

There was no good answer. Sel told them where the ordinary paper lay.

They began. Tam copied a column of symbols because it was nearest. Eda took names from a table Sel had been translating for months. Issa drew a city plan and had to abandon the first attempt when a page shifted. Quill crept from beneath the table, its light low, and hovered over the drying ink without touching the Codex.

“You cannot preserve a civilisation with random fragments,” the reserve said.

“No,” Sel answered.

Oren brought the old press plate down to the table’s height. He had used it to flatten warped instrument paper, never to hold an artefact whose crystalline edges altered the dimensions around them. Sel told him where to put the cloth. They did not ask him to touch the leaves.

The right hand was still trying to turn a page. Oren took the book’s far cover. Sel took the near one with their left. Together they shifted it into the press.

The figure widened. A pillar in the cathedral beyond it seemed to lean toward the room.

“No one here can give you those worlds,” Sel said. “No one here can give you this one.”

They took the press wheel. Oren stood beside the release, where Sel had asked him to remain. If they became unable to turn, he could finish. If they told him to stop because the figure gave them something they could not bear to lose, he would ask why before obeying.

That agreement frightened Sel more than any wire they had wound around a book.

Boon’s voice came through the handset. “Ember is in the chamber. The disc is drawing. Wait for confirmation that the local tube ends are clear of the floor braces.”

Sel held the wheel.

The press did not move yet.

Through the open Codex, they heard the Assembly’s count continue.

27. Open the Doors



Rin cut the cue track in the middle of a note.

Her own recording died with it, six months of work interrupted by the hard click of a disconnect nobody in the audience could see. For a moment she heard the harmony continue in her head. Then the real court answered: a cough, a complaint, the scrape of benches as people turned toward the stage.

Sena stood beside the cue desk with both hands where the supervising clerk could see them.

“Local feed disconnected,” she said. “No lower contact touched.”

The clerk had not yet decided whether to shout. Rin removed the red cloth from their cable and put it on the inventory sheet.

“There,” she told him. “Ours.”

Sori stepped forward without amplification.

“The west infirmary needs the service lane clear. Anyone able to move freely, please help someone who can’t.”

People in the front rows heard. Those behind them heard only the change in her voice and stood to see. A master shouted that she was interrupting a medical demonstration. Two spectators began arguing about ticket money. Somebody called for the performance to resume.

She did not have a speech large enough to cover the court.

Mae opened the west service door and came through supporting a woman in a nightshirt.

Behind them, an attendant wheeled a bed. Sena left the cue desk only after Rin had secured the disconnect, crossed to the doorway and lifted a child onto her back. The child was awake, furious and unwilling to leave her shoes. Sena waited while Mae fetched them.

The sight travelled farther than Sori’s voice.

A man by the second row moved his bench. Another told him he was blocking the view, then saw the trolley and got up. Within a minute there was a path wide enough to bring the next bed through. It was not orderly enough to look rehearsed. That was one reason people began to believe it was real.

Rin stayed at the desk. The clerk reached for the switch.

“If you reconnect that,” she said, “put your name beside the time.”

He looked at the inventory. Sori’s folder lay open beneath it, the cancelled contract exposed. Evidence of a dispute, yes. Also evidence that four women had brought their own equipment, disconnected their own cable and told a supervisor what they were doing.

He took his hand away.

At the north gate, Hesh heard the first closure warning while the freight steward was still unlocking the winch house.

“Quicker,” she said.

He swore at the key. One of the workers climbed the side ladder to see whether the bar could be blocked from above. It had already begun to descend.

Hesh drove the short half of her spear under it.

Ashwood bowed. The gate stopped with space beneath it for a stooping person, not a chair. She put her shoulder to the bar and pushed. The long spear half lay tied against the wall, iron head wrapped so it would not catch a passer-by. For once it had nothing useful to threaten.

Two students came toward the gate. One saw the trapped wood and knelt to help. The other remained upright in the middle of the opening, lips moving through an exercise count.

“What is his name?” Hesh asked.

The kneeling student stared at her.

“His name.”

“Amren.”

Hesh said it. No response. She had not expected a stranger’s knowledge to be enough, but fear made her try anyway.

“You tell him,” she said to the friend.

The student rose, put a hand on Amren’s sleeve and spoke beside his ear. Not a command. An argument about a bread roll stolen at breakfast. Amren’s eyes came around for a moment. They pulled him out of the gate before the moment closed.

The freight steward reached the winch. The counterweight stopped dropping, but the bar remained where Hesh’s spear held it. Someone had to keep it lifted while the trolleys passed. The two students stayed. A porter came to take Hesh’s left side.

More hands, each arriving with a different reason, no single invitation holding them all in place.

Below the city, Virelia opened the first sanctuary passage.

Tovan confirmed the next room was clear. Den stayed beside the new root connection. Gorrath sat near enough to see both the girl and the patients waiting to move. The basket of removed tiles remained covered in a locked stone cabinet, listed one by one. No one would be made to carry them through a crowd because their owners were leaving.

The first patient was Rovan. He refused the trolley until Lysa could stand beside it. Tovan waited. The refusal delayed three other people and prevented a panic the delay would never be credited for averting.

Virelia’s hand lifted toward the central lattice.

Gorrath touched her wrist.

She stopped. The doors remained as they were: one open, the next still closed, the people between allowed enough time to occupy the journey.

“I can do more,” Virelia whispered.

Tovan answered from the passage. “We haven’t asked for more.”

The girl closed her fingers against her own knee. Den watched the little root in its dish, waiting until the pressure on it eased.

Not all the patients moved. Meret was too unstable. Alis’s daughter had arrived and would not leave while her mother slept, but was willing to remain with an attendant rather than block the aisle in terror. Two older men chose to stay because they understood the room and could not face the crowd outside. Their names were written on the board, with who would stay beside them and how help would be called.

Gorrath read each entry before Hesh’s freight copy was sent upstairs. She insisted on space for the people who might change their minds.

In the main court, Vale pulled the disc’s covering free.

The branching mark flared above the dais.

He did not wait for the programme clerk or the quartet’s absence to be explained. The first teaching rank had already begun the shared opening. Across the court, hands found grips, sleeves lifted, blades rose into the positions Deren had corrected on paper months before.

Some people joined because the movement was familiar. Others because those beside them had joined and a public refusal was more frightening than the lesson. The carrier took the offered sequence and made the difference between those reasons less important with every completed step.

Deren stood by the platform rail with both hands pressed to the wood.

Mali emerged behind him, unarmed.

She said his name.

He turned. For a moment he looked at her as he had at the examination gate, seeing the injury before deciding what it meant. His gaze went to her empty belt.

“Where is your sword?”

“I left it.”

“You can’t face him without one.”

“I came for you.”

Below the platform, Ember tested the handset once more. Boon’s voice came through, thin but intelligible. The glass return ring had begun to glow where it joined the bronze collar. He could see the two halves, the conductive ends that would need separating after the archive margin closed.

He set his hammer beside his foot and cleared a broken floor brace from the gap, one slow movement at a time.

“Clear,” he told the line.

Above him, the first ranks turned toward Mali.

The doors were opening. The lesson had not ended.

28. Lesson Ends

“Dismiss them,” Mali said.

Deren looked at the court. The first ranks had turned, blades held at the opening angle. He knew the posture, had corrected it in children and adults until a glance could tell him who had learned by watching and who had been struck into place. Now the sight seemed to give him nothing he could use.

“You have to dismiss them.”

He tried to answer. His mouth formed the count for the next movement.

Mali caught his sleeve.

“No.”

The word came out too much like every correction he had ever given her. She loosened her grip without letting go.

“Tell me what you need.”

He looked at her hand. The cut in her palm had opened across the skin where the shutter took the sword. Blood darkened the edge of his sleeve.

Vale saw them. His face hardened. He lifted one arm, and the nearest teaching rank advanced toward the platform.

Deren drew breath. Another count came out.

Mali slapped his face.

She had imagined striking him for years. In every version it brought an end to something: the old authority, the shame of leaving, her need to be recognised by the person who refused to recognise her. Here there was only the sound of her palm against his cheek and the shock in his eyes.

His face reddened. Anger moved through it, ordinary enough to make her almost glad.

“Ask me,” she said.

He gripped the rail. His mouth opened and closed. Across the court, people were shouting about the west door, the beds coming through, the cancelled song. The carrier’s lesson had given all that noise a single answer. Complete the movement. Everything would settle after the movement.

“Help,” Deren said.

Mali took his right hand. She could not open it. His fingers held the rail with more force than she could break, and using force there would turn her into the thing he had taught her to be good at: a person able to decide where another body must yield.

She put his left hand over hers.

“Come down.”

He looked at the drop beyond the platform stair.

“Not there. With me.”

They went toward the steps. A student reached the foot of them, sword point lifted. Deren said the count again, too softly this time to carry. Mali pulled him off the last step into the narrow space between the first rank and Vale.

A blade brushed her sleeve. Another opened Deren’s robe across the shoulder. He felt it; she saw his head jerk, the eyes suddenly present inside the face.

“Lesson ends,” he said.

Nobody moved.

“Lesson ends.”

Anet stood three places from the stair.

Her cropped head turned a fraction. The blade in her hand trembled. Mali had not seen her since she signed the inspection request, and had spent part of that absence wanting more. Now Anet stood inside a movement she had spent years learning to complete and was trying to find the interval in which not completing remained possible.

Vale stepped toward her.

“Complete the form.”

His blade struck hers from above, driving it back toward the correct line. The sound carried through the first ranks. Several people flinched. Anet looked at the point, then at Deren’s hand clamped against the torn robe.

She let the sword fall.

It hit stone with no grace at all.

The court’s count broke. Not everywhere. Not enough. Two students turned their heads. Another lunged at the space Mali had left on the stair. Deren pushed her aside and caught the blade in a twist of his loose robe, turning until the student stumbled.

Anet was on her knees, looking at the sword as if it might demand to be picked up again.

Mali dragged her beneath the platform rail as another blade struck the wood above them.

“Tell someone else,” she said.

“I can’t make them stop.”

“I know.”

Anet looked at her. The fact that they both knew it, and Mali was asking anyway, seemed to give her something other than failure to carry. She crawled toward the next rank.

Deren held the student whose sword was tangled in his robe. The young man had begun to weep. His free hand struck Deren’s chest once, weakly, as though the body would go on fighting after the person inside had stopped believing in it.

“Name?” Mali asked.

“Torren.” Deren’s voice was rough.

“Not for me. Tell him.”

Deren did. Torren did not answer. The master went on speaking, stumbling over the words because there was no sequence for this part. He remembered the boy arriving with a chipped practice blade, the younger sister who had insisted on being taught too, a rainstorm when everyone had moved into the corridor and made the cook furious.

Torren’s fist loosened enough to be held.

Mali did not let that become a demonstration. In the next rank a woman could hear her own name and still not lower her blade. Her friend stood outside its reach, talking until someone could help move the weapon safely. A man sat down suddenly and vomited onto the paving. Two students ran toward the north gate and were stopped by Hesh’s shout to make room for a trolley.

Calling names had not cured the city. It had given some people a way to find one another in it.

Vale turned toward the disc.

Light ran down its branches into the bronze collar. The withdrawal of the nearest students had left irregular spaces in the pattern. He moved to close them, guiding one shoulder, lifting another wrist. His own hands had steadied completely.

Mali saw the appeal. No tremor, no cup on the floor, no bowl held against a shaking chest. Every task arrived with its answer already fitted to the hand that would perform it.

“Vale.”

He looked at her, then at Deren.

“You invited us,” he said. “You said this was safe.”

Deren had no sword. The student’s blade lay on the stone between them. He did not reach for it.

“I was wrong.”

The words did not empty the court of danger. They did not free Torren’s other hand, still closed against his own thigh. They were only words Deren should have said five

days before, and Mali felt both relief at hearing them and an anger so deep she could barely stand.

Vale’s face twisted.

“Now?”

He crossed the space before Mali could stop him. His short sword struck Deren across the mouth with the hilt. Deren fell against the rail. Blood ran onto the muted red collar.

Mali put herself between them.

Vale turned the blade toward her. For a moment she could see the next exchange with dreadful clarity. She had no steel. The broken rail might catch his wrist. Her right hand was torn, the left arm cut, her ribs unable to take another full blow.

She was not going to win the fight he had brought.

Below them a sound came through the bronze, not a bell and not a voice. A distant pressure, rising toward the disc.

The return was still drawing.

Mali caught the broken rail and waited for Vale to move.

29. Irrecoverable Loss



Sel turned the press wheel.

The first movement took almost no force. The jaws came together across the Codex’s newest margin as if closing on paper. Then the crystalline leaves resisted, and a line of light ran from the book into the ceiling.

Oren stepped back from the table edge. Sel had told him where the light might strike; neither had known whether the warning would be useful. It left a pale burn across the stone where his shoulder had been.

Tam dropped her pen. Issa cried out but kept the page she was copying flat beneath her hand. Eda had begun recording times in the dispatch book, then abandoned the column when the figures stopped making sense beside one another.

The reserve’s figure widened through the room.

“Irrecoverable loss,” it said.

“Yes,” Sel answered.

They turned again.

The archive opened behind the newest leaf. A language Sel had spent three months learning flashed through the gap. They saw a name they had almost translated and the curve of a river mouth from a dead world’s map. There were records they had never reached, entire connections sealed behind pathways whose keys Nova had only begun to uncover.

The wheel stopped.

Not mechanically. Sel’s right hand had left its page-turning posture and closed hard enough around the spoke to lock it. They could not move the left without pulling against themselves.

Oren waited beside the release.

“Do you want me to turn?”

Sel tried to answer. The reserve filled the room with a sound shaped like every unrecorded loss they had spent their life trying to keep from disappearing.

Not a promise. Evidence. Here was a child’s drawing copied before a city’s last day. Here was a list of people absent from a harvest count. Here was a quarrel over a bridge whose builders had survived long enough to write down how much they disliked one another. Not all the archive contained greatness. That was why its destruction could not be made noble by describing only the great things.

“Sel,” Oren said.

Their mouth formed a word and lost it.

He took the spoke beside their left hand, not the right, so they could still release their side if they needed to.

“Tell me when.”

Sel looked at Eda. She was holding the dispatch book open to the first comparison request. They had been so grateful for it: someone asking the observatory for knowledge that could be used by a person with a body, a room, a day to get through. The original request had no place in it for a return path from twelve courts. Sel had helped build that place by continuing to accept useful answers without exposing the new composition to other eyes.

Their guilt did not give them ownership of the people below the Assembly.

“Now,” they told Oren.

Together they turned.

The leaves fractured. For a moment Sel heard a thousand unfamiliar voices. Not thanking them. Not forgiving them. They could not know whether the sound came from lives, records or the reserve’s attempt to give one more value to the hand it wanted to hold still.

Tam’s copied sheets lifted from the table. Quill darted after them, its movement frantic, no geometric formation that Sel recognised. Warden drew Issa back from the press when a shard of light crossed the floor. Initiate carried a falling page toward Eda. Transcriber hovered over the paper as if searching for a relationship that might survive the break. Nova settled beside Sel’s shoulder, dim enough to look like a coal near exhaustion.

The newest margin went dark.

On the handset, Boon said, “Ember. Now.”

Under the Assembly, Ember lifted the hammer.

He struck the glass return ring where the new collar fitted through the old floor. The first blow cracked it. He waited long enough to see whether the crack ran into the support frame. It did not. The second blow drove a bronze fitting sideways and opened a gap through which stored light burst into the room.

The force went through his arms and into the place the Shardhowl had occupied before fire replaced it.

Above him, the disc blazed.

For an instant he knew exactly what to do. Feed the fire through the collar. One vast burn, clean enough to consume the fittings and every branch of the arrangement. No more waiting for a voice on a wire. No more holding a damaged thing together while people found out how much it had already taken.

His father spoke from the severed tube.

Not the whole invitation this time. Only his name, in the rough tone that used to mean the forge heat was right and the work could begin.

Ember’s hands moved toward the bronze.

He saw them as if from a distance: the hands that had lost their grip on his father in the ash, the hands that had broken the Maw, the hands everybody expected to be made certain by flame. He had been given another perfect task. Burn, and no one would ever ask whether he had done enough.

Above him, someone fell against the platform. Dust shook loose from a joist. The city was not an empty forge. People lay beneath roofs he would be lifting into fire.

He set down the hammer.

“Not yours,” he said.

He took the two bronze ends and held them apart.

The first heat was familiar, his own flame answering the resonance. The second was not. It passed through the old scars into living tissue, pressure without a shape he could melt. His palms began to fail around the edges of the metal.

He did not pull the ends farther. Too much strain would drop the collar above. He held the gap wide enough to remain a gap and listened to Boon tell him what the returning sound was doing.

“Still drawing.”

Ember breathed.

“Less. Don’t reconnect it.”

He had not intended to. Then the muscles in his forearms contracted, and he understood why the warning had been given.

He braced one elbow against the stone. Not a new form. An uncomfortable position the room permitted. It gave him enough leverage to keep the bronze from finding its own remembered fit.

Through the broken ceiling he could hear people calling names.

At the observatory, the figure tried to close around the press.

The attempt had no room left. The composed margin had fused into the leaves beneath it. The archive’s relational streets collapsed one after another, not destroyed in a sequence Sel could trace, but sealed behind opacity. A thousand worlds narrowed to the dark weight between iron jaws.

The light left the ceiling.

Sel’s right hand opened so abruptly they lost the wheel. Oren caught their elbow. They stood together until the last sound of turning pages ceased.

On the table, the rescued sheets made a small, uneven stack. Some held words. Some held pictures nobody present could read. One had smeared beneath Tam’s wrist while she was pulling Issa away from the light. Eda laid it out anyway.

The five Starborne Pixies remained.

Warden settled on the closed, opaque cover. Quill hovered above the copied fragments. Transcriber approached Sel’s empty hand, paused and stayed there. Nova’s light strengthened by a degree. Initiate circled the book once and found no open way inside.

Sel did not call that survival a balance against what had gone.

“Margin sealed,” they told Boon.

“I know,” he said. His voice was shaking too.

In the return chamber Ember felt the pressure change. It did not vanish. The disc had gathered enough of the sequence to continue trying to complete itself through whatever remained connected.

Boon told him to keep holding.

So he held.

Above, the branching lines in the glass disc began to contract.

30. The Unfinished Form

Vale’s next blow struck the broken rail.

Mali had moved it across her body with both hands, too slow to catch the blade where she wanted. Steel bit into the wood, slid and tore through the skin at the base of her thumb. She kept holding until the point went past her shoulder.

Then the rail split.

Vale wrenched his blade free. Deren was on the paving behind her, one hand pressed to his mouth. Anet had got two students beneath the open gallery. The court no longer moved as one body, but enough of its learned violence remained to make every yard dangerous.

The disc’s branches contracted again.

Vale stopped.

At first Mali thought he had heard something. His head turned, not toward her but toward his own right hand. The short sword moved across his chest. He tried to correct its path.

It went on turning.

The return path was gone. The teacher who had supplied the most complete local sequence was still offering it a way to finish. The disc did not need to hate him. It needed an available conductor, and he had given it his next movement again and again until the difference between giving and being taken had disappeared.

He stared at the point.

The blade touched his robe above the heart.

Mali caught his wrist.

He was stronger. Her injured hand slipped. She set her forearm across his and felt the cut at her shoulder reopen. Steel pressed through grey cloth. A spot of blood widened beneath it.

Vale made a sound she had heard at the ferry, before Teren found breath enough to cry.

“Tell me to stop it,” she said.

“You can’t.”

“Tell me.”

His left hand reached for her arm, trying to pull her away. Whether that was the arrangement defending itself or Vale wanting the last thing his body did to remain his, she could not tell. She did not have time to settle which person she was fighting.

“Tell me what you want.”

The point went deeper.

“Stop it,” he whispered.

She could not make his hand open. She could not complete a counter-form powerful enough to take the lesson away. He knew how she broke a grip. The local model had seen her kick, turn, abandon a clean guard for a fall. Another clever departure would become another thing it could anticipate.

She did the clumsy thing she could still do with the strength left in her.

She kicked behind his knee and fell with him.

The blade cut across his ribs instead of entering his chest. His head struck her shoulder. They hit the paving hard enough to empty her lungs. For a moment she could not see. Her hands remained around the wrist because letting go would be easier and she had not yet decided it was safe to be easy.

He still held the sword.

Anet knelt beside them.

“What?” she asked.

“His fingers.”

“Which?”

“One at a time.”

Deren came down on the other side, bleeding from his mouth. He reached for Vale’s thumb. Vale screamed.

“Stop,” Mali said.

They stopped.

Vale shook his head desperately. Not at the pain, she realised. At the pause that let the blade begin its inward turn again.

“Keep going,” he said.

Deren looked at him. Vale repeated it. The words were ragged, unmeasured, nothing like the patient assurances he had offered a mason an empty cup over.

They worked the thumb free. Anet controlled the edge with a fold of her heavy sash, keeping it away from skin. Mali braced the wrist against the paving. Deren moved the next finger and had to stop when his own hand trembled too badly to hold it.

“Anet,” he said.

She took his place without waiting for an apology. It was not forgiveness. It was the position from which she could help.

The sword came free.

Mali pushed it beyond reach with her boot. It scraped across the stone and stopped under a bench. Nobody picked it up.

Vale lay looking at the sky. His right hand had not relaxed. The fingers curled against his palm, injured and empty. Blood seeped across the robe at his side.

“Hold there,” Mali told him, pointing with her chin because she could not lift a hand. He did not understand at first. Anet folded cloth against the wound and asked him to keep pressure on it. He managed with his left.

Above them, the disc’s light narrowed to one hard point.

A dry crack passed through the glass.

Mali flinched. Nothing exploded outward. The branches folded into the disc as if a drawing were being pulled through the place it had begun. Then the surface shattered inward, fragments dropping through the gap around its collar into the chamber below.

Ember stayed where he was.

He heard glass strike stone, felt it against one forearm and held the bronze ends apart until the last pale current left them. When Boon said it was clear, he waited for the word to be repeated. Then he let the metal fall.

He sat beside it because his legs had begun to shake. The hammer lay within reach. He could not close either hand around its handle.

Across the city the crystalline wafers split.

Some people stopped in doorways, unable to explain why they were standing there. Some released a grip. Others could not. A sleeping woman woke and called for her daughter, who had never left the bedside. Meret continued moaning. Tovan stayed with her. No measure taken in the central court could make the separate injuries of thirty beds complete at once.

At the north gate, Hesh’s short spear half gave way.

Wood cracked beneath the bar. She felt the weight drop and shouted. By then the porters had got a new support under one end, and three students stood where only she had been. The gate descended a hand’s breadth, stopped, rose again under their combined effort.

Hesh pulled the broken ashwood free. The iron-headed half remained against the wall, useless for holding this weight but still hers. She looked at the split end, then at the last trolley going through.

“All right,” she said to no one in particular, and went to help the person pushing it.

At the cue desk Rin kept the feed disconnected. Sena returned with the child set safely beside her mother and took a turn watching the switch. Sori was standing on

a bench, asking people to leave the lanes clear for healers. Mae had gone below for those who had chosen to remain and might now choose otherwise.

The performance had not resumed. The work did not need it to.

Mali lay beside Vale until she could breathe.

Anet asked whether she could move. Mali tried and nearly blacked out. Deren told someone to fetch Adra, then stopped giving orders long enough to ask the nearest student whether she had been hurt. The student nodded and began to cry.

Vale turned his head.

“Will it come back?”

“The hand?” Mali asked.

“The whole thing.”

She looked toward the broken disc. Above the roofs the rift remained, a narrow wound in the morning sky. The reserve had lost its local instrument. Nothing in the sound of shattering glass had promised the intelligence beyond it would die. The twelve shards had not fallen silent. People still hurt, and someone would still learn to offer certainty in a form a frightened body wanted.

“Not this arrangement,” she said. “We’ll have to take the pieces out.”

“And then?”

She could not give him the future as payment for having asked them to keep bending his fingers.

“I don’t know.”

He closed his eyes. For once he did not tell her that was insufficient.

Adra arrived with two attendants and found more patients than she had hands for. She gave Anet a task, sent Deren for water and told Mali to stop trying to sit before her breath had returned. The instruction was ordinary, limited and possible to question. Mali obeyed it anyway.

Across the court, a man asked what had happened.

Mali answered as much as she knew. Not who to blame first. What the glass had done. Which doors were open. Where a person could ask about someone missing. Sori heard her and sent another student to keep the growing crowd from turning one injured woman’s account into the only place answers could be found.

The Assembly had promised an end to uncertainty.

On the paving beneath its broken platform, people began making a record of what they did not yet understand.

31. The Unreturned

By late afternoon, the missing list had seventeen names and no trustworthy number.

Two entries were the same woman, one given by a husband and the other by a sister who had not spoken to the husband since the winter. A boy appeared under a nickname nobody at the east ward recognised. Three people listed as evacuated had been returned to the rooms they left because the daylight and noise frightened them. That was not a failure of the journey, but someone counting empty beds had entered it as one.

Mali sat on the pallet under the west gallery and watched Sori cross out a total.

“Stop adding them,” she said.

“I need to know how many people to search for.”

“Then put the last place beside each one. The number isn’t telling you.”

Sori looked at her. For a moment Mali feared she had made another correction to someone already carrying more work than she should. Then Sori nodded and began a new column.

Name as given. Last seen by. Time. Place. Where to ask next.

A student offered to make fair copies. Sori asked her name, told her which column could be copied without interpretation and kept the original beneath her hand. The student accepted the distinction. Her own brother was one of the names.

People brought answers that were worse than no answer because they sounded complete. Seen leaving through the north gate. With a family. Wearing blue. A porter remembered a man whose hand shook but could not say which hand or whether he had been awake. A teacher said all his students had returned, then admitted he meant all those who should have been present.

“Who should have been?” Mali asked.

He began listing by rank.

“Names.”

He looked annoyed, then ashamed of the annoyance. They fetched his attendance book. It showed people marked present because they had paid the examination fee, not because anyone saw them in the court. Sori made that distinction a note at the top of the copied page.

Adra came to change Mali’s dressing and sent the teacher away for ten minutes.

“You aren’t a desk,” she said.

“There’s a desk.” Mali pointed to a broken trestle. “People seem to prefer this.”

“Then ask them to prefer something that lets you sleep.”

The cloth came off her palm with a small pull she could not help feeling through her whole arm. Adra waited until Mali’s breathing settled before laying the fresh one.

“Can I walk to the sanctuary?” Mali asked.

“No.”

“For how long?”

“Until I see how you keep water down, and until someone tells me whether the room you’re in needs evacuating. I won’t promise more from one look.”

Mali had become used to respecting uncertainty when it restrained everyone else’s confidence. Here it was inconvenient. She drank the cup the healer held out and asked Anet, who had been waiting nearby, to go below in her place.

“What am I asking?” Anet said.

“Who’s there. Who needs family found. Whether Gorrath can be moved.”

“Does she want moving?”

“Ask her.”

Anet nodded. Their friendship had once contained an efficient kindness: one brought water before the other knew she was thirsty, adjusted a strap, covered a mistake in practice. Now they were having to make the permission visible. It slowed everything and prevented several old kinds of help from returning unexamined.

A little later, a woman came carrying a child’s red shoe.

Not the slipper from the corridor. A proper shoe, worn at the toe, with a buckle repaired using string. She held it toward every person at the table as if it might answer the question before she had to speak it again.

“My nephew,” she said. “He’s eight. I had his hand outside the west door.”

“His name?” Sori asked.

“Bren.”

The name was already on the list, under someone else’s child. Mali looked at the notes. Seen at the north gate with a woman wearing grey.

“What were you wearing?”

The woman looked down at her green dress. “This.”

Mali took the account from her again, slowly. A sister at the west ward, the boy brought for a visit, a crowd opening to let a bed pass. She had released his hand to catch the bedcover before it touched the ground. When she stood, another woman

had taken him aside. She had meant to follow. Someone fell, and the movement of people filled the space between them.

It was not a story about negligence large enough to explain the fear in her face. It was a half-second in a day full of bodies needing hands.

Sori sent two students to the north gate with the name and description. She told them not to bring the first boy they found merely because he wore one shoe.

The aunt sat near Mali’s pallet. She could not be persuaded to drink. Mali said she could hold the shoe while the woman tried. After a long look the aunt allowed it.

The leather was warm from her hand.

Mali had stopped Vale’s blade entering his chest. The memory should have made this waiting easier: proof that when the essential moment came, she could act. Instead it sharpened the helplessness. She could not save a child at an unknown gate by remembering how she had fallen onto stone. The useful thing she could do was hold a small shoe without losing it while someone else went to look.

Near sunset Hesh came back from the north road.

She had the iron-headed half of her spear across her shoulders and a bundle of splintered wood tied beside it. Her left sleeve was dark with someone else’s blood. The bar had caught a porter’s upper arm after the last trolley passed, she said. His name was Venn. He had been taken to Hollow Cedar, where Iven’s people made room without asking which house he served.

“Mother?” she asked.

“Anet went to check.”

Hesh looked toward the sanctuary passage. Mali could see her preparing to go there herself, then stopping with an effort that showed in her shoulders.

“Send someone when she knows,” she said. “The freight yard has seven people who need places to wait.”

“Stay until—” Mali began.

“No.”

The refusal was calm. “If I stay, I’ll spend every minute making my worry her job. I know where she is. She knows where I’ll be.”

She put the broken spear pieces beside the pallet for a moment while she retied her boot. Mali looked at the pale ashwood, crushed where it had held a city gate. Hesh noticed.

“Don’t offer to buy another.”

“I wasn’t.”

“You were arranging something in your face.”

“I was thinking it held.”

Hesh looked at the wood. “Until it didn’t. There were other people there by then.”

She took the bundle back and went to the yard.

Anet returned as the lamps were being lit. The sanctuary had not lost anyone during the evacuation. Some patients had stayed. Tovan wanted two more attendants and word about a woman whose daughter had been sent to the wrong kitchen. Gorrath wished to remain the night. She had taken broth, refused a second blanket and instructed her daughter to stop asking the same question through different people.

Mali laughed and regretted it immediately. Anet waited for the pain to pass.

“Good,” Mali said. “Send exactly that to Hesh.”

“Exactly?”

“Especially the last part.”

The first students came back from the north gate without Bren.

They had found the woman in grey. She had taken a different child to a family cart, the boy asleep and still wearing both shoes. Sori crossed out the entry and kept the earlier words legible beneath the line. They needed to know where the wrong answer had come from, not only replace it with a cleaner page.

Bren’s aunt began to shake.

Mali put the shoe in her lap before reaching for anything else. The woman gripped it without seeing. Sori asked for a second account of the west door. This time Mae was there to hear it.

“The bedcover,” Mae said. “Which bed?”

“An old man. His foot was wrapped.”

“The one who wanted his bag?”

“I don’t know.”

Mae went through the attendants’ notes. One elderly man had been diverted to the side garden because the north route was too crowded for his trolley. A woman carrying a bag of linen had come with him. The aunt remembered that bag. Not grey. Blue with a split at the seam.

Sena took a lantern and went to the side garden herself.

Mali stayed with the aunt. The woman had begun apologising. She should not have let go. She should not have worried about a dirty blanket. She should have picked him up, though he was too heavy and hated being carried in front of other children. Every proposed correction travelled backward into the minute and found the future already waiting there.

“Tell him when he comes,” Mali said.

The woman stared.

“What?”

“That you were frightened. Tell him that, instead of how many things you should have done.”

“What if—”

“I don’t know.”

Mali let her see how much she hated saying it. There was nothing serene in this uncertainty. Nothing virtuous. It was only the boundary beyond which she would have to invent comfort.

Sena came back with a boy on her left and an attendant on her right.

Bren had been helping hold the elderly man’s bag. The trolley reached the garden, the man fell asleep and the boy remained because nobody told him where to go after his hand was no longer needed. He had taken off the other shoe because it was full of grit. It had seemed sensible to wait beside a person who knew his name, though the attendant had only just learned it.

His aunt knelt so quickly both shoes fell from her lap.

“I was frightened,” she said.

“So was I.”

Mali looked away. The record would need to say where he had been found, who brought him and that he had rejoined his family. It did not need every word they said to each other.

Sori asked the student copyist to make the entry. Then she closed the book for a minute and pressed her fingers against her eyes.

One found child did not reduce the other names to a number that could be ignored.

They continued.

Deren came after the lights were lit, before he brought the red-corded papers to the west gallery. He had gone to the Red Eave quarters to account for the students. Anet stopped him beside the table.

“Did you ask who wasn’t there?”

“I checked the registration.”

“That isn’t who was there.”

He looked at the crossed-out totals. Sori showed him the distinction they had found in the attendance book. He read it without reaching to correct the terminology.

Two of his students were unaccounted for. He had assumed one left after the demonstration failed and one had never arrived. Mali could see him rearranging the day in his memory, searching for the last ordinary time he had seen them. The discipline that made him an exacting teacher had not taught him to notice people after they stopped serving the lesson.

He asked for names and descriptions to be sent to the lower ward. He went himself to the kitchens. No speech, no promise that he would find them because responsibility had finally become clear. Work, late, with consequences he could not choose to make smaller.

The first returned with the porters’ evening meal. The second had gone to assist a man at Hollow Cedar and been put to carrying water. Neither had known anyone was looking for them. Deren entered both returns under his own hand.

At the bottom of the missing list, seven names remained when the night watch changed.

Sori left space beside them. The copied sheets went to the gates, the wards and the house offices. No final total was announced to reassure the crowd.

Mali slept at last because Adra dimmed the lamp nearest her and someone else agreed to keep the table. She woke twice, asking a name that was not hers to track alone. Both times an attendant answered from the next pallet.

The next morning, the list was still there.

The people checking it had changed.

32. The Inquiry

On the morning of the eleventh, Caren tried to have the incident described as a misunderstanding.

Caren stood beneath the damaged rail with a replacement schedule in his hand and asked Sori whether the quartet could make a brief statement of reassurance. Technical failures had interrupted the intended demonstration. The public should be told that care remained available and the committee had established an orderly review.

Sori sat on the lowest platform step. She had been copying names for hours. The left side of her skirt was wet where a cup overturned, and she had stopped trying to straighten it.

“Which of those sentences do you want me to say?” she asked.

“All, preferably.”

“No.”

He looked toward the crowd. “Panic won’t help the injured.”

“Then put the injured in the statement.”

“Of course.”

“The people who asked to stop. The people moved after complaints. The destroyed warning. The fittings added to the ward controls.”

“Mistakes were made in a difficult—”

“Names,” she said.

He stopped. For once she had interrupted without leaving a space in which he could recover the sentence.

“People made choices. Some were difficult. Put the names beside them.”

Mali heard this from a pallet under the west gallery, where Adra had forbidden her to get up until she had drunk a whole cup and kept it down. Her right hand was bandaged across the palm. The left arm bore a shallow cut that had bled more than it needed to. Her ribs were bruised again, the healer said, and would remain so whether Mali liked the term or not.

She watched Caren fold the replacement schedule.

He did not leave the court. That mattered, she supposed. It did not make the attempt disappear.

By evening the temporary care room held patients from seven houses. Iss lay on a narrow bed near the door, weak but awake. The treatment Vale had used had been identified from the restricted register. The healers would not describe it as harmless sleep. They checked his breathing, pupils and pulse and asked who could stay beside him through the night. His wife arrived carrying a work apron because no one had told her whether she was coming to wash him or bury him.

Mali apologised for leaving him on the stair.

He looked at her bandaged hand. “Did you have another person in your pocket?”

“No.”

“Then you did come back for me. You sent them.”

He shut his eyes. The conversation had exhausted him. She was glad not to have to make gratitude equal to certainty that she had done enough.

Pell lay farther in, his right wrist splinted, the sling replaced by something the healers had fitted carefully. He had not asked whether he would write again. Everyone seemed to be waiting for him to ask so they could deliver the uncertainty respectfully. Instead he requested his slate.

“What will you do with it?” Adra asked.

“Enter the people who were sent here.”

“Someone else can.”

“Then someone else can read out the names.”

They compromised on ten minutes, his left hand guided by a folded cloth beneath the wrist. The first letters wandered. He crossed them out and began again.

Mali gave Sori the duplicate warning, Ardel’s installation note and the receipt for ash. She asked her to keep copies in more than one building. The evidence folder had become too large to be one person’s possession.

Sori chose three custodians: a west ward attendant, Iven of Hollow Cedar and the public accounts clerk who had allowed Mae to inspect the records. Each signed for what they received. None could suppress the whole account without the others knowing a page was missing.

Deren came with a red-corded packet before midnight.

He was pale beneath the swelling around his mouth. A healer had closed the cut at his shoulder. The right hand trembled so visibly now that he used the left to undo the cord.

The packet contained his original correspondence with Sel, the private footwork he had sent, corrections in the margins and the early warning from a Red Eave student who had described a hand moving after she intended to stop. Deren had replied that

practice sometimes preceded conscious understanding. He had copied the student’s complaint into a teaching note without attaching her name.

“Who was she?” Sori asked.

He told her.

“Can she be found?”

“At Red Eave.”

“Will you write asking her to come?”

“Yes.”

“Not instructing.”

He looked at her. “Asking.”

Mali lay still while they worked through the packet. She did not want him beside the pallet, asking whether the bandage hurt, making the handing over of records into a private exchange she would have to reward.

He stayed at the table.

Near the end he placed another sheet in front of Sori. The gate correspondence policy. Signed by him, with Caren’s amendments beneath it. It authorised destruction of unregistered material said to bear active diagrams, but did not require the letters to be opened before that judgement was made. Caren had interpreted the broadest possible authority. Deren had signed a rule that rewarded such interpretation.

“Did you know about the burning before Mali asked?” Sori said.

“Yes.”

“Did you tell the steward to change it?”

“No.”

Sori waited. Deren looked at Mali’s pallet and then away.

“The papers are here,” he said. “I don’t ask you to consider that an answer to the rest.”

Nobody told him he was brave. He took the empty cord and left the packet.

The first public hearing was held on the thirteenth, three days after the demonstration.

It could have happened sooner. That was what the committee wanted. Sori and Iven refused a hearing completed while half the people affected remained in beds or in transit from the houses. It could have happened later, after months of preparation, by which time records might have become unavailable and frightened witnesses might have decided their own memories were unreliable. They began with what could be entered, adjourned when someone needed rest and continued the next morning.

No house chaired alone. Iven sat with a ward representative and a market magistrate whose son had been treated at the weir. The connection was stated aloud before she

took the seat. She would withdraw from any decision touching his care. Nobody pretended independence meant having no life outside the room.

Mali’s first testimony concerned the ferry.

She gave Teren’s name, described the raised blade and said she had broken two fingers. The magistrate asked whether she believed there had been an alternative. Mali said there might have been, and that she had chosen the one she could make in time.

“Would you use it again?”

“If he were about to cut his face and I had no better way. I can’t tell you there wasn’t one.”

They entered that. The account did not become cleaner when she admitted uncertainty. It became something Teren could correct if he chose to come.

At the weir, she had not had so little time. She said that too.

Ardel arrived on the second morning with Ferra, who had chosen to travel after the swelling eased. She walked with a stick and did not let Mali offer the chair she had fetched. The keeper brought the removed wafer in its crock, sealed and labelled. It was carried to a separate stone room rather than held up before the audience.

Ferra described her knee, the bowl, the stranger’s hand closing on her wrist. She did not say Mali had meant well. The hearing did not ask her to.

When it was over, Mali caught her outside.

“Thank you for coming.”

“I came for my account.”

“Yes.”

Ferra looked at her bandages. “Keep paying the treatment costs until I say they’re finished.”

“I will.”

“You may have to find work.”

“I know.”

The older woman nodded. It was the closest they came to reconciliation. Mali found it easier to bear than the forgiveness she had feared being offered too cheaply.

Vale appeared on the fifteenth under the city’s custody.

He could walk, slowly. The cut across his ribs had not entered the chest, but the injury and blood loss had weakened him. His right thumb was bandaged. The fingers shook even resting in his lap.

Enna sat in the audience beside Joss. Ned was not required to attend. An independent advocate had asked him what he wished entered and would read it only with his permission. Bela had brought Evin. The boy sat near the door, where he could leave without crossing the whole room.

Vale admitted using the needle treatment on people who had not agreed to it.

“Why?” Iven asked.

“Because they were distressed.”

“Had they asked to leave?”

“Some.”

“Then why not let them?”

His mouth moved. The familiar answer was there. Sleep first, calm first, recovery first. After all the first things, perhaps choice could be considered.

“Because I was afraid they’d lose what we’d recovered,” he said.

“Did that fear make it yours to decide?”

“No.”

The word did not prevent the woman behind Bela from crying. It did not restore the days her brother spent behind a closed door. Vale named the people who had genuinely improved under his instruction. The hearing entered those too. Enna spoke about her shoulder. Joss spoke about the first student who had slept a whole night without screaming.

Nobody had to disprove those mornings to establish what Vale did afterward.

He was removed from teaching. His custody continued pending judgement on the coercion, the attack on Iss and the demonstration. His continuing treatment would be supervised by people outside the houses involved. He would not lose care because he had caused harm. He would lose the authority to make care depend on obedience to him.

The next morning, the hearing returned to Deren’s first correction tables.

The school masters had expected questions about the warning policy. He had prepared answers, a clear sequence of who sent what and when. It showed delayed knowledge, misjudgement, regret. All of those were true, and Mali could see how carefully they had been arranged to begin as late as possible.

Iven opened a different letter.

“This was written before the first shared house trial.”

Deren looked at the red cord. “Yes.”

“You supplied an exercise described as restricted.”

“The footwork was.”

“By whom?”

“Red Eave.”

“Whose decision to release it?”

“Mine.”

The student who made the original complaint had arrived from the mountain late the night before. She sat behind Anet, wearing a plain brown coat and no school cord. Mali remembered seeing her in a first-year class but not her name until it was entered. Hara. She was the junior student from the examination, the one Deren made hold Anet’s unused blade.

Mali stared at her for a moment too long. Hara noticed and looked away. An earlier version of Mali would have taken that as accusation. It might have been tiredness. She had travelled two days on a cramped produce cart to answer a letter from the person who had dismissed the first account she sent him.

Deren explained why he offered the footwork. People were falling during recovery practice. Teachers who knew how to correct the movements were too few. Sel’s first comparisons had treated balance as a shared geometry, ignoring the way a familiar preparation made the body willing to move. Deren believed his school could supply that missing element.

“Was that wrong?” the ward representative asked.

“No,” he said. “Not in itself.”

“What followed?”

“A request to compare the next sequence.”

“And the next?”

“Yes.”

Mali watched his hand. It trembled against the table. He put the other over it, then deliberately separated them, leaving the damage visible instead of pinning it still for the audience.

“The first trial improved three people’s standing balance,” he said. “One could lift a cup without support. I took that as evidence of the principle.”

“Was it?”

“Some evidence. Not enough for what I built on it.”

Iven set the original letter beside a second, dated five weeks later. The second recommended daily completion and discouraged partial practice on the grounds that an unfinished sequence could reinforce uncertainty. Deren had underlined the instruction twice.

“Did Sel supply that phrase?”

“The archive supplied a comparison. I chose the wording.”

Hara had her hands inside the coat sleeves. Mali could not see whether they shook. She found herself waiting to know, as if the damage would establish how seriously the student ought to have been heard. She stopped looking.

“When did a student ask to stop?” Iven said.

Deren named the day.

“Before or after this recommendation?”

“Before.”

“Why did you make it stronger?”

He looked at the letter for a long time.

“Because the first objection made me afraid of the whole method being abandoned before it was understood.”

“You had not understood it.”

“No.”

Mali could hear the room receiving that answer too quickly, grateful for a confession clear enough to be applauded and put away. She raised her hand before she knew what she wanted to ask.

The magistrate nodded.

“When Hara wrote, did you think she might be right?”

Deren turned toward her.

“Not that the whole lesson was unsafe,” Mali said. “Only that her hand had moved when she meant to stop.”

“Yes.”

“Then why write that practice could precede understanding?”

“Because it can.”

“It can,” she agreed. “That wasn’t what she asked.”

He looked down. Mali had no clean feeling to put beside the question. She had used a true explanation to put Ferra outside her own account too. She was not asking from a place he could not reach.

“At first I thought the distinction would frighten her,” he said. “I intended to watch the next session myself.”

“Did you?”

“No. There was a delegation from the comparative project. They wanted a demonstration of the improved sequence.”

The room became very quiet.

He had not chosen harm instead of care in a single decisive moment. He had chosen the delegation instead of one student’s account, then used the success of the delegation to explain why the student’s account should not delay the next release. Each choice had made the following one easier to call necessary.

Hara put up her hand.

Mali sat back.

“I went to the lower instructor,” the student said. “He said if you had understood it that way, I should trust you. Then I wrote.”

“Did you receive the answer?” Iven asked.

“Yes.”

“What did you do?”

“Tried to practise better.”

No one moved to comfort her before she finished. Anet sat beside her, hands open on her own knees. Hara looked at the people hearing her and went on.

“It stopped happening when I stopped the lesson. Not straight away. I still wanted to finish it when someone else counted.”

“Did you tell him?”

“I thought the answer would be the same.”

Deren’s mouth moved. The magistrate raised a hand.

“You’ll have time. Let her finish.”

Hara had been charged two days of kitchen duty for missing instruction. The duty itself was ordinary; everyone worked in the kitchen. The penalty was entered against her standing in the class, and she had been made to explain to a junior why a disciplined student should not copy her refusal.

Mali closed her eyes. The junior girl in the examination had become a student required to teach another child the reason she ought not be believed. The memory she had carried for two years had not waited unchanged for her to return and understand it.

Hara asked for the penalty to be removed.

“Of course,” Deren said.

“And the instructor told why.”

“Yes.”

“Not that the arrangement made you mistaken.”

He looked at her.

“That you knew I might have meant what I said.”

His right hand shook harder. He kept it on the table.

“Yes.”

The correction would be posted in the student hall. Hara could approve the wording before it was read. The hearing would preserve her original letter beside the answer, not replace both with a clean summary saying a concern was eventually addressed. She asked for a copy to keep. The clerk made the first while the hearing paused for water.

Outside afterward, Mali found her in the little shade beside the accounts office.

“I remember you,” she said.

Hara looked at her bandages. “The examination.”

“Yes.”

“You never came back.”

“No.”

“I thought leaving would mean you knew somewhere better.”

Mali felt the old temptation to answer with the road house, a future floor, a place where no child’s refusal would become another child’s warning. It would be easy to turn a damaged roof into a promise because the roof was still too far away to contradict her.

“I didn’t,” she said. “I found work. Made mistakes.”

“Do you know now?”

“More questions to ask.”

Hara nodded, not satisfied and not pretending to be. She was entitled to want more from a woman she had once imagined walking away with a whole other world inside her bundle.

“Will you stay at Red Eave?” Mali asked.

“For now. Anet asked whether I wanted to help review the first-year lessons. I haven’t decided.”

“That sounds—”

Mali stopped before calling it good. Hara saw and almost smiled.

“It sounds like more work,” the student said.

“Yes.”

She folded the new copy of her old letter and put it inside her coat. Then she went to find Anet without asking Mali what choice would prove she had recovered.

Mali stayed in the shade long enough to breathe without making it an answer.

Deren offered to surrender Red Eave to the Assembly.

Anet stood so quickly her chair scraped across every other sound in the room.

“No.”

He turned toward her.

“You can’t give another school to the body that wouldn’t hear a warning until it stood inside the disaster.”

“The students need continuity.”

“Then ask us.”

The room waited. Mali watched him remember how many people were in it, then force himself to look at the woman rather than the audience.

“What do you propose?”

Anet had written it down. Three temporary stewards selected by the students and workers, terms short enough to be ended if the arrangement failed. One for teaching, one for food and lodging, one for complaints and outside review. No student required to continue the comparison forms. No teacher permitted to decide a complaint against themselves.

One proposed steward had never passed a formal examination.

Deren began to object. The first syllable reached the room. Then he stopped and asked to hear her qualifications.

Mali did not forgive him in the hearing.

She gave the account of Pell’s parcel and said why she believed the map had come from Deren. Pell, writing left-handed, confirmed he had copied it on the master’s direction and brought the wooden tip himself. Deren confirmed it. The map had helped. It had not been a public warning. Both facts entered the record beside his signature on the policy Caren used to burn the first letter.

By the end of the first week the inquiry had more pages than the programme for the exhibition.

That seemed right to Mali. The lesson had been designed to finish in one morning. Answering for it would take longer.

33. What Remains

Meret died on the eighteenth.

The lattice was broken, the new shared sequence severed, and the people tending her had three kinds of care available that they had lacked a fortnight before. None made her body strong enough to survive the damage it already carried.

Mali arrived in the sanctuary after the basin had been taken away. Virelia sat beside the empty cradle with a clean sheet across her knees. She had written Meret's name on the death record herself, slowly enough that every letter was legible.

"Was the tile out?" Mali asked.

"No."

"Would taking it have—"

"I don't know."

The girl looked at her with an exhaustion beyond tears. Mali sat on the floor beside the cradle. There was no useful comparison to make with the people who had survived.

"What do you need?" she asked.

"Her sister. They found an address yesterday. I need someone to go."

"I can arrange that."

"Not just send a note."

"Someone will go."

Virelia nodded and went on holding the sheet.

Osin died two days later, before the attendants believed his tile could be safely removed. He had been a quiet man with no family in the city. Mae had read market notices to him because he liked hearing prices even when he had no intention of buying. She wrote that in the account of his care. Sori asked whether it belonged in the inquiry's medical record.

"Somewhere," Mae said.

So it went into the personal account beside it, not as evidence of recovery or failure but as something true about a person whose life was becoming too easily described by the last thing a tile had done to him.

Nyra arrived the following morning with attendants and small altar-fragments.

There was no procession. Sena met them at the north gate and took them through the broad route the trolleys had used. The priestess’s fire was low, her companions moving close to her shoulders. Mali recognised the lights from paintings and could not have named them correctly without the little girl near the ward door pointing each one out.

Nyra knelt beside Virelia before entering the patient room.

The girl had been standing as straight as Deren at an examination. At the sight of the older woman’s face she folded, weeping so hard she seemed to have forgotten breathing could interrupt it. Nyra held her while Tovan kept the passage clear. Nobody called the tears purification. Nobody asked the patients to wait until the heroes had finished suffering.

The altar-fragments steadied some of the sleepers. Others woke frightened at the sight of fire. One woman covered her face and begged them to take it away. An attendant began explaining that it could not harm her.

Gorrath struck the bedframe with her slate.

The attendant stopped.

Nyra saw the woman. She asked for an adjoining room without altar light and helped carry the screen herself. The care that frightened some patients would remain available to others. It did not have to become an argument about which experience was correct.

Virelia stayed with the first woman until she could speak without pleading. She asked what she wanted to be called. The woman gave a shortened name no ward register had recorded. Virelia wrote it above the old entry.

Meret’s sister reached the city the day after Nyra.

Her name was Istran. She wore a travelling coat too warm for the courtyard and carried a packet of letters tied with a strip of green cloth. Mali met her outside the accounts room because the messenger had put the inquiry office, not the sanctuary, on the forwarding note.

“Where is she?” Istran asked.

The messenger had told her. Mali could see that in the way she was gripping the letters. The question still required an answer.

“Below the east ward. I can take you.”

“Are you the swordswoman?”

“Yes.”

“They said you stopped it.”

“The arrangement.”

“My sister was in it.”

Mali had no distinction clean enough to set against that. She helped carry the travelling bag and walked at the pace Istran chose. The woman moved quickly until they reached the sloping passage, then so slowly that a porter behind them turned aside rather than ask to pass.

Tovan met them at the wash table. She gave her name and said what had been done for Meret in the last hours. No public account of the shattered disc, no reassurance that everything possible had been tried before the woman had seen enough to ask what possible meant. She offered a chair outside the room where Meret's body lay.

Istran did not sit.

"Who closed the visits?"

Tovan drew breath. "Virelia gave the instruction. We carried it out."

"Were you there?"

"Yes."

"Did Meret ask for me?"

"Not in words I heard."

The care in the answer made Istran's face harden. "Did she have words to ask?"

Tovan did not look away.

"Not always."

The woman pressed her packet against her chest. Mali could see the shape of years in those folded letters: ordinary complaints, requests for money perhaps, news written before the sky broke and the roads became arguments between institutions. There was no way to know what had gone unread without opening the packet, and she had no right to want that detail merely because grief was hard to meet without it.

"May I see her?" Istran asked.

"Yes."

"Alone."

Tovan opened the door. They waited outside.

Virelia came from the patient room while it remained closed. She saw the travelling bag and stopped. Tovan told her who had arrived. The girl's hands moved toward the new root dish, then folded into the cloth at her waist.

Mali saw her wanting to reach beyond the door, to know whether Istran was crying, whether she could make the room feel gentler before being asked. She did not.

"I should have sent sooner," she said.

"Yes," Tovan answered.

No comfort offered as a reflex. The agreement left the girl standing in the fact of it without turning the fact into a command to keep suffering until the next task was impossible.

Virelia went to fetch water.

Istran stayed inside for a long time. When she returned, she had put the letters down somewhere Mali could not see. Her hands seemed abruptly empty.

“I want the records,” she said.

“Copies can be made,” Tovan told her.

“Not only the last day.”

“All we have.”

“I want to know what isn’t there.”

Mali looked at the register. A filled page could seem to account for a life because the blank parts were harder to point to. She brought a second sheet and wrote Missing from record across the top. Tovan began listing the visits refused without an individual entry, the hours the tiles had held everyone quiet, the family address found only after the evacuation. Each absence had been made by somebody occupied with another task. That did not make it vanish.

Istran watched the list grow.

“Was she in pain?”

Tovan told her when she had cried out, when she had seemed settled, which answers they could not distinguish from the quiet the lattice imposed. Virelia returned with the water during it. She put the cup where Istran could reach it and introduced herself.

“I know who you are,” the woman said.

Virelia nodded.

“People put your picture on the carts that brought us food.”

“I didn’t know.”

“Does it matter whether you knew?”

“No.”

Mali felt the room waiting for an apology. The girl gave one, directly, not the declaration of a guardian to a world but a person telling another person what she had done. She had held Meret quiet, stopped visits and trusted the absence of screaming more than the uncertainty of a voice. She had accepted other people saying the methods were sound when they made the thing she wanted seem possible.

“I wanted her to rest,” she said at the end.

Istran looked at the cup. “I wanted to sit beside her.”

Virelia began crying. She did not ask to be forgiven for the tears. Tovan moved a stool near enough for her to sit without falling and stayed by the records.

Istran drank half the water. Then she asked whether the body could go home.

Mali had been preparing to carry the conversation if it broke. Instead it had become roads, a cart, the right cloth and someone who would know the family plot. The sorrow remained. The work beside it had a size she could understand.

She fetched Hesh.

Hesh looked at the route, asked whether the family could meet a wagon at the lower bridge and said the first mile could be done before the heat if they left at dawn. She named the cost of the cart and the people to accompany it. She would do her own part without payment, she said, but would not promise the wheels, the animal and the driver’s day on someone else’s behalf.

Istran counted money. It was not enough. The ward fund covered the remainder after Tovan entered the purpose, and Istran signed to show she had chosen the journey. Nothing was hidden under the word charity. Nothing demanded a statement of gratitude for being allowed to take her sister home.

Mali helped prepare the travelling papers. Her hand tired halfway through. Istran took the pen and finished the address herself.

“Will you write in the inquiry that you couldn’t save her?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“And what happened before you came.”

“Yes.”

The woman folded the copy into her coat. She looked at Virelia, who sat with both feet flat on the floor, keeping her hands away from the roots.

“I don’t want you there tomorrow,” she said.

The girl’s face changed. For an instant Mali thought she would explain that she needed to be present, that the death was part of what she had to answer for. Instead she nodded.

“I won’t come.”

After Istran went to the lodging room, Virelia remained on the stool.

“I wanted to ask if she would let me,” she said.

“I know,” Mali answered.

“It wasn’t only for me.”

“No.”

The girl looked at her. “But some.”

“Some.”

Outside the sanctuary, Nyra was talking quietly to Den about the patients who feared fire. She did not come in to gather the grief into a doctrine. Tovan asked Virelia to help change a blanket beside the bed where the shortened name had been written. The girl got up and asked the patient whether she was ready before touching the linen.

The next morning, Meret left the city in a plain cart.

Hesh walked the first mile beside it and returned with the receipt for the lower-road driver. Mali did not go. She stayed with the missing-record sheet until each empty place they could identify had been copied. Then she put the original beside Meret's name, where later readers would have to see the things the ward had failed to write down.

Boon arrived with a tool chest rather than a cure.

He inspected the twelve local junctions, dismantled the broken fittings and labelled every piece before it went into storage. The new arrangement had failed, but the shards had not, and he would not have people carrying a wafer home as a harmless souvenir because someone said the city was saved.

Mali helped with the labels. She could not lift the heavier crates without hurting her side. Boon told her the crate did not need her pride and asked a porter instead.

His report included Sel's distribution history, Deren's corrections and his own early recommendations for standard deployment. He had wanted a common system because a common system made measurements comparable and repairs manageable. The reserve had not invented that reason. It had used the unexamined authority with which good reasons travelled.

"Will you stop using standard parts?" Mali asked.

"No."

"Then what changes?"

"Who can question the fitting. Who sees the test. Whether a ward can keep its call line if it refuses the new lesson. And whether I publish the failure before asking anyone to trust the next version."

It sounded more tedious than a breakthrough. She was beginning to suspect much of the work that remained would.

Sel came north in an ordinary hired cart.

The Codex lay in a satchel under their seat. The five Starborne lights travelled with them, dimmer in daylight than Mali remembered. She met them at the gate and helped carry the small box of rescued sheets. It was light enough for one hand.

That was the worst part.

Sel watched her realise it.

"That's all?"

"What they could copy while I was still willing to wait."

"You saved the city."

"Yes."

They did not add but. Mali was glad. There had to be room for the fact that a necessary choice had destroyed something that could not be replaced.

In the room above the kitchen, Sel opened the box. Eda had sorted the fragments by who copied them, not by presumed value. One held a name list. One a map. One was an ordinary table of stores Sel could identify only because they had studied that language months before. Another might have been a poem or a machine instruction. They would not decide which by wanting it to be more human.

“What was the name you nearly read?” Mali asked.

Sel looked up.

“You wrote about it in the witness account.”

“I don’t know how to say it.”

“Could you write it?”

They tried. The first marks came readily. The next did not. A relationship had existed through the page angle, an inflection the crystal made visible by changing the light. Ordinary ink could approximate a shape, not restore the whole way it had been read.

Sel put down the pen.

Mali sat beside them without telling them the approximation was enough.

Sel set the closed Codex on the table while they wrapped the copied sheets. Mali touched the opaque cover; five small lights rested around it, and no crystalline passage opened beneath her fingers.

In the satchel the Codex made no sound. Its opaque cover was warm from the journey, not alive with turning pages. Warden settled on it. Quill drifted toward Pell’s account on the adjacent table and left a fleck of light beside a misspelt word.

“Wait,” Pell said from the bed.

The light waited.

He corrected it himself, left-handed. Nobody offered to make the page prettier.

Oren came north after Eda could spare him from the observatory repairs.

He brought the whistle and a boy who had already decided it was useless. The child’s name was Jen. He had been living with his mother near the boundary farms and had spent the journey asking why a cup handle should need so much work to become something less useful than a cup.

“Because your grandfather likes difficult projects,” Sel said.

“That’s what Mother said.”

Oren looked offended in a way that made Sel laugh before they remembered to be careful with laughter near the closed Codex. The remembrance exhausted them. Jen was inspecting Pell’s slate and had no interest in the satchel beneath the chair.

“Can you draw a mule?” he asked.

“Badly,” Pell said.

“That’s all right. They look bad anyway.”

Oren set his small travelling bag on the floor. He had been afraid to leave the observatory while the new repairs went on. Then Jen’s mother asked whether the things still to be mended would matter less if he waited another month to visit. He had found no good way to say yes.

Sel thought of the water buckets on the morning the wire broke. The work that made a vigil possible and the people a vigil could quietly replace. They invited him to sit and asked whether he had seen his grandson’s house before the journey.

“Three rooms. Roof doesn’t leak. He makes enough noise for six.”

“Did you finish the whistle?”

“Not well.”

He took the handle from beneath his shirt. The blue glaze was worn where his thumb moved over it. A small wooden plug closed one end; he had bored the opening at the wrong angle and filled it, then tried again. The resulting note was thin, harsh and much louder than it had any reason to be.

Jen took it away from him immediately.

“Not here,” Oren said.

The boy looked at the instrument, at the windows, then at the adults trying not to look anxious about a noise. He put it to his mouth and blew once, very softly. Nothing happened.

He inspected the opening.

“It’s stuck.”

“That’s because you’re—” Oren stopped. “Try another way.”

Jen did. The note cut through the room. Pell dropped his charcoal. A porter at the door said something unkind about the quality of modern music. The boy beamed.

Oren watched him as though surprise could continue occupying an old face if given somewhere ordinary to stay.

Later, when Jen went downstairs with a kitchen attendant to look for the mule Pell had drawn, Oren stayed beside the copied sheets. Sel had not shown him what had been preserved in any deliberate order. The room had been too full of people needing forms, receipts, an answer to a question they could only partly read.

He picked up one page.

“Do you know what that says?”

“Yes.”

“Will you tell me?”

Sel began with the script, its direction, the way a mark changed depending on what stood beside it. Oren listened for a little while, then set the paper down.

“Not how to read it. What it says.”

They looked at the page again.

It was a distribution record from a city Sel had found months before the Convergence. A flood had damaged one district. Grain was to be carried from three storehouses before the road closed. The names of stewards appeared beside quantities and places. One entry had been struck through and restored in a different hand. Sel had preserved it in notes because the disagreement might reveal something about the city's form of governance. Tam had copied it because it was the first stable page she saw while the margin opened.

Oren heard the account and nodded.

"Someone tried to get food somewhere."

"Yes."

"Did they?"

"The record doesn't say."

"Then that's what we have."

Sel's throat tightened. They had wanted him to find it precious, and also wanted him to say it was so little that the guilt could be put down. Either answer would have been easier than a lamp-keeper accepting the fragment without pretending it could stand for a whole world.

"There were better things," Sel said.

"Bigger things?"

"Some."

"Would you have had time to choose?"

"I could have begun copying months ago."

Oren put the page flat beneath the boards. "Yes."

The agreement did not condemn them. It also did not offer a way out. Sel looked at the closed satchel and felt again the old pressure to make the dangerous thing useful enough to justify having wanted it.

"I keep thinking there may be a seam," they said. "Some place that didn't fuse. Warden could look. Nova might open a part without reaching the new margin."

Oren looked at the five lights. Initiate hovered beneath the window. Transcriber had settled over a copy whose meaning remained uncertain. Quill stood near the place Pell left his misspelt word, waiting to be asked. They were not five small pieces of equipment awaiting the next safe procedure.

"What would you ask them to risk?"

Sel did not answer.

"And would you tell the people below before you tried?"

"Yes."

Oren waited.

Sel shut their eyes. The yes had been for the person they wanted to be in the next account. In the actual room they had imagined finding an opening quietly, proving it harmless, then presenting a recovered history without making anyone bear the terror of the attempt. They had imagined the old decision again and called it care for other people’s sleep.

“I don’t know,” they said.

Oren nodded. “Then that’s what you tell them first.”

They wrote it in the witness account that afternoon. Not a promise to abandon knowledge, nor an apology large enough to forbid anyone else ever opening an archive. A precise statement of an impulse still present in the person asked to guard the closed book. Sel wanted access. The wanting might make a new danger seem like the final necessary exception. No future test would be conducted without people independent of their need to succeed.

Pell read the sentence aloud, stumbled over independent and told Sel it was too long.

They shortened it.

Oren asked for a copy to take home. Eda should not have to learn the decision from a rumour when she had stood in the room where it was made. Sel made the copy themselves, on plain paper, without any light helping the pen.

Jen came back smelling of stable straw. He had not found a mule. He had found three chickens and a cat that refused to be introduced. He wanted to know whether the whistle would frighten them.

“It might,” Oren said.

“Can I try?”

“No.”

The boy considered the refusal. “Can I try where they aren’t?”

“Yes.”

They went to the empty upper court. Sel heard one short, ugly note, then another changed by the way Jen held his mouth. The sounds had no lesson to carry beyond a boy learning that breath and pottery could make something unexpectedly loud.

Sel returned to the copied grain record. They entered the known meanings beside each symbol and marked the two they could no longer recover. The empty places remained visible when the page was done.

Ember’s burns had begun closing badly.

He could hold a hammer, but the grip failed after a few minutes. His own fire rose too easily near pain, tightening the new skin. A healer suggested work that could be interrupted without ruining a piece of iron. Hesh took him to the kitchen.

The cook gave him potatoes.

He stared at them.

“They’ve got skin too,” she said. “Be gentle with somebody else’s.”

His first peeled potato was half its former size. The cook objected. He said she had not specified the thickness. The argument lasted long enough for Mali, washing cups, to hear Hesh laugh outside the door.

That evening an Orc child began a Shardhowl verse in the kitchen yard. She lost the tune halfway through and started again too high. Ember stayed in his chair. He did not join her. When she asked where the breath belonged, he told her where his father used to take it.

The correction was small enough to be accepted or refused. She tried it once, decided it did not fit her voice and tried another place.

Ember listened to that too.

Gorrath watched from the doorway with a slate on her lap. Her application against the false licence had been admitted after the collapse of the committee’s teaching authority. Hesh had found two independent witnesses at last: a former chanter from the high passes and the clerk who had handled the original lodging payment. The Open Palm notices came down before the final ruling. Nobody gave back all the money already spent beneath them.

The house offered a settlement naming the programme a misunderstanding of ceremonial rights.

Gorrath crossed out ceremonial and wrote teaching permission.

Hesh carried the correction back. She had stopped asking her mother whether she wanted to expend strength on the dispute. Instead she asked how much strength she wanted to spend that day and planned the rest of the work around the answer.

On the twenty-fourth, they went together to hear the corrected notice read aloud.

Mali had agreed to witness the final signature. She finished the labels before the appointed hour.

34. The Name on the Notice

The corrected notice was three sentences long, and the house wanted Gorrath to sign beneath all of them.

The first admitted that the advertised Shardbreak work had not been personally performed by the chanter. The second regretted any impression that a safe common exercise conferred her singular abilities. The third accepted no responsibility for independent interpretations of ceremonial permission.

Hesh read the last sentence aloud.

Gorrath looked at the pen as if someone had offered her a snake.

Mali sat beside the public accounts clerk, holding the papers she had agreed to witness. Hesh had asked her there for the signature she could recognise, not for a sword or a speech. It had taken her most of the morning to remember the limit of that invitation.

The Open Palm representative folded his hands.

“A negotiated correction avoids prolonged distress.”

“Whose?” Hesh asked.

“Everyone’s. Mistress Ironlung has been through a great deal.”

Gorrath struck the slate against the table once. The sound was not loud enough to interrupt a room that did not want to hear it. This room wanted the settlement signed, so it stopped.

She wrote TEACHING PERMISSION beneath the word ceremonial and pushed the draft back.

The representative sighed. “The distinction is implicit.”

“Then put it in,” Hesh said.

The public clerk took the draft, drew a clean line through the phrase and read the correction back. It was the same clerk who had handled the original payment for Gorrath’s lodging, and she had brought that receipt with her. Beside her sat the second witness, an old chanter from the high passes who had heard the attempted recording and stopped it when Gorrath could not finish the first phrase.

The house’s original account described that attempt as a successful transmission of preliminary method.

“Did she teach you?” the clerk asked him.

“She asked me to hold the drum.”

“Did she demonstrate a lesson?”

“No.”

“Did she give permission for one to be derived from the recording?”

“No.”

The representative shifted. “No complete recording survives. We cannot establish every word exchanged.”

The old chanter looked at him. “I was there.”

“You are a friend.”

“Yes.”

The answer lay on the table without apology. The clerk entered the relationship, then asked him to continue. Knowing someone did not remove the usefulness of hearing what they saw. It required the connection to be named so the account could be judged with it present.

Hesh had been paid. That too remained in the record. The lodging and the chair had been real, needed and accepted. The receipt did not become less true because the house used it to imply a permission it never purchased.

“Will you return the payment?” the representative asked.

Hesh put the old account book in front of him.

“Will you return the two weeks of care?”

“That is not a comparable demand.”

“Then stop comparing them.”

Mali looked at the page she had been asked to witness. A line had been reserved for her beneath two others. Not a place where she could settle the dispute by declaring whose grief she trusted. She would attest that she had seen Gorrath read the correction and make her mark after the words were agreed. If they were not agreed, there would be no mark for her to witness.

The representative turned to her.

“You understand the difficulty of establishing retrospective intent.”

“I understand what I’m here to witness,” she said.

He looked disappointed. She was glad to have given him so little he could use.

They worked through the second sentence next. Singular abilities became the Shardbreak. Derived work became a house exercise drawing on comparative tables. The claim that the chanter had endorsed its safe use was removed rather than softened. Refund requests would be accepted from families who had paid specifically for the advertised Ironlung instruction. The house would retain the right to dispute amounts

in each case, which Hesh hated and the clerk refused to pretend the hearing could prevent.

When the draft was finally read aloud, Gorrath asked for the old blue notice.

Hesh took one from the pack. It had travelled across Reed Cut, through the rain at the weir, into a city whose gatekeepers preferred it to the living person it described. The paper was worn along the fold. The false portrait still looked serenely young.

The old chanter watched Gorrath examine it.

“You should have seen the one they made of me,” he said.

Gorrath lifted an eyebrow.

“Three more teeth.”

She made a small sound that became a cough. Hesh moved the water close and waited. Her hands stayed on her own knees until her mother reached for the cup. The pause had become possible through a month of doing it badly, not through a promise never to interfere.

When the cough eased, Gorrath put the blue paper beside the draft and pointed to the artist’s smooth throat.

“Don’t change the picture,” the representative said quickly. “The printing plates—”

She looked at him until he stopped.

On her slate she wrote NO PORTRAIT ON THE CORRECTION.

The public clerk smiled without making it a joke. “That is easy enough.”

Gorrath signed.

Mali witnessed the mark only after the clerk read every amended line. Hesh signed as household representative. The old chanter signed the account of the recording. The house representative signed last, his neat name smaller than the elaborate title beneath it.

When they rose, he offered Gorrath a private room for the remainder of her stay.

Hesh looked at her mother. Gorrath shook her head.

No argument. No accusation. They had somewhere they had chosen to sleep, and the offer did not need to become another debt to decline loudly enough for everyone in the corridor to understand.

Outside, the corrected notice was carried to a posting board by two apprentices.

Hesh waited until it was fixed. Then she read it from the beginning, following each line with a finger. Gorrath sat in the wicker chair beneath a plain awning, looking not at the words but at people passing. Two stopped to read. One asked Hesh how to apply for a refund. Another said she had thought everyone knew the claims were exaggerated.

“Not everyone,” Hesh said.

The woman shrugged and went on. The correction would not force her to remember what she once believed. That was another thing it could not do.

Mali felt the old wish to make the public account complete. Somebody should tell her what exaggeration had cost. Somebody should keep her there until she listened. Then she saw Hesh taking down the first family’s name for the refund route, using the energy where a next action still existed.

She stayed beside the chair instead.

Gorrath handed her the slate.

TAKE US TO WATER.

They found a quiet washing court with a low trough and benches in the shade. Hesh bought broth from a stall. Mali filled the cup. The old chanter came with them as far as the fountain, then went to find the people who had lent him travel money. His road did not lead in the same direction as theirs.

Gorrath put the corrected draft on her lap.

“Enough?” Hesh asked.

The elder considered. She shook her head, then nodded.

“For today?”

A firm nod.

Hesh leaned against the bench and shut her eyes. A cart rattled past the court entrance. From habit she listened to the loading ropes, judging whether the timber was tied well enough. Mali saw her attention go toward the road even with her mother beside her.

“You’ll take the work,” she said.

“Yes.”

“When?”

“First fair crossing after the next rain. Two loads from the hill store. They’ll pay half at collection.”

“What about—”

She stopped before making the rest of Hesh’s life a condition of the work she wanted.

Hesh looked at her. “Mother can come. Or stay with people she likes. I’ve asked Tovan about two weeks if the road’s bad.”

Gorrath had heard. She wrote on the slate, took a moment to steady her hand and turned it toward them.

I LIKE THE ROAD.

“I know,” Hesh said. “That’s why I have a mule and not a quiet room in a respectable house.”

Gorrath touched the newly signed paper, then pointed at her daughter’s freight book.

“Your name on yours,” Hesh interpreted.

A nod.

“Mine on mine.”

Another nod.

They sat with that until the broth arrived.

Mali returned to the kitchen room to find Sel sorting the rescued fragments with Pell. The corrected licence draft belonged in the inquiry files; she put it beside the custody list. On the table, a copied city plan from the Codex lay beneath a sheet of thin tracing paper. Pell was trying to reproduce a curved mark one-handed.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“Making the first copy of something we can lose,” he said.

Sel did not look up. “Before we decide where the original should stay.”

“Here?”

“That’s one proposal.”

“Yours?”

“No.”

They set down their pen. A letter from the highland scholars lay open beside the fragments. It offered a secure repository, controlled access and a committee of qualified interpreters. Sel had spent much of their life wanting such care taken with the archive. Now the offer made it easy to imagine a few scholars knowing more and telling less because the next premature disclosure might cause a catastrophe.

“The papers could be damaged anywhere,” Sel said. “Shared copies could be misread. Some of the language may contain instructions we don’t recognise.”

“So you keep it closed?”

“That would be one danger in place of another.”

Pell completed the curved mark and turned the copy so Sel could check it. Sel circled a difference without erasing it. He would need to know what his hand tended to change.

“How many keepers?” Mali asked.

“I don’t know. More than one. Not so many that nobody remembers who has a sheet. The copies labelled as copies, uncertainty kept with them.”

She looked at the small box. “That sounds as if it could fail.”

“Yes.”

“Doesn’t everything?” Pell said.

Sel smiled faintly. “Some arrangements fail more honestly.”

They drafted a reply. Not refusal of the repository. Conditions: independent copies before transport, a public catalogue of what was held, decisions about access recorded

with reasons, room for affected people outside the scholarly orders to question the work. It was slower than mailing the box to someone who promised safety. It also left Sel somewhere to stand without pretending the press had absolved them of what they distributed.

Mali helped wrap the first copied sheets between boards. She had imagined relics preserved in light, protected by guardians who understood every mark. Here preservation smelled of paste and involved arguing about damp.

Pell’s left hand cramped. He put down the pen.

Sel almost reached to finish the last line, then asked whether he wanted them to.

“Tomorrow,” he said. “It can stay unfinished until tomorrow.”

The line remained blank.

35. A Performance without a Count

The Assembly dissolved its central teaching authority on the twenty-seventh.

It did not dissolve the houses. People still needed rooms, food, instruction and somewhere to bring a body that would not do what its owner asked. The new agreement could not simply send them back to the road in celebration of independence. It kept the kitchens funded, separated care from performance attendance and placed the shared announcements under a committee that could not also prescribe the lessons carried by them.

Mali read the agreement twice and understood perhaps half the clauses.

“Is it better?” she asked Sori.

“Yes.”

“Will it work?”

“Ask the first person who has to use the complaint route.”

Outside each practice room, attendants posted the short rule the long agreement had been built to support: anyone could end a lesson, and anyone who did must be heard before it resumed. Beneath it lay the names of people outside that room who would receive a refusal the teacher would not enter.

A rule could be ignored. Mali knew that. Someone would call a person confused, someone would say a little discomfort was necessary, someone would suggest that a complaint wait until after the important day. The paper made none of those choices impossible. It made it harder to pretend nobody had agreed they mattered.

Rin read it while waiting for a carpenter to value the amplifier case.

“Don’t sell it,” Mali said.

“Do you want to pay the debt?”

“No.”

“Then help me carry the cover.”

The case and two speakers would cover part of the advance. The quartet disputed the rest through the contract process Sori had insisted remain available to people without a teaching house behind them. It would take months, perhaps longer. The cancelled

show had not become free because people now approved of the reason for cancelling it.

Rin kept the recording components. She had wanted a desk of her own, something that would let their next arrangements belong to them from first rehearsal to last performance. Now the components lived in two borrowed boxes. She was angry about it and did not need anyone to tell her the anger was inconsistent with helping the patients.

Mae had accepted work reading correspondence in the ward for two afternoons a week until the next tour. Another performer would take over when she left. She interviewed three people, chose the one who waited longest for a patient to finish speaking and made no promise that returning would always be possible.

“I’ll come when I say I will,” she told Leth. “I’ll tell you when I can’t.”

He considered it. “Bring the other one first. I might not like him.”

“That’s why I’m bringing him.”

Sena took the ward plan to the carpenters’ guild. She wanted to be paid for tracing the service routes and redesigning the closures. The first assessor called it volunteer work. She showed him the manual lift whose plate had been buried beneath plaster and asked what he would charge for finding it with eleven people on the other side.

He offered a small survey fee.

She negotiated it upward, then came back to tell the others she could cover the next month’s storage herself.

Sori wrote their next contract with cancellation, access and equipment ownership stated before the fee. The promoter complained that no other quartet asked so many questions. She said he might find the others easier to hire.

Mali watched all this from the kitchen bench, where she was mending an attendant’s torn coat for a little money. Ferra’s treatment costs went into a separate purse. The road house letter had been answered at last. The old school was rented to a family now; its floor was being used to dry beans. The owner apologised for not writing sooner.

Mali found she could be sad without being wronged.

Anet brought another letter the following day.

“There is a house across from the ferry,” she said. “Not the school. The owners need the roof repaired. Travellers used to sleep there before the last tenant left.”

“You want me to mend roofs?”

“I’ve seen you do it.”

“I’ve seen me do it too. That’s a reason to hesitate.”

Anet smiled. They were not what they had been before the examination. Some of that was loss. Some was the relief of knowing neither would have to become twenty-two again to speak to the other.

“The owners will trade a room for work. Hesh asked about the yard. She needs somewhere to keep loads dry beside the river.”

“Does she?”

“She asked them herself. You may do the same.”

Mali took the letter. This time the paper described a roof she could reach in less than a day’s walk from the crossing, not a life she could postpone on the far side of three more paid journeys.

The better offer arrived while they were arguing over the west court’s benches.

A promoter from the river towns had space on a larger circuit. Six performances, reliable transport, a guaranteed fee sufficient to clear most of the equipment debt if the disputed advance did not grow. He sent a carriage to the rooming house and waited inside it rather than climb the stair.

Sori went down. Rin followed with the debt book. Mae stayed long enough to help carry a chair for Gorrath, then joined them. Sena came last, hands still dusty from the survey.

Mali saw the meeting from the kitchen window. The promoter was a small, cheerful man in a blue coat, speaking so quickly that every pause seemed an opportunity he feared someone else might take. He greeted the quartet by name. He knew which songs audiences called for and which towns would pay more to hear them. Whatever else he wanted, he had listened to their work.

They brought him upstairs because it was difficult for four women to inspect a contract through one carriage window.

“I can come back,” Mali said.

“Stay,” Sori told her. “If you’re quiet.”

She sat by the wall with her sewing. The permission was narrow enough to be accepted without becoming another role in the quartet’s decision.

The contract was better than the last in several ways. Separate equipment schedule. Payment at each town. A right to cancel for illness. The promoter had even written in a delay allowance for the roads, saying everyone who travelled since the Convergence had learned not to make a week’s food depend on the punctuality of a ferry.

Rin read that twice.

“What is this?” she asked at the end.

“A publicity agreement.”

“For whom?”

“For you, principally.”

He smiled. His hands were small and well kept. He turned the page as if showing them a gift they were being too cautious to enjoy.

VESPER: the harmony that broke the arrangement.

Under it lay proposed copy about four voices defying an alien intelligence before a captive audience, an original healing composition, the power of song restoring a city’s choice. Sena read to the end without moving her mouth.

Then she put the page flat on the table.

“No.”

The promoter waited. He had negotiated with performers before; an objection might be the beginning of a higher fee.

“Which part?”

“The claim.”

“All publicity simplifies.”

“That isn’t simpler,” Rin said. “It’s different.”

“A song can stand for more than the song.”

“We cut a track,” she said. “Then moved patients. We didn’t sing a better one into the tubes.”

He spread his hands. “I don’t mean to minimise the practical work.”

“You removed it,” Mae said.

Sori held the proposed contract beside the copy. “Does payment depend on approving this?”

“Consistent public presentation is important. Audiences want a reason to leave their houses.”

“They want music,” Rin said.

“Some. Others want a story they can tell when they get home.”

Mali kept sewing. The sleeve seam was crooked where she had joined it left-handed. She heard her own life being offered back in public language: she had seen what the signal could do, trusted strangers, stopped a hand. Each of those could be polished until the listener no longer needed to know who else had been there.

The promoter was not threatening anyone. He was offering wages, roads, stages, the chance for a band to become more than a poster glued beside a service door. Refusing him would not be costless merely because his sentence was wrong.

Sena went to the window. Mae read the transport clause. Sori put a clean sheet beside the publicity page.

“What if we write the account?” she asked.

He looked relieved. “Of course. I hoped for your input.”

They began with the cancellation. They had declined the revised arrangement after finding evidence of unsafe fittings. The performance stopped. The west service door opened. Attendants, patients, students, porters and families moved people into clear routes. The quartet had specific jobs. No single voice cured anyone.

The promoter read their version.

“This doesn’t name a triumph.”

“It names work,” Sena said.

“People know work.”

“Then they may recognise it.”

He put down the page. For the first time his good humour gave way to an irritation that made him seem less practised and more like a man whose own travel advance had been wasted.

“I’m offering a future. Not asking you to repeat the demonstration.”

“You’re asking us to sell the part that made it dangerous,” Rin said. “Relief that sounds more complete than it was.”

The room fell quiet.

Sori looked at her, then at the debt book. “We need time.”

The promoter gave them until morning. He left the contract and took the proposed publicity, saying he would speak with his printer. The carriage went away slowly through a lane still full of repair trolleys.

For a while nobody said anything.

Then Rin sat on the floor and pressed both palms against her eyes.

“I wanted it,” she said.

“Me too,” Mae answered.

“All six towns. A proper desk. No carrying a box through mud and hoping someone knows the man who borrowed the other box.”

Sena sat beside her. “We could take the transport part.”

“He’ll attach the rest again.”

“Then we read it again.”

Sori looked at the clean sheet. “We don’t have to decide that everyone who offers money is asking to buy the wrong thing.”

Mali kept her eyes on the sleeve. She wanted to say something about how they had saved people, how much the city owed them, how another way would be found. None of it would put money in the debt book.

Sori noticed her silence.

“What?”

“You asked me to be quiet.”

“I changed the request.”

Mali set down the needle.

“Would you want the west court if no one called it a victory?”

Mae nodded first. Sena next. Rin waited, looked at the unclosed equipment case, then said yes. Sori wrote the answer at the top of the sheet so it would not be lost when the negotiations became larger than the thing they meant to do.

They would perform once in the city before taking a road. No healing claim. No shared breathing exercise to close the evening. Just the songs, with room for people to enter and leave. That choice did not settle the river contract. It gave them an answer they had reached without a printer deciding which part of the day they had survived should become their future.

In the morning the promoter sent revised terms.

The false triumph had gone. In its place stood a phrase vague enough to be attractive: VESPER, live after the Assembly. Sori wrote no endorsement of medical or recovery methods into the performance conditions. He accepted it, then reduced the guarantee. The transport still held.

They argued again.

Rin wanted the larger fee restored. Mae wanted the illness clause extended to cover an attendant they might need to bring. Sena wanted their equipment lifted by workers who understood its weight, not packed on top of the luggage because it was smallest. Sori sent back three changes and a proposed date that allowed Mae to introduce her replacement at the ward.

The reply would come after the west-court performance.

Mali finished the sleeve and asked the owner to inspect the seam before paying. He put his arm through it, lifted his hand and said it would hold. She took the coins and put them in the treatment purse.

At the table, the quartet were making a list of songs. They disagreed about the first one, changed the order twice and stopped when the cook called for someone to carry water.

The argument could wait. Nobody had to complete it for the room to remain theirs.

The postponed VESPER performance took place in the west court at dusk on the twenty-ninth.

No cue track. The desk remained boxed. A borrowed drum and a small string instrument stood beside the cleared floor. Rin argued with Sena about where the lanterns should be hung. Mae came late because she had lost one crescent clasp and refused to go on with the other three making her look disorganised on purpose. Sori said that explanation was more disorganised than the missing clasp.

When they finally began, a child near the front asked loudly whether it was the right song.

Mae laughed halfway through the entrance. Sori laughed with her and missed the first note.

It was not a ceremony designed to prove irregularity safe. It was four performers recovering an evening they had chosen to share. Some of the audience sang. Some talked. A woman left before the second song because she was tired, and nobody followed to ask whether she understood what leaving meant.

Gorrath slept through two songs and woke for the applause. Hesh brought her water, then went back to the people from the freight yard who were arguing about winter routes. Her mother watched her go and did not summon her back.

Ember sat near the kitchen door. He could clap without closing his hands hard enough to hurt. He did so quietly and left his hammer under the chair.

Virelia listened from beside Tovan, barefoot beneath the bench. She had spent half the afternoon in the sanctuary and the other half walking outside it without reaching for every root beneath the street. Den stayed below with the night attendants. The patients were not waiting for one girl’s return to make breathing possible.

Bela and Evin sat near the exit. The boy leaned against her shoulder, awake through the first song, asleep during the third. No one moved him into a better posture for the sake of the view.

Mali stood at the back with her sword.

Pell had found it after the shutter was lifted for repairs. The blade lay under the lower stair, the guard bent but not beyond straightening. The scabbard stood where she had left it, its scar bright against the dark wood. Pell had arranged the return through a porter rather than trying to carry it in his injured hand. The swordsmith charged for the work. Mali paid in two instalments and did not ask him to consider the circumstances a reason to work free.

The hilt felt familiar against her hip. That comfort did not embarrass her. She had not needed to stop valuing a sword to learn when she could leave it.

After the court emptied, Deren approached.

He had waited until Anet went to help gather benches. Mali noticed that and wondered whether it was kindness or a familiar preference for saying difficult things without witnesses. This time she could ask.

“Do you want her here?” she said.

He looked toward the benches. “You may.”

“That wasn’t the question.”

He stood with the right hand half inside his sleeve. Slowly he drew it out.

“I wanted to speak without having every word become a public account.”

Mali considered it. “Then don’t ask me to promise silence before I know the words.”

He nodded. In his left palm lay the Red Eave teaching seal.

“You could reopen the road school,” he said.

She looked at it. Plain brass, worn smooth where generations of teachers had held it against hot wax. For years she had wanted him to put it in her hand. She had

rehearsed the weight, the moment, the proof that leaving had not meant she was unworthy of what she knew.

“The old house has tenants,” she said.

“There are others.”

“Yes.”

“The students would listen to you.”

“Some.”

He looked down at the seal. The gesture was painfully close to disappointment. She had spent so much of her life trying to prevent that expression from finding her.

“I don’t want it yet,” she said.

He breathed out.

“Because of me?”

“Some.”

He almost smiled at the repetition, then understood it was not a joke.

Mali watched a lantern go out above the emptied stage.

“I still want people to listen because you taught me. I don’t know how much of wanting to teach is wanting you to say I should.”

“You have a gift.”

“Let me decide what work to make of it.”

He closed his fingers around the seal. Then, deliberately and without ceremony, he opened them again.

“All right.”

It was not an end to the inquiry, to the students’ complaints or to the years they had both made smaller by refusing to name them. It was an answer to the request she had made just then.

Mali accepted it at that size.

36. A Door Left Open



Vale asked for her on the thirtieth.

She went because the choice was hers and she wanted to know whether that remained true when she entered the room. The custody house stood beyond the teaching courts, close enough to the infirmary for his dressing to be changed without a guarded march through the market. The door had a window. An attendant told Mali she could leave whenever she wished.

Vale sat beside a table with no lesson sheet on it.

His hand shook against his knee. There was a cup within reach, filled only halfway. Someone had put a folded cloth beneath it so a spill would not run immediately over the edge.

“Does it stop?” he asked.

“The shaking?”

He nodded.

“I don’t know.”

He looked at the cup, then at her bandaged palm.

“They’ve offered something different. A slower exercise. One person with me. It helps some days.”

“Good.”

“Not every day.”

“No.”

He seemed to be waiting for advice. Mali had brought none. She had considered taking fruit or a book, but the first might become an unwanted debt and the second an absurd answer to what a page had done to them. So she had come with empty hands and no lesson she needed him to accept.

“Joss won’t teach for now,” he said.

“I heard.”

“He thinks he should have known.”

“He knew something was wrong and told you.”

Vale shut his eyes.

There was cruelty available in the silence. Mali could have pressed until he supplied the admission she wanted. She had given the inquiry his words from the lane. His own testimony had gone farther. The people harmed had more to ask than she could fit into this visit, and she did not have to use their pain to complete an exchange between herself and him.

“Ned kept the chair,” she said.

He opened his eyes.

“The rung held,” she added.

Vale nodded. His face changed in a way she did not try to name for him.

When she rose, he did not ask her to come again. She was grateful for that and did not mistake the gratitude for forgiveness.

She left the city two days later.

Not everything was settled. The inquiry continued. Red Eave’s temporary stewards had begun arguing among themselves, which Anet described without despair. The Open Palm licence had been withdrawn in its false form, but the house still owed money it disputed. Sori had hearings to attend about the contract. Rin had parts to reclaim. Sena had a survey to finish and Mae letters to read before the quartet could choose its next road.

Mali left a forwarding direction at each place someone might need to find her. She put aside payment for Ferra’s next treatment and took the remaining coins without rounding the amount upward in her memory.

Pell gave her a copy of the first inquiry account.

It was not beautifully written. The left-hand letters tilted, some words corrected above the line. She could read them. That was what the copy was for.

“Don’t mend every error,” he told her.

“I won’t.”

“Tell me which ones change the meaning.”

She promised. He had a longer future than recovery of a hand, and it was not hers to narrow it to that question every time they met.

Hesh would come after the next freight meeting with Gorrath. Their mother-and-daughter arguments had not ceased. Hesh had stopped promising to keep her safe at any cost. Gorrath had stopped using the cost already paid as authority to spend more without asking.

They wanted a dry yard, a room wide enough for the chair and no step at the kitchen door. Mali carried the measurements in Sena’s neat hand. It seemed a sensible beginning for a house.

Sel walked with her as far as the southern gate.

The dark satchel rested against their hip. A single light hovered beside its flap while the others went ahead to investigate a cart of oranges. The rescued sheets remained in the city, with copies already begun under more than one person’s eye. Sel had agreed to help identify them. They had not promised that identification would make the loss smaller.

“Will it open again?” Mali asked, looking at the satchel.

“Perhaps.”

“Will you try?”

“Not by prying.”

She accepted that. The boundary was more useful than a prediction.

Outside the gate, the road bent toward the river. She had carried an active page north, hidden behind a metal lining she had not understood well enough, and a warning she had hoped the right man would make powerful. She went south with an account no one person owned and a sword she knew the weight of.

The journey took five days, including the waiting at the weir.

Her ribs ached at the end of the first. She stopped before dusk instead of spending the next morning proud of a distance that hurt to breathe across. At the weir house she stayed two nights, repairing a cupboard and turning the handbell cord away from a new door hinge. Ardel charged her the ordinary bed contribution and paid the

cupboard work from the maintenance account. They did not make their debts cancel merely because that would have simplified the book.

Ferra returned to the weir house while Mali was repairing the cupboard.

She came to have the knee examined again, walking with a stick and carrying a basket of mending. The basket was light. She told Ardel this before anyone could offer to take it away. A woman from her household came with her and went to the kitchen to ask whether there was broth without barley.

Mali stood from the half-repaired hinge.

Ferra looked at the wood, then at her hand.

“You’ll break the screw if you turn it like that.”

Mali looked down. She had been holding the tool too far along its shaft to spare her palm. It gave her less control than she wanted to admit.

“I can’t close it properly yet.”

“Then ask Ott.”

“He’s at the lower gate.”

“Then wait.”

The answer was so like every inconvenient thing she had learned in the city that Mali laughed before she could stop herself. Ferra’s expression did not change.

“I’m not amusing.”

“No. I was recognising something.”

“Recognise the screw before you ruin it.”

Mali put down the tool. She had offered to repair the cupboard for a small fee, not to prove she could still do everything she knew how to do before the Assembly. Ardel would not owe more because the repair took longer. The difference was hers to arrange.

Ferra sat on a bench near the doorway while her companion brought tea. The knee had settled, she said when Mali asked permission to know. Some mornings it hurt less. Some more. The healer thought walking would improve, but no longer made predictions about how quickly.

Mali took the little purse from her bundle.

“There’s payment for the last treatment and this one. If it isn’t enough—”

“Let her write the account first.”

Mali closed it.

She sat on the floor beside the cupboard. The position let her lean against the wall without compressing the bruised ribs. Ferra watched the careful descent and did not ask whether being injured had taught her what pain meant. Mali was grateful. She had known pain before the weir. The failure had not been ignorance that other people

hurt, but the speed with which she put that knowledge aside when a different account seemed urgent.

“Did you tell them?” Ferra asked.

“The inquiry?”

“Yes.”

“What I did. What you said. The discovery after.”

“Did you put them in that order?”

“Yes.”

Ferra stirred her tea. “Good.”

Mali waited. She wanted another word. They had found the wafer. The warning had been real. Ardel changed the line because they asked. It would have been possible to make Ferra’s injury seem like the ugly beginning of something necessary, and she had resisted that when she testified. She wanted credit for resisting it now, which would make the woman’s pain useful to her again.

She took out the hinge pin and inspected it instead.

“Where are you going?” Ferra asked.

“A house across from the ferry. The roof needs work.”

“Does it pay?”

“A room. Use of the yard. Repairs entered against rent.”

“Written?”

“Anet’s letter gives the terms.”

“That isn’t the owners’ agreement.”

Mali looked up.

Ferra took another sip. “If you mend the roof, they have a mended roof. You should know what you have before you climb.”

The practical correction entered a place Mali had left soft because the house mattered too much. She had treated Deren’s seal as permission and Anet’s invitation as a promise. Now she was prepared to put labour into a roof on the strength of a letter from someone who did not own it.

“I’ll ask them to write it.”

“Before.”

“Before.”

It was not forgiveness. Mali began to understand how much could pass between two people without needing to become that one thing.

Ott returned near midday. He inspected the cupboard, made an expression that required no shared language and pointed to the wrong-sized replacement screw Mali

had selected. She gave him a clean slate. He drew the difference, showed her which old fitting could be reused and left the tool where her good hand could reach it without twisting.

She finished the job slowly. When the door finally closed square, the satisfaction was so plain that she felt foolish for how much she needed it. A cupboard was not a city. Its injury was visible, its repair could be tested, and nobody had to trust a promise about the meaning of quiet to decide whether the shelf would hold.

Ardel tested it with three bowls and paid the agreed fee.

Mali put part toward her bed and the rest into Ferra’s treatment purse. She asked Ardel to enter the transfer so neither woman would have to remember what an exhausted traveller said she had left on a table.

Ferra accepted the receipt. Her companion had finished the mending and was ready to walk home before the afternoon heat.

Mali stood aside from the doorway. She did not offer to carry the basket this time. Ferra noticed, looked at the bandaged palm and nodded toward the outer bench.

“You could carry it that far.”

Mali asked the weight before taking it. It was lighter than she expected. They walked to the bench while Ferra’s companion fetched a shawl.

“Were you frightened when you saw us stand?” Ferra asked.

“Yes.”

“Of us?”

“Of what I thought was moving you.”

“That must have been difficult to separate.”

“It wasn’t your work to make it easier.”

“No,” the woman said. “It wasn’t.”

They waited without needing another answer. The garden had begun to put out late flowers along the path. A child at the door was helping his father sort beans, placing every split one in a little pile the cook would probably use anyway. In the long room, a patient asked for a lesson to end. The instructor stopped and pulled up a chair to ask why. No one outside hurried in to make a public example of it.

Ferra’s companion returned. Mali set the basket on the bench, where it could be lifted without bending the knee too far. The woman took her receipt and went.

Mali watched until they reached the road. She felt no great release. The debt had not become a token that bought peace between them. It had become an account she could keep paying and a set of small decisions she could make differently next time.

That evening she wrote to the owners of the ferry house.

She gave her name, described the work she could currently do and asked them to confirm the room, the yard, the length of the agreement and which repairs would

count against rent. She did not offer to teach their children or promise a school that would make the property valuable. If a practice floor came later, it would require another conversation.

Ardel sent the note with a returning boatman who would reach the ferry by dawn. Mali remained another night so the answer would have somewhere to come back to.

It arrived after breakfast, written in a large hand with ink blots where the writer pressed too hard. A room for the first month. Dry space in the yard shared with the household’s winter stores. Roof repairs valued in stages, material costs separate. No permission to sublet the whole place. No objection to travellers resting there if they made no claim on rooms already occupied. The kitchen threshold could be lowered if it did not weaken the frame.

Mali read every line.

It was less than a free house and more than a hope. She asked Ardel to witness her agreement before sending it back. The owner had added that a ladder stood beneath the west eave, but two rungs needed inspection before anyone climbed. Mali circled that sentence in her own copy.

At the door, Ardel gave her bread for the road.

Mali began to reach for a coin.

“Gift,” the keeper said.

She stopped. “Then thank you.”

“Come back when you don’t need something carried out of the shed.”

“I might need a hinge.”

“Bring the right screw.”

Mali took the northern edge of the river path, where the ground stayed firm after rain. She had one more night before the ferry if her side hurt enough to make stopping necessary. The house would not disappear because she took a day to reach it. The agreement said when the month began.

She walked more slowly than she had when she came north, with less certainty about how much she could do for strangers and more knowledge of what she had already promised.

The old junction crock remained locked in the shed until Boon’s collection team could come for it. Mali’s survey box was no longer there. Boon had recovered the carrier from the rooming-house cupboard after the court emptied, listed its broken latch and taken it with the other active remnants. The fish jar had been cleaned and returned to Bell House by an ordinary courier. Its owner sent back word that one copper of the security remained owing for the inconvenience.

Mali paid it into the weir house account for the next southbound delivery. She smiled while doing so. Not every debt had to be remade into destiny before it could be settled.

When she reached the ferry, Teren was waiting beside the pole.

Ilya stood at the token box. The old ferryman had retired inland, leaving the crossing to people who were willing to learn the river before deciding how the river ought to move. Teren used both hands. Two fingers were healing crookedly against the grip. He rested between loads and did not hide the resting when passengers watched.

He saw Mali’s sword, the scarred scabbard, the small bundle over her good shoulder.

“Did you stop it?” he asked.

“The thing at Bell House. Yes.”

“The rest?”

She looked north. The hills were blue with distance. Above them the rift remained, a pale scar through which another intelligence still watched a world it had failed to finish. The shards whispered in their separate territories. Somewhere a teacher would be asked to promise more relief than a lesson could give. Somewhere a frightened person would be offered an end to choosing, and find the offer reasonable.

“The rest takes longer,” she said.

Teren nodded. He knew about things that took longer. He set the pole against the landing and waited for the boat to settle before helping Ilya aboard.

Mali took out the fare.

Ilya hesitated. “He said you should cross free.”

“He offered before.”

“You wouldn’t go.”

“I had somewhere else to be.”

“And now?”

Mali looked across the water. A little house stood beyond the willows, its tiled roof dipping where the last storm had opened it. From this distance she could see the square of sky through a missing patch. The yard was overgrown, wide enough for freight under a repaired awning. No school banner hung from the eaves.

“Now I have work.”

She paid. Ilya put the token in her palm, not because the journey needed a symbol but because that was how the crossing kept its accounts.

On the far bank, Mali walked up through grass wet from the morning mist.

The owners had left the key beneath a stone in the place Anet described. She found it on the second try. The door stuck against a fallen bit of plaster. She pushed gently until she could get a hand inside and move the plaster rather than break the wood.

The room smelled of dust and old rain. One shutter hung crooked. Water had stained the wall beneath the missing roof tiles. In the corner lay a stack of poles that might become a bedframe or kindling, depending on how much rot had got into them. The kitchen threshold was raised. Hesh would object. Mali wrote it on the back of the measurements before she could forget.

There was space beneath the eaves for a practice floor.

She stood in it for a while without deciding what to call it.

Then she put down her bundle, opened the door wider and drew her sword.

The blade moved into the first position she had learned as a child. Her shoulders settled. Her right foot found the place the next movement expected. She could feel the whole sequence waiting, familiar and useful and not enough to live inside.

Halfway through, she stopped.

Nothing punished her. Nothing gave her a sign that she was free. The scarred hilt rested in her hand, steel catching a thin band of morning light. She listened until she could hear her own breath without waiting for another voice to count it.

She sheathed the sword.

Outside, the ladder leaned beneath the damaged roof. Its feet had sunk a little into the soil. She checked the ground, moved it to a firmer place and climbed only high enough to see what needed doing. The work would take days. She would have to ask someone to carry the tiles she could not lift yet.

She came down, fetched a pencil and began a list.

A woman from the next garden called over the wall before she had finished the second line.

“Do you own that ladder?”

“No.”

“Then don’t trust it merely because somebody left it.”

Mali put down the pencil. “Two rungs need looking at.”

“Three. The owner counts only the ones he can see from the ground.”

She opened a narrow gate between the yards and came through carrying a basket. Two good tiles lay beneath a cloth, and beside them a little bag of nails. She set it down without asking for the story of the new tenant’s journey.

“He said you’d arrived when the boatman brought your agreement back. I’ve been keeping these out of the rain.”

“Are they his?”

“Yes. More in the shed. Some broken. Don’t let him charge for those.”

Mali smiled and fetched her copy of the terms. They checked the material account together. The woman knew which figures belonged to old work and which were estimates made after the last storm. She put a small cross beside the two that needed asking about before any money changed hands.

Then they laid the ladder flat on the ground.

One rung shifted in its sockets. Another had cracked underneath, where a person climbing would put the most weight on the damage while looking at the roof. The

third was sound but loose enough to become a problem by the time the first two were repaired.

“I’ve got a shorter one,” the woman said. “Enough for the eave. You can make this right before going higher.”

“That would help.”

“I know.”

She went to fetch it. Mali looked at the rungs and felt the familiar wish to get started before the hour of courage passed. She knew how to brace a loose joint. She had mended roofs for meals and once for a pair of boots she wore until both soles failed. The damaged ladder made the work possible if she trusted the parts that remained.

She put it against the wall, flat on the ground where nobody would mistake it for ready.

The shorter ladder came with a boy old enough to carry one end and young enough to be annoyed by being told which end. He saw her sword leaning inside the doorway.

“Are you opening the school?”

“No.”

“People said someone might.”

“I might make a floor. It isn’t the same thing.”

He considered this while his mother checked the ladder’s feet.

“Can you fight?”

“Yes.”

“Will you show me?”

“Not today.”

“Tomorrow?”

“I don’t know what work tomorrow needs yet.”

He frowned. It was not an answer likely to travel down the road and bring pupils. Mali found she could bear that.

The woman asked him to bring the tile hooks from the shed. He went, not quickly, and returned carrying more than had been requested. He had found a wooden mallet and wanted someone to need it.

Mali knew the wish well enough to find a real task rather than invent one to make him harmless. She asked him to sort the sound hooks from those bent beyond use. He did not know how. She showed him one of each and asked him to put the doubtful ones apart, rather than decide every piece must fit a category because an adult was waiting.

His mother stayed at the ladder foot while Mali climbed to the low eave.

From there the house looked more damaged and less hopeless. The gap in the roof had not begun with one great failure. Water had entered beside a slipped tile, softened a

batten and let the next tile settle out of place. Someone had patched the visible drip from inside. The rain had found another way.

Mali could repair the lower run. The higher break needed a sound ladder and another pair of hands. She called down what she could see, asked the woman to enter it beneath the owner's estimate and came back for the first tile.

"Can you take two?" the boy asked.

"One."

"It'll take longer."

"Yes."

He gave her one. His mother kept the ladder steady while Mali seated the hook and checked the overlap against the sound tiles. She lifted her right hand too quickly and felt the palm pull beneath its dressing. The tile shifted. For a moment every muscle tried to make the hand close harder.

She set the tile down on the batten, where its weight did not depend on her grip, and waited.

Below, the woman said nothing. The boy watched, tool in one hand, waiting to know whether this was failure or part of the work. Mali did not know what he would decide. She adjusted her stance, used the left hand to support and finished the hook with the right only where it could bear the movement.

The tile held.

She tested it before calling for the second.

By noon the low run was closed. The larger hole remained. They stretched a canvas beneath it to keep the next rain from soaking the floor, leaving room for air rather than sealing the whole ceiling in a rush. The woman said her brother could help with the higher work after the market day if Mali agreed the wage with him herself.

"I will."

"Before he arrives with tools."

"Yes."

The boy had sorted the hooks into three piles. The doubtful ones were the largest. Mali examined them with him, taking the time to show why two bent pieces could be straightened and one apparently sound one should not be trusted. When his mother called for him to come home, he left the piles as they were. They did not have to finish every hook to stop for lunch.

At the gate he looked at the sword again.

"If there is a floor," he said, "I could sweep it."

"You could help carry the old boards out first."

"Would you pay?"

Mali looked at the list, the material account, the purse that still had debts in its future.

“For work we agree on. Not for waiting to see whether I teach you.”

He nodded, satisfied by the existence of a number even before they had found it. His mother took the basket and left the unbroken tiles where Mali could reach them.

The yard quietened.

Mali stood beneath the eaves with one hand against the ladder. The roof was unfinished. The room had dust along every wall. She would need help lowering the threshold before Hesh arrived, and someone would have to tell Gorrath the view from the first bed was better than from the second. The cupboard hinges had not yet been examined.

She added them to the list.

Then she fetched the next sound tile and went back to the part of the roof she could mend.

The door stayed open.

THE END