

Netherfiend

A Novel of the Arcana

Izno

Book One

Set in the world of Resurgence: The Veil of Darkness

A loyalties.space reader edition

Every bargain costs blood. The dark remembers.

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Dramatis Personae

The Three

- **Riegel**, a street-born great swordsman of the lower districts, who carries a black cleaver he will not lift
- **Anna**, blade-daughter of the southern sands, daughter of the Sword Head Tariq
- **Creez**, a street-born gunner of the western badlands, who carries his father's holy gun

Friends You Haven't Met

- **The Silver Mask**, the First Pentacle of the High Table
- **The Wine-Dark Mask**, the First Cup of the High Table

Of the Tomb of Netherfiend

- **Ossiran**, the Skull Sovereign, Bearer of the Thirteenth Arcanum, the Ending
- **Velisande**, Witch-Seneschal, Keeper of the Bone Deck
- **Thessaly**, the Scribe, Keeper of the Ossuary Archive
- **Corvinus**, the Strategist, Master of the War-Table
- **Nyxa**, Warden of the Letter-Hall, who reads every message that reaches the Tomb
- **Fennick**, the Courier, Runner of the Hollow Roads
- **Ottoline**, the Analyst, Reckoner of the Counting Lamps
- **Bramwell**, the Herald, Voice of the Black Gate

Of Calice and the Houses

- **King Aurelian**, Crown of Calice, first among the Cups

- **Speaker Lucan Merrow**, First Voice of the Senate of Cups
- **Archmagister Halvard Coyne**, Master of the Crystal Spires, House of Pentacles
- **Imre Vantress**, Sword Head of the Vantress clan
- **Calda Rook**, Hearth-Queen of the Ember Marches, House of Wands

Of the Three Kingdoms

- **Enzo**, Clan Head, Riegel's brother; **Lucia**, Enzo's wife; **Old Matteo**, smith of the clan
- **Tariq**, Sword Head of the southern clans; **Amara**, his second wife; **Sefu**, of their household
- **Elara**, Creez's cousin; **Aunt Ruth**, her mother; **Dot**, of the Redwater telegraph office
- **Captain Ines**, master of the freighter *Saint Agatha*

Of the Arcana

The twenty-two Major Arcana are not pictures. They are the laws of the world, and the world remembers them.

Chapter One: The Weeping Iron

The heavens above the lower city wept a deluge of cold, unforgiving iron. The storm sought to drown the sins of the cobblestone alleys, but it only washed the fresh blood into the gutters.

Riegel was hurled backward into the rain and crashed through the wooden awning of a street-side tavern. Splintered crossbeams and shattered clay rained down on his armoured shoulders. In his right hand he dragged a beast of raw, blackened steel, a cleaver heavy enough to sever a horse in two. Its broad edge threw dull orange sparks across the stones, but the great swordsman refused to lift it.

“Draw your steel!” Enzo roared. The street-born commander waded through the screaming, scrambling tavern crowd. He wore the heavy, ornate armour of a Clan Head, yet he had forsaken the massive broadsword on his back. His fist gripped a jagged six-inch hunting knife instead.

“Enzo, stop!” Riegel coughed up rainwater and blood, his back pressed to the crumbling brick. His eyes, once bright with restless energy, were wide with panic. “I will not fight my brother! Drop the blade!”

“Brother?” Enzo spat the word, and it dripped with jealous, agonised madness. “A brother does not covet a man’s wife! Draw the damn sword, Riegel! Defend yourself!”

“I walked away!” Riegel screamed over the thunder, holding out his empty left hand. “I forsook the clan! I left the district so this would never happen! Lucia is *yours!*”

“I see the way she looks at the door when the rain falls!” Enzo kicked a heavy wooden cart aside. Bystanders shrieked and scattered. “I see her waiting for a ghost! You stayed in her heart, Riegel, and I will carve you out of it!”

* * *

Half a world away, beneath a merciless sun, the ancient sandstone columns of a grand Egyptian estate began to fracture and scream.

Anna threw herself backward as a thirty-foot pillar exploded into dust, showering the golden courtyard with lethal shrapnel. High on the balcony, her stepmother Amara clutched a cursed relic: a stone pulsing with a sickening, warped purple light.

“Do you feel it, Anna?” Amara shrieked, her voice ringing with rapturous frenzy over the roar of collapsing stone. “The perfect devotion! The absolute love!”

“It is a parasite!” Anna screamed back, scrambling to her feet as the earth heaved beneath her. Her prized curved blade trembled in her white-knuckled grip. “It is poisoning our blood! Amara, put the stone down before it buries us all!”

“It demands a sacrifice to make the love pure!” Amara laughed, a sound wholly cut loose from reason. She leaned over the balustrade and held the blinding relic high. “Kill her, Tariq! Cleanse the bloodline!”

Through the cloud of pulverised sandstone came Tariq, Anna’s father and the greatest blademaster of their clan. His pupils were blown wide and empty of a father’s warmth, filled

only with the relic's mechanical devotion. He dragged a massive two-handed sword through the sand.

"Father, wake up!" Anna begged, raising her blade. "Fight it! You are a Sword Head! Don't let her pull your strings!"

"Her love is absolute," Tariq said. His voice was a hollow, distorted monotone, stripped of everything human. "The clan must be pruned. The devotion must be perfect."

"Where are the High Courts?" Anna's voice cracked as her father raised his sword. "Where are the Magicians? They are meant to see this magic! They are meant to cleanse this ruin!"

"No one is coming for you, little bird," Amara sneered from above. "The blind courts sit in their towers. The world belongs to those who take it. Strike her down, Tariq!"

* * *

In the dead, howling silence of the western badlands, an unholy wind carried the stench of sulphur.

"They cannot see me, Creez," the demon whispered. It wore the face of his little cousin, Elara, but the flesh was only a stolen vessel. The scattered idol had twisted her bones, stretching her limbs and unhinging her jaw into a permanent, mocking smile that dripped black ichor.

Creez had been thrown against the splintered wreck of an overturned stagecoach. He scrambled to his knees and spat blood into the dirt. He raised his heavy, silver-plated single-shooter, and his hands would not stop shaking.

"The mighty Magicians in their sovereign courts cannot even smell the Devil on my breath," the demon mocked, in a layered, guttural voice that shattered the last lanterns on the stagecoach. Its neck twisted to an angle no neck should reach. "They sit in

their velvet towers and rot! They play politics while the world bleeds! But you can see me, can't you? You're just a street-born gunner, yet your eyes bear witness to hell."

"Release her soul!" Creez screamed. Tears cut tracks through the dust on his face. The boy everyone knew for his wild, infectious joy was broken. "Take me! Leave her and take me!"

"She likes it in the dark," the demon laughed, and took one jagged step forward. The air crackled with cold static dread. "She begged me to stay. She hates you, Creez. She hates that you laugh while she suffers."

"*Liar!*" Creez thumbed back the heavy hammer of the holy gun. The pure magic sealed in the silver-lined bullet hummed against his skin.

The demon convulsed. Its head snapped back, and for a fraction of a second the black abyss of its eyes cleared. Elara's own voice, terrified and human, broke through.

"Creez!" Her small hands clawed at her face. "It burns! Creez, please, make it stop! Shoot it!"

"Elara!" Creez sobbed. He stepped forward and lowered the gun.

The demon tore control back with a booming laugh that shook the desert floor. "You don't have the stomach for it, boy! You will die weeping!"

* * *

The climax of their tragedies arrived in a single, devastating heartbeat.

In the flooded alley, Enzo crashed into Riegel like a battering ram, ignoring the iron cleaver entirely. He drove the hunting knife upward. "Die with her name on your lips!"

Riegel let the cleaver fall into the mud. “Enzo, *no!*” He caught his brother’s wrist in both hands, muscles tearing under the strain.

In the collapsing courtyard, Tariq lunged with a hollow roar. “For perfect devotion!” He raised the great blade above his head for the killing stroke.

“Forgive me!” Anna wept. She fell to one knee in the blood-soaked sand and brought her blade up in a blind, desperate guard.

In the badlands, the demon leapt into the storm with its long claws spread through the blinding dust. “I will swallow your soul!” It dived straight for Creez’s throat.

“God forgive us all,” Creez whispered. He threw himself into the dirt, rolled onto his back, and his bleeding fingers closed around the cold steel of his father’s holy gun.

The accidents and the holy execution struck in the same fraction of a second.

The mud-slick cobblestones under Riegel’s boots gave way. He slipped. To keep his feet he twisted his hips and drove his heavy iron bracer upward to turn the knife. The sudden shift met Enzo’s reckless lunge. Enzo’s boots lost their grip, and he pitched forward, and his own great weight drove his chest onto the hilt of his own knife.

At the same instant, the ground beneath Tariq, weakened by the relic’s rhythmic, destructive pulse, gave way into a sinkhole. Tariq stumbled. His killing momentum threw him off balance, and as he fell forward into Anna’s guard, her blade slipped past his heavy iron crossguard. The sickening resistance of flesh and bone shuddered up through her hilt.

And as the demon came down on him, Creez looked into the black abyss of his cousin's eyes and pulled the trigger.

The wet tearing of Enzo's flesh.

The piercing of Tariq's heart.

The thunderous cannon-blast of Creez's silver-lined bullet.

Three sounds that echoed across three kingdoms, and marked the death of innocence.

Enzo froze. The rage drained from his eyes and left a hollow clarity behind. Hot arterial blood poured over Riegel's trembling fingers.

"Lucia..." Enzo breathed, and slumped dead into the mud.

Tariq dropped his sword. The purple fog cleared from his eyes just long enough for him to see his daughter, and to understand.

"Run, my little bird," he choked, blood spilling over his lips. Then he collapsed into the ruined earth.

In the desert, the demon was obliterated by a blinding, holy shockwave that levelled the surrounding dunes. When the light faded, only a small, lifeless girl remained in the dirt.

Silence fell over the world like a shroud.

Riegel shoved his dead brother back into the mud. Anna let her blade drop into the sand. Creez sank to his knees before the broken body of his cousin.

Three bright, living souls fell to the earth in unison and stared at the blood on their hands. High above them all, the ruling courts and the elite Magicians sat in their crystalline towers, wilfully blind to the ancient artefacts and the earthly passions that tore the lower castes apart.

Riegel pressed his forehead to the bloody cobblestones. Anna clutched her head amid the burning ruin. Creez clawed at his own chest in the choking dust.

Separated by oceans, bound by one unfathomable agony, they opened their mouths and let out a raw, throat-tearing wail that vanished into the void.

* * *

Hours later, the storm beat against a rusted transport cage strapped to the back of a moving train, where Riegel sat bound in heavy iron chains, bound for the executioner's block in a foreign city. In the pitch-black cargo hold of a transport bus rolling into the same city limits, Anna huddled into a tight ball beneath a coarse blanket, a ghost fleeing a burning massacre. And marching through the freezing desert night toward civilisation, Creez walked alone, hollowed to the soul, a holy gun holstered at his hip.

They were no longer young. They were three wounded, lifeless shapes, broken by a failing system, hurtling unknowingly toward one another on a collision course to challenge the gods of a broken world.

Chapter Two: The Thirteenth Seat

The envoy from the Senate of Cups arrived at the Black Gate of Netherfiend on the first cold morning of autumn, and he arrived afraid.

Ossiran could tell from the throne. He did not need eyes for it. He had not had eyes for three hundred and eleven years, and the sockets of his skull held instead two small fires, violet at the core and pale at the rim, which saw what eyes could not. They saw the warmth in a living body and how it moved. They saw the envoy's heart hammering against his ribs as he descended the long stair that wound down out of the desert dunes into the dark. They saw the sweat along his collar, and his gloved hand straying again and again to the silver chalice pinned at his breast, the badge of his House, as if a badge could save a man.

"He has rehearsed his speech eleven times since the river," said Velisande, at the Sovereign's right hand. "Nyxa's crows counted. He mutters it to his horse."

"Is it a good speech?"

"It is a Cups speech. Long, warm, and poisoned at the bottom." The Witch-Seneschal smiled. Her smile was lovely and it frightened people. She wore the black and violet of the Tomb, high at the throat. Her hair, darker than the hall, was bound in silver pins shaped like small keys. At her waist, in a case of bone and lacquer, she carried the Bone Deck, and her fingers rested on

it the way other women's fingers rest on a locket. "Shall I let him finish it, my lord, or shall I simply have his tongue?"

"Let him finish," said Ossiran. "A man who has practised eleven times deserves an audience."

The Hall of the Thirteenth Seat was the oldest room in Netherfiend. Its pillars were carved from the long bones of beasts that no longer walked the world, and its ceiling was lost in a darkness that no lamp had ever reached. The floor was black stone, polished until it held reflections like still water. Up the centre ran a single strip of bone-white inlay, straight as a blade, from the doors to the dais. On the dais stood the throne. It had no cushion and no canopy. It was a chair of grey stone, its back carved with the sigil of the Thirteenth Arcanum: a figure on a pale horse, a banner, a rose. Death, the old cards called it. The people who lived in the shadow of Netherfiend were more careful. They called it the Ending.

Ossiran sat in that chair as though it had grown around him. He was tall, even seated, and robed in layered black that drank the light. His skull was crowned with a circlet of dark iron, set with a single stone the colour of a bruise. His hands lay on the arms of the throne. They were bone, finger and knuckle and wrist, and they were very still. Stillness was a thing the living could not manage. It was the first thing visitors noticed about him, and usually the last thing they forgot.

The doors opened. Bramwell, the Herald, stepped through first, as was his right.

"Lucan Merrow's man," Bramwell announced, and his voice did what it always did: it filled the hall to the ceiling without ever rising. Bramwell was broad and grey-bearded and dressed in a tabard of night-blue. Once, before his death and before his

service, he had been a singer of funeral songs. “Envoy Tobias Hale, of the Senate of Cups, of the city of Calice, bearing letters under seal. He asks the hospitality of the Tomb.”

“He has it,” said Ossiran. “Let him approach.”

Tobias Hale walked the white line from the doors to the dais. It was eighty paces. Ossiran had designed it that way. A man who walks eighty paces toward a throne in silence learns a great deal about himself, and very little of it is flattering. By the fortieth pace the envoy’s step had shortened. By the seventieth he had stopped looking at the throne and was looking at the floor, where his own reflection walked beneath him upside down.

He knelt at the foot of the dais, which he had not been asked to do.

“Great Sovereign,” he began. “Lord of the Tomb. Bearer of the Thirteenth. The Senate of Cups sends you greeting, and His Majesty King Aurelian, Crown of Calice and first among the Cups, sends you greeting, and the love of the canal city, and the —”

“Rise,” said Ossiran. “Netherfiend does not ask its guests to kneel. It only asks them to be honest. Can you rise, Envoy Hale?”

The man rose. His knees cracked.

“Good,” said Ossiran. “Now. Your speech.”

It was, as Velisande had promised, a Cups speech. It began with the weather and the harvest. It wandered pleasantly through the long peace, three hundred years of it, and the wisdom of the Concord that had made that peace possible. It praised the four Houses: the Cups, whose sovereign courts governed; the Pentacles, the Magicians who ruled from their crystalline towers; the Swords, whose clans and Clan Heads kept the law at the edge of a blade; the Wands, who kept the borders

burning bright. It praised Netherfiend too, though more carefully, as one praises a thunderstorm that has so far stayed on the far side of the hills.

Then, at the bottom of the warm cup, came the poison.

“The Concord,” said Tobias Hale, “is due for renewal at the Equinox. As you know, Great Sovereign, it is renewed each century at a Conclave of the Houses in Calice, beneath the Crown, before the High Table of the realm. The Equinox falls thirty days from now. As you also know, the original terms bound the Thirteenth Arcanum within the walls of this Tomb, in exchange for which the Houses swore to leave the Tomb in peace.” He swallowed. “The Senate feels the terms are no longer sufficient.”

“Does it,” said Ossiran.

“There have been... irregularities. Deaths in the river provinces that the physicians cannot explain. Graves found open in the hill-towns below the Crystal Spires. A Clan Head of the lower city dead in the rain on his own brother’s account, and the Sword clans already sharpening their blades over it. A Sword Head of the southern sands slain in his own courtyard. Something walking the western badlands in a dead girl’s face. The Archmagister of the Crystal Spires has presented evidence that the Ending is leaking from Netherfiend. That the seal is failing.” The envoy produced a scroll, bound in red cord and sealed in wax the colour of wine. “The Senate therefore requires that the Bearer of the Thirteenth attend the Conclave in person, at the Equinox, and surrender the Arcanum into the keeping of the four Houses jointly. Failing which, the Concord will be considered void, and the Houses—” he faltered. “The Houses will consider what must be done.”

The hall was silent.

It was a particular silence. Netherfiend had many kinds. There was the silence of the deep crypts, which was patient. There was the silence of the Letter-Hall at night, which was attentive. And there was this one, which settled on the Hall of the Thirteenth Seat only when its Sovereign was thinking, and which had in it something of the quiet before a blade comes down.

Velisande broke it. She did not raise her voice. She never did.

“Surrender,” she said, tasting the word. “You walked eighty paces down my lord’s hall and said *surrender* to his face.”

“I am only the voice of the Senate, Lady Seneschal—”

“You are a voice. Voices can be stopped.” She took one step down from the dais. The temperature of the hall dropped. Frost bloomed on the black floor around her feet, in the shape of thorned roses, and crept toward the envoy’s boots. “I have stopped many.”

“Velisande,” said Ossiran.

She stopped. The frost stopped with her. She turned her head, and in her face was the thing that made her the most dangerous creature in Netherfiend, which was not the frost, nor the old witchcraft in her blood, nor the knives she kept in places no one ever thought to look. It was love. She loved him entirely and without condition, the way a flood loves a valley. Ossiran had long ago accepted that he would have to spend a portion of every day keeping that love from drowning someone.

“He is a guest,” the Sovereign said gently. “And he has done exactly what he was sent to do. Envoy Hale, you will be given rooms and food and a fire. Bramwell will see to it. Tomorrow you will have your answer to carry home.”

The envoy bowed, and bowed again, and walked backward for the first ten of the eighty paces before he remembered that he was allowed to turn around.

When the doors had closed behind him, Velisande sank to one knee at the foot of the throne. It was not the envoy's frightened kneeling. It was something older and prouder.

"Forgive me, my lord."

"There is nothing to forgive. You said what the rest of the Tomb was thinking. Someone ought to say it." Ossiran's fingers tapped once on the arm of the throne, a dry sound, like a twig. "Read for me."

* * *

Ossiran did not answer at once. He was listening to something that was no longer there.

Three nights ago, in the deepest hour, a sound had come down into Netherfiend through four hundred feet of stone. It had not come through the Black Gate, or the Hollow Roads, or the crows of the Letter-Hall. It had simply arrived, the way grief arrives: three voices, very far apart, crying out in the same instant. A man in the rain. A girl in the sand. A boy in the dust. The cry had lasted no longer than a heartbeat. The Sovereign of Netherfiend had not slept in three centuries, but he had sat up on his throne in the dark as though woken.

He had told no one. Not even her.

The Table of Reading stood in a small round chamber behind the throne, lit by a single candle of black wax that had been burning, by Thessaly's records, for ninety-four years. The table was a slab of pale stone worn smooth in the centre by the hands of every Seneschal who had served the Tomb. There had

been four before Velisande. Ossiran remembered them all, and he did not speak of them.

Velisande unlocked the bone case and drew out the Deck.

It was not like the painted decks the fortune-sellers carried in the markets of Calice. The Bone Deck had seventy-eight cards, each a thin leaf cut from something that had once been alive, polished and inked in a hand older than the Concord. The suits were there: Wands and Cups, Swords and Pentacles, ace to ten, page and knight and queen and king. So were the twenty-two Major Arcana, the Fool at zero and the World at the end. When Velisande shuffled them, they made a sound like distant hooves.

“What is the question, my lord?”

“The usual one,” said Ossiran. “What is coming, and what does it want?”

She shuffled until the sound of hooves stopped of its own accord. Then she cut the deck into three, gathered it, and laid out three cards in a row, face down. Past, present, path. It was the simplest spread. Ossiran preferred it. Complicated spreads made people feel wise, and feeling wise was a poor substitute for seeing clearly.

She turned the first card.

The Three of Swords. A heart pierced by three blades, under a sky of grey rain.

“A wound,” said Velisande. “An old one. Grief, betrayal, a truth that cuts. It sits in the past position.” Her eyes flicked to him. “The Concord, my lord. The night they sealed you here.”

“Perhaps.” Ossiran did not move. “Go on.”

She turned the second.

The Tower. A great spire struck by lightning, its crown blown off, two figures falling headfirst from its windows into the dark.

Velisande drew a breath and held it.

The candle flame leaned, though there was no draught.

“Sudden ruin,” she said at last. “The fall of what was built on false ground. Revelation by catastrophe. The Tower does not warn, my lord. It only arrives.” Her voice was steady, but her hand on the table had gone white at the knuckles. “In the present position. Here. Now.”

“It is only a card.”

“It is never only a card.” She looked at him. “Not in this deck. Not in this world. You know that better than anyone.”

He did. That was the oldest truth of the world, the one the fortune-sellers had forgotten and the Houses pretended to forget. The Major Arcana were not symbols painted to amuse the idle. They were the laws beneath the laws, the powers that had shaped the world before there were names for anything. The Tower was the law that what is built falsely must fall. The Lovers were the law of choice. The Hanged Man was the law of sacrifice and the strange sight it brings. And the Thirteenth, Death, the Ending, was the law that everything ends, so that something else can begin.

Each Arcanum had a Bearer, once. A few still did. Most had passed into hiding, or into legend, or into the vaults of the Houses, where they were studied and hoarded like coin. Three hundred years ago, the Houses had come to Netherfiend with armies and treaties and the united weight of their four Suits, and they had asked the Bearer of the Thirteenth to let himself be sealed. They had promised peace. He had agreed, for his own

reasons, and those reasons were in no archive anywhere, not even Thessaly's.

"Turn the third," he said.

Velisande turned it.

The Page of Wands. A young figure in a desert, holding a flowering staff, gazing at the bud on its tip as though it held a secret.

The witch frowned. "A messenger. News from far away. An adventure, a spark, a first step." She tapped the card. "From the Wands. Fire. The Ember Marches."

"The path," said Ossiran slowly. "Not a messenger coming to us. A messenger going out from us."

"My lord?"

He rose. When Ossiran stood, everything in the room seemed to settle around the fact of it, the way water settles around a stone. The candle steadied.

"A wound in the past," he said. "A fall in the present. A spark on the road ahead, and it comes from the Wands, the one House the envoy did not bother to mention by name when he described who sent him." The violet fires in his skull brightened. "The Senate of Cups says the seal is failing. The Pentacles have brought *evidence*. Where are the Swords, who judge? Where are the Wands, who guard the borders and would be first to feel the Ending if it truly leaked? Why does a Cups envoy speak for four Houses when his letter carries the wax of one?"

Velisande's eyes narrowed. "Someone is building a tower."

"Someone is building a tower," Ossiran agreed. "And they have built it on false ground, because the seal is not failing. I would know. I am the seal." He laid one bone finger on the card of the falling spire. "The question is only whose tower it is, and

who is meant to be standing at the window when the lightning comes.”

There was a knock at the door of the chamber. Three soft raps, then one, then two.

Velisande’s head turned. “Nyxa.”

“Let her in.”

The Warden of the Letter-Hall did not so much enter as become present. She was small and pale and dressed in grey that made her hard to look at directly. Her hair was cropped close. Her fingers were stained to the second knuckle with ink, and a dozen tiny keys hung on a cord at her throat, one for every lock in the Letter-Hall. Every letter, scroll, sealed packet, and whispered message that reached Netherfiend passed through her hands first. Nothing came into the Tomb that Nyxa had not opened, read, copied, resealed, and filed. Nothing left it without her knowing.

She held out a single folded square of paper. It was not sealed. It had been, once; there was a smear of black wax on its edge, the kind of wax used by no House at all.

“My lord,” she said. Her voice was barely above a whisper. It always was. “This came in with the envoy’s baggage. Sewn into the lining of his second saddlebag. I don’t think he knows it was there.”

Ossiran took the paper. He unfolded it.

There were only seven words on it, in a hand he did not recognise, in ink that was still faintly wet after a journey of a thousand miles, which was impossible.

The Tower is for you. Do not come.

Velisande read it over his shoulder. The frost came back to the floor of the reading room, silent and fast, and crept up the legs of the table.

“Convene the council,” said Ossiran. “All of them. Tonight.”

Chapter Three: The Council of the Hollow Hall

The Hollow Hall lay at the heart of Netherfiend, below the throne and above the deep crypts, in a chamber so vast that the Tomb's first builders had not bothered to give it walls. It had pillars instead, a ring of thirteen, and between them only darkness. In the centre stood the War-Table. It was a single slab of black basalt, forty feet long, and carved into its surface in perfect relief was the whole known world: the canal city of Calice with its threaded waterways; the Crystal Spires on their northern hills; the red badlands of the west; the southern sands with their buried estates; the Ember Marches, where the clans of the Wands kept their beacon-fires burning along a thousand miles of frontier. And in the east, small and dark and patient, Netherfiend itself.

The guardians took their places around it in the order they had always taken them.

Thessaly the Scribe came first, because she had arrived before anyone else and been waiting in the dark with her lamp. She was a tall, stooped figure in robes of undyed linen, her face hidden beneath a deep hood. Only her hands showed, long and grey and dry as parchment. She carried three books under one arm and a fourth open in the other. She had not closed a book in front of anyone in two centuries.

Corvinus the Strategist stood at the western edge of the table, where he could see the most of it. He wore the black armour of a general of a kingdom that had stopped existing before the Concord was signed, and over it a cloak of crow feathers that rustled when he breathed, though he did not need to breathe. His face was half bone and half something older. He had already moved six small iron pieces across the carved landscape and was frowning at the seventh.

Ottoline the Analyst sat, because Ottoline always sat. She had a stool of her own design that rose and sank on brass gears, and around her neck hung a pair of spectacles with eleven lenses on hinged arms. Before her, on the table's edge, she had set out the Counting Lamps: nine small glass globes, each holding a flame of a different colour, which brightened and dimmed according to figures only she could read. She was humming.

Fennick the Courier leaned against a pillar, which was as close as Fennick ever came to sitting still. He was young, or looked it, lean and quick with a face full of grins and a long grey coat whose pockets held the keys to the Hollow Roads: the hidden ways beneath the world, older than the Houses, along which a runner who knew them could cross a hundred miles in a night. His boots were never clean.

Bramwell the Herald stood at the door, though there was no door, and announced each guardian softly as they came.

And Nyxa, the Warden of the Letter-Hall, was simply there when everyone looked up, at the eastern end, beside the small carved shape of the Tomb. No one had seen her arrive. No one ever did.

When the Sovereign came, they all bowed. Velisande came at his side, the bone case at her hip, and took her place at his right hand without a word.

“Sit, those who sit,” said Ossiran. “Stand, those who stand. We have a short night and a long road.”

He did not take a chair. He stood at the head of the table and looked down at the world as it was carved, and for a long moment he said nothing at all.

“Nyxa,” he said at last. “Begin.”

The Warden of the Letter-Hall laid out three items on the basalt.

The first was the envoy’s scroll, its red cord cut, its wine-dark wax split neatly in half. The second was the unsigned note: *The Tower is for you. Do not come.* The third was a broadsheet, cheap and grey, the kind the criers in Calice nailed to the posts of the bridges.

“The envoy’s demands we know,” Nyxa whispered. “The warning we know. This is new. It came by crow an hour ago, from one of my eyes in the canal city.” She tapped the broadsheet. “A swordsman named Riegel, street-born, of the lower city, arrived in Calice tonight in a transport cage on the back of the prison train. On the eve of the Equinox, thirty days from now, with every House in the city for the Conclave, he goes to the block in the Piazza of the Chalice, before the Senate’s own balcony, for the death of his brother. His brother was a Clan Head. The Senate of Cups asked for the case themselves. The Sword Head of the Vantress clan has been brought down from the Iron Holds to stand at the block in person.”

“A Sword Head,” said Corvinus, “to behead a street-born nobody.” His crow-cloak rustled. “No. They are not executing a

man. They are making a speech. A Clan Head dead, his brother on the block, and the Cups holding the axe. Every clan in the lower city will take a side, and the Senate will sell swords to both.”

“There is more,” Nyxa whispered. “Three nights ago, my crows in three countries fell from their perches at the same moment. In the lower city, a Clan Head died on his own knife. In the southern sands, a Sword Head named Tariq died on his daughter’s blade, in an estate where a purple stone was burning. In the western badlands, a boy put a silver bullet through something wearing his cousin’s face.” She looked up. “Three deaths. Three kingdoms. One heartbeat. The daughter is a fugitive; my eyes at the bus yards of Calice saw a girl with a curved blade crawl out of a cargo hold tonight, an hour after the prison train came in. The boy is walking east out of the desert. Every road the three of them are on bends toward Calice.”

Ossiran said nothing. In the sockets of his skull, the violet fires burned very still.

“Purple stones,” said Velisande quietly. “My lord. The envoy spoke of deaths the physicians could not explain. Of the *Ending leaking*.” Her lip curled. “They are laying something at our gate that does not belong to us.”

“Ottoline,” said Ossiran.

The Analyst stopped humming. She swung three lenses down over her eyes, peered at her lamps, and swung two of them back up.

“I have been watching the flows of coin into the Crystal Spires for forty years, my lord, because no one else bothers to and the numbers are beautiful.” She touched the violet lamp. Its flame stood up tall. “Eleven years ago, certain Magicians began

buying quietly through three trading houses that the Senate licenses and pretends not to own. Silver wire. Black iron chain. Lapidary tools fine enough to cut a hair. And a great deal of something listed in the ledgers only as *heart-glass*.” She touched the red lamp. It flickered. “Six years ago, the Senate began receiving payments from those same houses. Large ones. Regular ones. And three years ago, in every province where those traders sell their little trinkets in the markets, the madness began.”

“Trinkets,” said Corvinus.

“Charms. Love-stones. Purple glass on iron chains. Very cheap.” Ottoline sighed. “The lower castes buy them. Someone in the Spires makes them. The courts take their share. And no one in a crystal tower or a marble palace has ever once looked down to see what happens next.”

The Hollow Hall went still.

“Thessaly,” said Ossiran. “What happens next?”

The Scribe turned a page in her open book. It made a sound like a breath drawn in.

“The Concord bound the Thirteenth within Netherfiend, my lord, by your consent,” she said, and her voice was soft and dry and very old. “But the other twenty-one laws of the world were left to the Houses to keep in trust. The Pentacles took the Sixth into their towers to study. The Lovers.” She laid her book upon the table and turned it so the others could see. The page was covered in a script none but she could read, but the illustration needed no translation: two figures beneath an angel, and between them a choice. “The law of the Lovers is the law of choice. Love freely given. Love that could have been refused. That is what makes it love.”

“And if you cut it,” said Ottoline softly. Her lenses clicked.

“If you cut a law of the world into pieces and force it, it turns over,” said Thessaly. “Every reader of the cards knows that a reversed card means its opposite. In this world, that is not a metaphor. The forced Lovers is no longer choice. It is *devotion*. Perfect, absolute, mechanical devotion, which cannot be refused and does not need to be returned. A husband who will do anything his wife says. A father who will kill his daughter because he is told it is love.” She closed one hand slowly. “And sometimes, through a heart that has been emptied of choice, other things come in.”

“Things that wear people,” said Fennick. He was no longer grinning.

“Devoted people make obedient voters,” said Corvinus. “And obedient soldiers. And soldiers who love their masters perfectly do not fear anything.” He looked up at the throne’s shadow. “Not even the Ending.”

The Tower is for you.

No one in the Hollow Hall said it aloud. No one had to.

“So,” said Corvinus. He set down his seventh iron piece in the Piazza of the Chalice with a click that echoed between the pillars. “Someone in the Spires is cutting a law of nature into trinkets. The Cups are buying them and selling them to the lower castes. And now they will bring an army of the perfectly devoted to the Conclave, blame every death on Netherfiend, and call the fall of this Tomb *justice*.” He leaned on the table with both gauntleted fists. “My lord, it is the most elegant thing I have seen in a hundred years. I would like to burn it to the ground.”

“You would like to burn everything to the ground,” said Velisande.

“I would like to burn the *correct* things to the ground. That is what strategy is.” “We have three choices,” said Ossiran, and the hall fell silent again. “We can refuse the summons. Then the Houses march on Netherfiend with their devoted in the vanguard, and the world calls it justice. We can obey it. Then I walk into Calice and kneel to be broken, and the world calls it peace. Or we can do something they have not imagined.” His violet gaze moved slowly around the table. “Velisande. The Deck.”

* * *

She laid the cards on the black basalt, beside the carved canals of Calice. For a council, she used the Cross of Five: a card for the heart of the matter, one for what crosses it, one for what lies beneath, one for what lies ahead, and one at the crown for what may yet be.

The sound of hooves faded. She turned the first.

The Eight of Swords. A figure bound and blindfolded, standing among eight blades planted in wet ground.

“A prisoner,” said Velisande. “Trapped by the lies of others, and by his own despair. He could walk free if he saw the way.” She glanced at the broadsheet. “The heart of the matter is a man in chains.”

“The swordsman in the cage,” said Nyxa.

The second card, laid across the first.

The Queen of Swords. A woman enthroned with a blade upright in her hand, her face hard and clear, one hand raised as if to someone she had already judged and forgiven.

“Crossing him,” said Velisande slowly, “a woman with a sword. Grief made sharp. A truth-teller.” She frowned. “Not one of ours.”

The third, beneath.

The Six of Wands, reversed. A rider crowned in laurels, upside down.

“Beneath it all,” the witch said, “a victory that is not what it seems. A triumph turned to a fall. Pride before ruin.” Her mouth thinned. “The Houses, my lord. They have already celebrated.”

The fourth, ahead.

The Knight of Pentacles. A dark rider on a heavy horse, holding a single golden coin.

“Ahead, a slow and steady man who carries something precious. Patience. Burden.” She tilted her head. “A man who has walked a very long way, carrying a coin he did not ask for.”

“Or something worse than a coin,” said Ottoline. “The boy from the badlands, perhaps.”

Velisande turned the crown card. She looked at it for a long time.

The Hanged Man. A figure suspended upside down from a living tree by one ankle, arms folded behind him, face serene. Around his head shone a halo of pale light.

“Sacrifice,” the witch said. “Surrender. The stillness that sees what motion cannot. The world turned upside down so that it can be understood.” She looked up at him. There was something in her eyes very like fear. “My lord, I do not like this card at the crown. The Hanged Man is the card of the one who gives himself up.”

“Yes,” said Ossiran. “It is.” He looked at the five cards for a long, silent moment. Then he laughed.

It was not a sound the guardians heard often. It was dry and quiet and it echoed between the thirteen pillars like stones dropping down a well.

“They want me to surrender,” he said. “Then I shall surrender. In person. At the Conclave, at the Equinox, exactly as the Senate asks. Bramwell, you will carry that answer to the envoy at dawn, in your finest voice, and you will make sure he believes every word.”

Velisande’s hand closed hard on the edge of the table. “My lord —”

“The Hanged Man does not die, Velisande. He hangs. He waits. He sees.” The Sovereign laid one bone finger on the Eight of Swords. “And there is a man in Calice who has also been bound and hung up for the world to look at, in a cage on the back of a train. The Deck is showing me two surrenders. One chosen. One not.” He turned to the Courier. “Fennick.”

Fennick straightened off his pillar. “My lord.”

“The Hollow Roads. How fast to Calice?”

The Courier’s grin came back, sharp and bright. “Two nights, if I don’t stop to eat. A night and a half if I take the Drowned Stair under the river, which I’m not supposed to.”

“Take the Drowned Stair. Nyxa will give you the names of her eyes in the canal city. You will find this Riegel, and you will see to it that he never reaches the block. Bring him to me alive, with whatever he saw, and with whoever else the Deck sends to stand beside him.” He touched the Queen of Swords, and then the Knight of Pentacles. “The cards say he will not be alone. A woman with a blade. A man carrying a burden from far away. Find them.”

“And if the Vantress Sword Head objects?”

“Then you will be quick,” said Ossiran, “and you will be quiet, and you will remember that you are the Page of Wands in this reading, Fennick, and pages are meant to run.”

“Corvinus.” The Strategist straightened. “We cannot meet what is coming alone. Who in this world hates the Magicians as much as we have just learned to?”

Corvinus did not even look at the table. “The Wands. The Ember Marches have guarded the frontiers for three hundred years on the Senate’s coin, and the Senate has been cutting that coin for ten. Calda Rook, Clan Head of the Marches, sent four letters of protest to Calice last winter. Nyxa read them all.”

“They were very rude,” Nyxa whispered. “I liked her.”

“Then Bramwell will carry a second message after the first,” said Ossiran. “Not to the envoy. To the Hearth-Queen of the Wands. Openly, under the banner of Netherfiend, so that every spy of the Spires sees the Tomb’s Herald riding for the Marches and draws exactly the wrong conclusion.”

“And the right one?” said Bramwell.

“I will tell you on the road.” Ossiran turned to his Scribe. “Thessaly, find me the full text of the Concord. Every clause. Every word the Houses swore. I want to know exactly what I agreed to three hundred years ago, so that I know exactly how to end it.”

“End it, my lord?” said Ottoline. Her lenses clicked down over her eyes, all eleven at once.

“I am the Bearer of the Ending,” said Ossiran. “What else would I do?”

When the council had gone, each to their errand, he stayed by the War-Table. Velisande stayed with him. She gathered the five cards slowly, one by one, and her fingers lingered on the last.

“You knew you would go to Calice before I turned a single card,” she said.

“I suspected.”

“Then why ask the Deck?”

The Sovereign of Netherfiend looked down at the small carved shape of the canal city, where in thirty days a stranger would kneel at the block.

“Because I am not the only one who reads it,” he said. “And I wanted to know whether the cards would tell me the same lie they are telling the Magicians.”

Velisande went very still.

“Someone in this world,” said Ossiran, “has known what the Deck would say for a very long time. They knew I would draw the Tower. They knew I would draw the Hanged Man. That warning was written *before* the reading, Velisande, not after it. Find out how.”

Chapter Four: The Cage and the Hold

The prison train came into Calice at midnight, screaming.

It had screamed the whole way. Every curve of the coast line had drawn the same shriek of iron from its wheels, and every tunnel had thrown the sound back doubled, so that by the time it crossed the long causeway over the lagoon Riegel had stopped hearing it as a noise at all. It had become the weather inside his skull. Rain. Iron. Screaming. His brother's weight going slack against his hands.

The cage was bolted to a flatcar at the very end of the train, open to the sky. The guards rode in a covered wagon ahead of it. Twice a day one of them had come back along the roof with a bucket of water and a heel of bread and pushed them through the bars on the end of a pole, the way one feeds a dog that has bitten someone. The rest of the time there had only been the rain and the chains.

The chains were heavy. They had been forged for him specifically, in the smithy of his own clan, the night after Enzo died. He had heard the hammer from the cellar where they held him. He had known whose hammer it was. Old Matteo, who had shown him at nine years old how to grip a sword so the blisters came in the right places. Matteo had wept while he worked. Riegel had heard that too.

Now the wrist-irons had worn the skin of both his wrists to bleeding, and the collar had rubbed a raw ring around his throat, and he sat with his back against the bars and his knees drawn up and watched the lights of Calice come out of the dark.

He had never seen it. Nobody from the lower districts of his city ever had. Calice was a word, the way the Crown was a word, the way the High Table and the Houses and the Arcana themselves were words, things said by people who would never touch them. But here it was, rising out of black water. Domes. Bell towers. A thousand lit windows doubled in the canals. On the hills to the north, high above everything else, seven spires of glass stood up into the rain and shone, each from its own core, like icicles lit from within.

The Crystal Spires. The towers of the Magicians.

They are meant to see this magic, he thought, and did not know where the thought came from, only that it was not his. *They are meant to cleanse this ruin.*

The train shrieked into the station and stopped.

* * *

They were waiting for him.

He understood that only slowly. He had expected a back gate, a cart, a cell. Instead, when the guards dragged the cage door open and hauled him down onto the platform by his chains, there were lamps. Dozens. Held up on poles by men in wine-red livery, so that the whole long platform blazed like a stage. And beyond the lamps, behind a rope, there were people. Hundreds of them, in the middle of the night, in the rain. Clerks and porters and fishwives. Gentlemen in good coats under black umbrellas. Ladies with their hands to their mouths.

And a man with a speaking-trumpet, standing on a crate.

"*The Brother-Killer!*" the crier bellowed. "Behold him! Riegel, street-born, of the lower districts! Sworn to the clan, forsworn of the clan! Who slew his own brother, Enzo, Clan Head of his house, with a hunting knife in the rain! Brought by the mercy of the Senate of Cups, and by the justice of His Majesty King Aurelian, to the block of Calice! On the eve of the Equinox, before the Houses assembled! Behold him!"

They beheld him.

Somebody threw a cabbage. Somebody threw a stone. The stone hit him above the left eye and the world went white for a moment and came back red. A woman under an umbrella was screaming *murderer, murderer* in a voice so high and steady it sounded like a kettle.

Riegel did not raise his head. He walked. One step. The next. The chains dragged on the wet boards.

I didn't, he wanted to say. He slipped. I slipped. It was the stones. It was the rain. I was trying to hold his wrist. I would have let him cut me. I would have let him.

But he had said all that already, in the cellar, to the Elders of his own clan. He had said it to the magistrate. He had said it, finally, to Lucia, who had come down the cellar stair alone on the second night with a candle in her hand and stood looking at him through the bars, and said nothing at all, and gone back up.

Saying it did not make it untrue that Enzo was dead.

At the end of the platform a black carriage stood waiting with its door open. The door bore a golden chalice. Beside it stood a man in a long wine-red coat, slender and silver-haired, with a ledger under one arm. He watched Riegel come down the length of the lamps with the air of a man assessing livestock.

“So this is the swordsman,” the man said. “I was told he was a great deal larger.”

“He was, sir,” said a guard. “Train don’t feed much.”

“Hm.” The man in red made a note. “He’ll need to be fed, then. Properly. A thin man on the block looks like a victim. A heavy man looks like a brute.” He looked into Riegel’s face for the first time, pleasantly, without the smallest trace of malice. “We’ll want you looking like a brute, Riegel. On the day. The Houses will be watching. You understand.”

Riegel looked back at him.

“Who are you?” he said. His voice had gone to gravel.

“An undersecretary.” The man smiled. “Nobody. Put him in the carriage.”

* * *

An hour after the prison train, on the far side of the city, a transport bus pulled into the depot at Porta Sabbia with its headlamps dimmed and its cargo hold full of things that were not on any manifest.

Anna lay among them in the dark. Crates of oranges. Sacks of rice. Two terrified goats, tied by their necks to a strut. A bundle of rolled carpets that she had burrowed into on the second night, because the cold off the sea had gone through the hull like it was paper. She had not eaten in two days. She had drunk rainwater off the floor, on her hands and knees, where it leaked in through a seam. Her blade lay along her side, wrapped in a coarse blanket she had stolen off a washing line in a port town whose name she never learned.

She had lost count of the days. She had not lost count of anything else.

Every time she closed her eyes she was in the courtyard. Every time. Golden dust. Falling stone. Her father's face coming out of the cloud with nothing behind it, and the weight of his body coming down onto her blade, and the sound. She had not known before that there was a sound. Nobody tells you. She had trained with the curved blade since she was six years old, against posts and sacks and her father's own patient sword, and nobody had ever told her that a blade going into a man makes a sound, and that it comes up the hilt into your hands and lives there.

Run, my little bird.

The engine coughed and died. Voices outside. The clang of the cargo latch.

Anna pulled the blanket over her head and went still.

Light. A man's boots on the ramp. He was whistling. He hauled out a sack of rice and then another, and his whistling came closer and closer down the dark hold toward her carpets, and she lay with her hand on her hilt and her heart going like a bird's against a window, and thought very clearly: *If he finds me, I will have to do it again.*

The whistling stopped.

"Signora," the man said quietly. "I know you're in there. Your feet are sticking out."

She did not move.

"It's all right." He sounded old. Tired. "I've been driving this route twenty years. You're the fourth this year. Nobody's going to look in this hold for another hour. The yard gate on the east side doesn't lock. Go out that way, go left at the fish market, and keep going down. Don't stop until you can smell the bad canals. Nobody up here goes down there. Not the police. Not the Sword

clans. Not the Magicians.” A pause. “God knows not the Magicians.”

Anna pushed back the edge of the carpet.

He was a short, broad man with a face like a walnut and a cigarette behind his ear. He was looking at the blade in her hand, and then at her face, and then at the blade again.

“Ah,” he said. “You’re *that* one.”

Her hand tightened. “What do you mean, that one?”

He did not answer. He only reached into his coat, very slowly, and took out a folded sheet of paper and held it out to her.

It was a broadsheet. Cheap grey paper, still damp. Across the top in heavy black type: **REWARD**. Below that, a drawing. It was not a very good drawing. But it was good enough. A girl, eighteen or nineteen, with her hair tied back and a curved blade in her hand.

ANNA, daughter of Tariq, Sword Head of the sands. PARRICIDE. Who slew her father with her own blade in his own house. Fled north. Armed. FIVE HUNDRED CROWNS for her delivery, living, to the household of the Lady Amara, guest of His Majesty, at the Palace of the Chalice, Calice.

Anna read it twice. The second time, the paper shook.

Guest of His Majesty.

“She’s here,” Anna whispered. “She’s *here*.”

“Who’s here?”

She did not answer. She was out of the carpets and past him and down the ramp before he could say another word. At the bottom she stopped and turned, one hand on the cold steel of the bus.

“Why?” she said. “Five hundred crowns. You could buy this bus.”

The old driver took the cigarette from behind his ear and looked at it.

“Because my daughter wore one of those purple stones,” he said. “Last spring. A pedlar at the depot sold it to her for a week’s wages. Said it would make her husband love her the way she loved him.” He put the cigarette back. “He does now. He does whatever she says. He doesn’t speak anymore unless she tells him to. Sits by the door all day like a dog.” He looked up at Anna. “That woman on your poster. Lady Amara. The paper says she’s the King’s guest. So you tell me, signora. What does a lady do with a stone like that, in the King’s house?”

Anna had no answer.

“East gate,” the driver said. “Left at the fish market. Down.” She went.

* * *

On the far side of the world, in a frontier town called Redwater Crossing, where the railroad ended and the desert began, a boy with a silver gun walked out of the dark and fell down in the middle of the main street.

He did not remember most of the walk. He remembered the first night, and the cold, which had come down out of the clear sky after sunset so hard that the sand had crackled under his boots. He remembered burying Elara under a cairn of red stones with his bare hands, and how small the cairn was. He remembered taking his father’s spare bullets out of the saddlebag on the dead horse by the overturned stagecoach and counting them by starlight.

Three. Three silver-lined bullets, blessed by the priests of the canyon chapel before it burned. Three, out of the twelve his father had carried for thirty years.

He remembered finding the shard.

It had been lying in the dirt a few feet from where Elara fell, black and glossy, the size of a thumbnail, and warm, though the sand around it had gone cold. A splinter of the idol. The idol she had found in the ruins of the old mission a week before her wedding, pretty and dark, carved like a little horned man with his arms around himself. *A good-luck charm*, she had said, laughing. *For the wedding*. It had been whole then. Now it was nothing but a splinter, and Creez had stood looking down at it for a long time before he picked it up, wrapped it in a strip of his own shirt, and put it in the inside pocket of his coat against his chest.

He did not know why. He only knew that he could not leave it there, and that he could not throw it away.

After that, he remembered nothing but walking.

When he opened his eyes again he was lying on a bench in the back of the telegraph office, with a wet cloth on his forehead and a girl of about twelve staring down at him.

"Ma," she yelled, without looking away. "He's awake! The gunman's awake!"

"I'm not a gunman," Creez croaked.

"You've got a gun."

"Everybody's got a gun."

"Not like that one." She pointed at it. It lay on the table across the room, beside his coat. Someone had unloaded it. The single silver-lined bullet that had been in the chamber stood upright beside it, catching the lamplight. "That's a priest-gun. My

granddad says. He says there ain't been a priest-gun in Redwater since the chapel burned."

Creez sat up. His head swam. "Where's my coat?"

"There. Ma hung it." The girl tilted her head. "There's something in the pocket that hums. Ma wouldn't touch it."

The girl's mother came in then, a thin tired woman with telegraph tape wrapped around one wrist like a bandage. She brought a tin cup of water and a plate of beans and set them down beside him without a word, and he ate and drank like an animal, and she watched him do it.

Then she said, "There's a letter for you."

Creez looked up.

"Came this morning," she said. "On the eastern wire, then by courier from the railhead. Paid to the hilt. Addressed to *Creez, of the badlands, who carries his father's gun.*" She held out an envelope. Her hand was not quite steady. "Nobody in this town knew your name until you fell down in the street an hour ago. So you tell me how somebody on the other side of the ocean knew to write to you here."

The envelope was heavy paper, creamy and thick. It was sealed with black wax. There was no sigil pressed into the wax. Only a smooth, blank oval, like a thumbprint wiped clean.

Creez broke it.

Inside was a steamship ticket, first class, from the eastern port to the canal city of Calice, departing in four days. A thick fold of banknotes. And a single card, the size of a playing card, blank on one side. On the other, in a fine, slanting hand:

The swordsman in the cage goes to the block on the eve of the Equinox. He will need a gunner. Bring the fragment. Tell no one. You have friends you haven't met.

He read it three times.

Then he looked up at the woman with the telegraph tape around her wrist.

“Ma’am,” he said, “how far is it to the eastern port?”

“Four days,” she said. “If you take the train.”

“Then I’d better take the train.”

“Who’s it from?”

Creez turned the card over. Blank. He turned it back.

“I don’t know,” he said. And for the first time since the canyon, something moved in his face that was not grief. It was very small and it did not last. But it was the old thing, the thing the whole of Redwater Crossing would have recognised if anyone there had known him: the beginnings of a crooked, reckless grin. “But they bought me a first-class ticket, so either they’re friends, or they want me very badly dead.”

He loaded the silver bullet back into his father’s gun and put on his coat. The shard in the pocket hummed against his ribs, faint and steady.

It had been humming since he woke. He only noticed now that it had changed. It no longer hummed toward the canyon where Elara lay.

It was pulling east.

* * *

They did not take Riegel to a cell. Not at first.

The black carriage carried him through the drowned streets of Calice for what felt like an hour, and when it stopped and the door opened, he was looking up at the face of the Senate House: a cliff of white marble columns lit from below, and in the centre

of it, high up, a balcony draped in wine-red silk. The undersecretary got down first. He pointed.

“There,” he said. “That’s where the Speaker will stand. And there—” he pointed at the empty pink-and-white stone of the great oval square, glistening in the rain, “—is where you’ll kneel. We’ll build the block there. New timber. The Sword Head of the Vantress clan will strike the blow; we’ve asked for him specially. Every House will be on that balcony, and every clan in the realm will hear about it within the week.” He tucked his ledger under his arm. “I wanted you to see it. It helps, I think. To know where you’re going.”

“Why?” said Riegel.

“Why does it help?”

“Why *me*.” Riegel turned his head and looked at him. “I’m nobody. You said it. A brother-killer from the lower districts. Why bring me all this way? Why the lamps? Why a *Sword Head*?”

The undersecretary looked at him for a moment with real, gentle surprise. The way one looks at a child who has asked why the sea is wet.

“Because your brother was a Clan Head,” he said. “And you are a great swordsman who forsook his clan. Half the clans of the realm will say you were right to leave. Half will say your brother was right to want you dead. When your head comes off on the eve of the Equinox, they will all have to choose a side.” He smiled again. “And then they will all need to buy swords. And the Houses have such a great many swords to sell.”

He nodded to the guards.

“The Vault,” he said.

* * *

The Vault of the Chalice lay under the Senate House, under the canal that ran beneath the Senate House, under the old cisterns beneath the canal. It was cut from black rock, and the walls wept, and the only light was a single lamp at the end of a corridor a hundred paces long, so far away that it looked like a star.

They put Riegel in the last cell on the left. They chained his collar to a ring in the wall. They locked the door.

He sat in the dark and listened to his own breathing, and to water dripping somewhere very far below, and to the rain he could no longer hear but could still feel, somehow, through all that stone.

He thought about Enzo. He thought about Lucia on the cellar stair with her candle, not speaking. He thought about the black cleaver, his cleaver, which the guards had taken from him on the night of his arrest, and which he had not lifted against his brother, not once, not even at the end. He had been proud of that. In the cage, on the train, he had held on to that pride like a rope.

It did not matter, he thought now. *I didn't lift it, and he's dead anyway.*

Something moved in the dark.

Not in his cell. Beyond the bars. In the corridor. A rustle of cloth. A breath. Riegel raised his head.

There was nobody there. The lamp at the end of the corridor burned like a far-off star, and between it and him there was only blackness, and in that blackness, very close to the bars, he could make out nothing at all.

But someone was there. He could feel them. A warmth in the cold.

“Who’s there?” he whispered.

No answer. Then a sound, small and precise: something set down on the stone floor just inside the bars. A cup. Riegel smelled water. Clean water. And bread, real bread, still warm.

“Don’t despair,” said a voice from the dark.

He could not tell whether it was a man’s voice or a woman’s. It was low and even and it gave nothing away, and it came, he thought, from someone wearing something over their face.

“Drink. Eat. Live,” the voice said. “You are going to need your strength.”

“Who are you?”

A pause.

“You have friends you haven’t met,” said the voice.

And then the warmth was gone, and the corridor was only dark again. And far down at the end of it, the lamp that looked like a star flickered once, as if a shadow had passed in front of it, and then burned steady.

Chapter Five: The Drowned Districts

The old driver had been right about the smell.

Below the fish market the streets of Calice stopped pretending. The marble gave way to brick, and the brick to timber, and the timber to something black and soft that had once been timber and was now only a habit of standing up. The canals down here had no lamps. They had no names either, only numbers, painted long ago on the corners of houses that had since sunk a storey into the mud, so that the numbers sat at the waterline and the fish read them. People called it the Drowned Districts. They said it like a curse, or like a home.

Anna lived there for five days.

She learned it fast because she had to. She learned that the water in the Ninth Canal could be drunk if you boiled it twice, and that the water in the Fourth could not be drunk at all. She learned that the boatmen who poled their flat black skiffs beneath the bridges at night were smugglers, every one of them, and that if you could carry a crate up a ladder without dropping it and keep your mouth shut afterwards, they would pay you in bread and let you sleep in their boat sheds among the nets.

She learned that her poster was everywhere. Up here in the light it was nailed to every post. Down here in the dark it was used to wrap fish.

On the third night, carrying crates for a one-eyed smuggler called Bastiano, she came up a ladder into the back of a wine shop and found two men in the black-and-gold livery of the Lady Amara's household sitting at a table drinking from the stock.

She knew them. That was the worst of it. Sefu and Old Rami. Sefu had taught her to swim in the water channels when she was seven. Old Rami had carried her on his shoulders through the market at the festival of lamps. They had worked for her father for twenty years.

They had purple stones on iron chains around their necks.

She saw it before they saw her. The faint violet glow through their shirts. Their faces, which had always been so quick and full of jokes, slack and patient now, like the faces of men waiting for an order. And she understood, standing there at the top of the ladder with a crate of contraband brandy in her arms, that Amara had not just come north to hunt her. Amara had brought the household. All of it. Every servant who had been loyal to her father. Every man who might have said, *the girl didn't do it, the girl was defending herself*.

She had put the stones on them, one by one, and brought them north on chains.

Sefu turned his head. His eyes met hers.

For a moment nothing happened at all. He looked at her the way one looks at a stranger. Then something moved behind his eyes, deep down, like a fish turning over in black water, and his mouth fell open.

"Little..." he began. "Little b—"

The stone at his throat flared.

His face emptied. He stood. So did Old Rami. They stood together, at the same instant, in the same way, like two puppets pulled up by one hand, and their chairs fell over behind them.

"The Lady wants you," Sefu said in a flat voice that was not his. "The Lady loves you. Come home."

Anna threw the crate at him.

She went down the ladder in one drop, hit the boards of the jetty, rolled, came up running. Behind her the wine-shop door crashed open. Bastiano, poling his skiff away from the jetty, took one look at her face and one look at the two men coming after her, and swore, and shoved the skiff back in toward the boards. She jumped. The skiff rocked so hard the brandy crates slid. Old Rami came off the end of the jetty after her, feet first, without slowing down, without even looking, and went into the black water of the Fourth Canal like a stone and did not come up.

Anna stared at the place where he had gone in.

"*He can't swim,*" she said. "He never — Rami never learned to swim—"

"Sit down!" Bastiano hissed.

On the jetty, Sefu stood perfectly still at the very edge of the boards and watched the skiff slide away into the dark. He did not try to follow. He only watched her, with his slack, empty, patient face, until the canal turned and took him out of sight.

She was still shaking an hour later when Bastiano put her ashore on a mud-bank under the Bridge of Saints and told her not to come back.

* * *

The interrogators came for Riegel on the second day, and on the third, and on the fourth.

They were polite. That was the thing he could not get used to. There were two of them, a man and a woman, both in plain grey coats with small silver chalices pinned at the collar, and they brought chairs with them into his cell and a lamp and a little folding table, and they set them all up neatly as if they were going to play cards.

“Let’s talk about the Elders of your clan,” the woman said, on the second day.

“No,” said Riegel.

“We understand that some of them encouraged your brother’s anger. Some of them felt, perhaps, that a man who abandons the clan forfeits his life. Some may even have *given* him the knife.” She turned a page in her notebook. “If you were to name them, that would put matters in a very different light. A brother driven to violence by his Elders. A family destroyed by old men. The Senate might view that with... sympathy.”

“Matteo,” said the man in grey, helpfully. “The smith. He forged your chains. Did he forge the knife, too?”

“No.”

“Are you sure?”

“No!” Riegel lunged against the chain at his collar, and it snapped him back so hard he saw stars. “He wept! He wept making the chains! You don’t — Matteo is the gentlest man in the districts, he’d never —”

“Then someone else,” said the woman.

On the third day they told him that Lucia had testified against him.

On the fourth day they told him that Lucia had been arrested for conspiracy and was being held in a cell three floors above him, and that her fate depended on what he said.

He did not believe them. He did not know whether he believed them. He sat in the dark after they left with his face in his hands and his whole body shaking, and he understood at last what they wanted. Not the truth. They did not care about the truth. They wanted a name. Any name. A name they could carry back to the lower districts and nail to a post, so that one half of his clan would turn on the other half, and the blood would start, and the Houses could sell swords to whoever was left.

Every clan in the realm will have to choose a side.

"I won't," he said aloud, to the dark. "Do you hear me? I won't give you anyone. You can take my head. You can't have them."

Nobody answered. But every night, when the lamp at the end of the corridor flickered, there was water just inside the bars, and bread. Once there was a small sour orange. He ate it, peel and all, and wept.

* * *

On the fifth night, sitting on the mud-bank under the Bridge of Saints because she had nowhere else to sit, Anna realised she was being watched.

There was no sound. No movement. Only a sudden certainty, cold at the back of her neck, the way her father had taught her to feel a blade coming before she saw it. She did not turn around. She let her right hand drift to the blanket on her lap, to the hilt beneath it.

"I wouldn't," said a voice behind her. It was young, and cheerful, and sounded slightly out of breath. "Honestly, I really wouldn't. I've been running for two nights under a river and I'm much too tired to be stabbed."

Anna was on her feet with the blade out before he finished the sentence.

He was sitting on the bottom rung of an iron ladder that came down from the bridge, a lean young man in a long grey coat with mud to his knees. His hands were up and open. He was grinning. It was not a very convincing grin. He looked, she thought, like someone who had grinned so long that his face had forgotten how to stop.

“Who are you?” she said.

“Fennick.” He kept his hands up. “Courier. Of the Tomb of Netherfiend.”

She laughed. She could not help it. It came out cracked and ugly. “Of course you are. And I’m the Queen of the Cups.”

“No,” he said. “You’re the Queen of Swords.” He said it simply, as if it were obvious. “A woman with a blade. Grief made sharp. A truth-teller. My lord’s Seneschal turned your card a week ago, a thousand miles from here, and I’ve been looking for you ever since.” He tilted his head. “You’re a lot harder to find than I expected. I asked every smuggler in the Drowned Districts. They all said they’d never heard of you. That’s how I knew I was close.”

Anna did not lower the blade.

“Netherfiend is a children’s story,” she said. “A bone king under the sand. My father’s servants used to frighten me with it. *Eat your dates, Anna, or the skull king will come up out of the desert and take you down to his tomb.*”

“He’s never once come up out of the desert for anyone’s dates,” said Fennick. “He’s been sealed under the sand for three hundred years by treaty with the Houses. He’s kept the treaty. They haven’t.” He nodded toward the city above them, toward

the faint glow of the Crystal Spires through the rain. "You know about the stones. The purple stones. I can see it in your face."

Her hand tightened on the hilt.

"My lord knows about them too," he said. "He knows where they come from. And he knows the Lady Amara came north with a whole household wearing them, to give herself to the King." His grin faded. "He doesn't know why. He'd like to. And he'd very much like to meet the woman the Deck calls the Queen of Swords, if she's willing."

"And if she isn't?"

"Then I'll go away." He spread his hands wider. "Truly. I'll climb back up this ladder, and you'll never see me again. But there's a swordsman in the Vault of the Chalice who goes to the block in twenty-five days for killing his brother in the rain. On the same night, at the same hour, that you—" he stopped.

"That I what?"

"That you killed your father," Fennick said quietly. "At the same moment. To the heartbeat. And a boy in the western badlands shot his cousin in the same heartbeat too. My lord heard all three of you. Through four hundred feet of stone. He has not heard anything through that stone in three centuries." He looked at her. "Don't you want to know why?"

Anna stood very still in the rain.

She thought about the courtyard. About the sound up the hilt. She thought about a stranger on a prison train somewhere in the dark, at the very moment she had been kneeling in the blood-soaked sand. Kneeling in the mud of some alley, perhaps. With the same weight in his hands. The same wail coming up out of him.

She had felt it. She had not known she had felt it until now. Kneeling in the ruin of her father's house, with her mouth open and the scream tearing out of her, she had felt, for one heartbeat, that she was not screaming alone.

"The swordsman," she said. "What's his name?"

"Riegel."

"Did he mean to do it?"

"No," said Fennick. "I don't think so. Did you?"

She lowered the blade.

"I'm not going to your tomb," she said. "Not yet. Amara's here. In the King's palace. And I'm not leaving this city until I've seen her face."

Fennick looked at her for a long time. Then, slowly, he lowered his hands.

"That's fine," he said. "I wasn't planning on leaving until I'd broken a man out of the Vault of the Chalice anyway." The grin came back, a little more real this time. "Want to help?"

* * *

The procession came down the Grand Water the next evening, at the hour when the bells of all the churches of Calice rang together.

Anna watched it from the roof of a sunken warehouse on the far bank, lying flat on the tiles with Fennick beside her. Neither of them spoke.

There were twelve boats. Long, low, black-lacquered gondolas, each lit by a dozen lanterns of violet glass, each poled by two men in black and gold. The men were Amara's household. Anna knew every one of them. She had grown up among them. They poled in perfect unison, every pole entering the water at the

same instant, every back bending at the same angle, every face the same face: slack and patient and turned toward the thirteenth boat, at the centre of the procession, the largest of all.

In that boat, on a throne of cushions beneath a canopy of violet silk, sat Amara.

She was more beautiful than Anna remembered. She had always been beautiful, but now it was a terrible thing, like the beauty of a fire seen from too close. Her gown was violet. Her hair was bound with gold. And at her throat, on its chain of black iron, the relic pulsed. Even from across the canal Anna could feel it. A heartbeat in the air. Slow and heavy and enormous, as if the whole of the Grand Water were a vein and the stone were pushing blood through it.

The crowds on the banks had fallen silent. Some of them, Anna saw, had sunk to their knees. Some were weeping. Not with fear. With longing. Reaching out toward the boats, toward the woman on the cushions, as if they could not help it.

“Look at them,” Fennick whispered. “Gods. Look at them.”

“She’s using it,” Anna said. “On the whole city. She’s *showing* it.”

“Not to them.” Fennick pointed.

The procession was turning. Out of the Grand Water, into the broad marble basin that lay before the Palace of the Chalice, where the Crown of Calice had sat for six hundred years. The palace rose from the water like a cliff of gold and white, every window lit. On the great water-stair before its doors, a crowd of figures stood waiting. Men and women in the robes of every House. Wine-red. Silver and white. River-grey steel. And at the top of the stair, alone, a tall figure in a mantle of deep blue, with

a crown on his head that caught the violet light and broke it into a hundred pieces.

“The King,” said Fennick softly. “Aurelian.”

The thirteenth boat touched the water-stair.

Amara rose from her cushions. She stepped out onto the marble, and the King came down to meet her, one stair at a time, and every House in Calice watched him do it. When he reached her he held out his hand. Amara took it. She sank down before him, all the way down, until her forehead touched the wet marble at his feet.

Across the canal, lying on the roof in the rain, Anna felt the relic’s heartbeat change.

It quickened. It reached. It turned, like a flower turning toward the sun, away from Amara and toward the tall man in blue who stood over her.

And the King of Calice smiled.

Anna had seen that smile before. She had seen it on the balcony of her father’s house, above the falling pillars, over the golden dust. It was the smile of someone who has been offered a thing they have wanted for a very long time, and who has already decided to take it.

“Fennick,” she whispered. Her voice did not sound like her own. “She didn’t come here to give herself to him.”

“Then what—”

“She came here to give him the *stone*.”

On the water-stair, the King of Calice bent down and lifted the Lady Amara gently to her feet, and with his other hand, very slowly, he reached for the chain at her throat.

Chapter Six: The High Table

There were thirteen chairs at the High Table of Calice, and on Table nights every one of them was filled by a mask.

It had been so for six hundred years. The custom was older than the Concord, older than the Senate, almost as old as the Crown. When the realm was young and its Houses were still killing one another in the streets, the first King of Calice had summoned the leaders of every faction to sit with him in a single room. He had ordered them to come masked, so that no man could be murdered on the way home for what he had said at the Table. The masks had stayed. So had the oath. *What is said at the Table belongs to the Table. Who sits at the Table belongs to no one.*

So the city guessed. The city had always guessed. Everyone in Calice knew there were thirteen seats, and that they were named by rank: the First Cup and the Second, the First Pentacle and the Second, the First Sword, the First Wand, and so on down. Everyone knew that the Speaker of the Senate was probably the First Cup, and that the Archmagister of the Crystal Spires was probably the First Pentacle. Everyone also knew it was death to say so aloud.

On Table nights, Speaker Lucan Merrow was never seen in his own face at court. Neither was Archmagister Halvard Coyne.

That proved nothing. On Table nights a great many important people were not seen in their own faces.

The First Cup sat in the fourth chair on the left and watched the King.

The mask was old. Wine-dark lacquer over thin silver, smooth and featureless except for the eyeholes, which were cut in the shape of two small chalices lying on their sides. It covered the whole face, and the hood covered the rest, and the robe beneath it was the same plain dark crimson that every Cup at the Table wore. The voice that came from behind it, on the rare occasions it spoke, had been trained for years not to sound like anyone. Behind the mask the First Cup breathed slowly, in and out, and kept both hands flat on the table, because one of them very much wanted to shake.

The Table was a ring of black wood in a round room at the heart of the Palace of the Chalice. There were no windows. The walls were hung with tapestries so old that their pictures had faded to ghosts: a woman pouring water from two jugs, a tower struck by lightning, a horned figure on a pedestal with two small chained people at his feet. The Arcana. The laws of the world. Every King of Calice had sat beneath them and believed they belonged to him.

This one had started to prove it.

King Aurelian sat in the thirteenth chair, which was not a chair but a throne, and wore no mask. That was the King's privilege. He was a tall man of perhaps fifty, broad-shouldered, with a short beard more silver than black and a face that had been called handsome for so long that it had stopped needing to try. His mantle was the deep blue of the Grand Water at dusk.

His crown was a plain circle of gold set with a single great sapphire, cut into the shape of a cup.

He was smiling.

He had been smiling since the procession, since the water-stair, since the moment he had lifted the Lady Amara to her feet and reached for the iron chain at her throat. He had not taken the stone from her there, before the crowds. He had only touched it. Then he had brought her in, through the great doors, into the palace, and up the long stair, and here, to the Table, where the masks were waiting.

Now the Lady Amara stood before him in the middle of the ring with her violet gown pooling on the black floor and her hands folded at her waist like a suppliant at an altar. The relic burned at her throat. The First Cup could feel its heartbeat even from the fourth chair. It went through the bones of the skull like a drum heard through a wall. *Love. Love. Love.*

“My lady,” said the King. “You have come a long way.”

“Across the sea, Majesty.” Amara’s voice was warm and rich and trembling. “From the sands. I have brought you my household, as I promised in my letters. Every man loyal to my late husband now wears your gift. Every one of them would die for me.” She lifted her face. Her eyes were shining. “And I would die for you.”

“I know,” said the King gently. “That was rather the point.”

Around the Table, nobody moved.

The First Cup kept both hands flat.

Letters, the First Cup thought. *She has been writing to him. For how long? And then, very cold, As I promised.*

“You have done beautifully,” said the King. He rose from the throne and came down into the ring, and the masks turned to

follow him. “Three years ago you found the stone in a trader’s cart at the old southern ports, and you understood at once what it was. That is rare. Most people who find one simply wear it. You wrote to the court. You asked for more. You asked how it could be made *stronger*.” He stood before her now, looking down, with that easy, fatherly smile. “And I sent a man to show you. Didn’t I?”

“Yes, Majesty.”

“And you used it on your husband. On Tariq, the greatest Sword Head of the southern clans. A man who had refused the Crown’s coin for twenty years. You made him love you so perfectly that he signed over his water rights, his lands, his men. And then, when his daughter would not bend, you made him love you enough to try to kill her.”

“Yes, Majesty.”

“And it worked,” the King said softly, “almost.”

Something flickered in Amara’s shining eyes. For the first time she seemed to hear what he was saying. “Majesty, the girl — the girl will be found, I swear it, my men are searching every canal in the—”

“I don’t care about the girl.”

The words fell into the room like a stone into still water. Amara’s mouth stayed open.

“I don’t care about the girl, my lady, or about Tariq, or about the sands,” said King Aurelian. “I care that you held a fragment of a law of nature against your heart for three years, and you fed it a household and a husband and a Sword Head’s blood, and it grew.” He lifted his hand. “Do you know what you are wearing? Truly?”

“Your gift,” Amara whispered. “Love. Perfect devotion.”

“The Lovers,” said the King. “The Sixth Arcanum. Cut, turned over and forced. A law of the world, broken into splinters by clever men in glass towers who thought it would make them rich.” He touched the stone with one fingertip, and the whole room shuddered. “And yours, my lady, is the biggest splinter in the world. Because you fed it the most.”

He closed his hand around the relic.

Amara screamed.

It was not pain. The First Cup understood that later, lying awake in the dark. It was not pain. It was the sound a person makes when the thing they love most is being taken out of their body. The relic did not want to go. It clung to her. Violet light poured out between the King’s fingers and crawled over Amara’s throat and face like vines, and she clawed at his wrist, and her household, standing in two silent ranks at the back of the room, all made the same sound at the same moment, a long low groan like a ship’s hull under strain.

The King pulled.

The iron chain parted.

Amara fell to the floor as if every string in her body had been cut at once. Her twelve men went down behind her, on their knees, in perfect unison, their heads hanging.

King Aurelian stood in the middle of the High Table with the Lovers relic burning in his fist, and laughed.

“Ah,” he said. He was looking at the stone with something very like tenderness. “There you are.”

He opened his collar with his free hand and hung the relic around his own neck by its broken chain, and knotted it, and let it fall against his chest.

The First Cup felt it happen. Everyone at the Table must have felt it. The relic's heartbeat, which had been a drum heard through a wall, changed. It slowed. It deepened. It stopped beating at the air and began, instead, to beat *inward*, as if it had found at last the heart it had been looking for. The King closed his eyes. A shiver went down the whole length of his body.

And when he opened them, they were violet.

The First Cup's hands, flat on the black wood, did not shake. It was the hardest thing the First Cup had ever done.

"Majesty," said a voice. It came from the chair directly across the ring. A mask of pale silver, smooth as a mirror, its eyeholes cut in the shape of two five-pointed stars. The First Pentacle. "The relic was cut for the lower castes. For voters and soldiers. It was never meant to be worn by—"

"By whom?" The King turned his violet eyes on the silver mask, mildly. "By a King?"

"By anyone who must still make choices, Majesty."

"I make very few choices," said King Aurelian. "Most things simply do what I tell them." He smiled. "And now they will love it."

He turned, slowly, to look at every mask at the Table, one by one. And as his gaze passed over them the First Cup felt it, the pull, the warm sweet terrible tide of it, like falling asleep in a bath. *Love him. He is the Crown. He is the realm. He is so tired and so wise and so alone. Love him.* The First Cup's breath stopped. Behind the wine-dark lacquer, the First Cup bit down hard on the inside of one cheek until the mouth filled with blood, and held on to the pain like a rope.

The gaze passed on.

Around the Table, some of the masks had bowed their heads. One, the Second Sword, had sunk out of his chair onto his knees. Across the ring, the silver mask of the First Pentacle had not moved at all.

“The Conclave meets at the Equinox,” said the King, and walked back to his throne. “Twenty-four days. Every House will come. The Bone Sovereign of Netherfiend has sent word by his herald that he will come too, and surrender the Thirteenth Arcanum into the keeping of the Houses, as the Senate asked.” He sat. “I am told he was very gracious about it.”

A murmur went round the Table.

“He’s lying, of course,” the King went on pleasantly. “He is the Ending. Things that end do not surrender; they wait. But it doesn’t matter. He will come into my city, under my Crown, before my Table, and when he kneels to give up the Thirteenth, I will be the one who takes it.” He laid his hand flat over the relic on his chest. “The Lovers I have now. The Ending I will have at the Equinox. And the third—”

He stopped.

For a moment, the First Cup saw something happen to the King’s face. It was very quick. It began in the eyes. Behind the violet, deep down in the pupils, something else moved. It was not violet. It was red. A dull, banked, sullen red, like a coal at the bottom of a grate. It looked out of the King’s eyes for no longer than a heartbeat, and the First Cup had the most horrible feeling, sitting there in the wine-dark mask, that it was looking straight back.

Then it was gone.

“The third,” said the King, “is already mine. It has only wandered a little. It will come home.” He smiled at the Table. “Things that love me always do.”

* * *

They carried the Lady Amara out of the palace an hour later on a litter, because she could not walk. She did not speak. She did not weep. She lay on the litter with her eyes open, staring at nothing, and her hand kept going to her throat, to the place where the chain had been, again and again and again, like a tongue going to the gap where a tooth was pulled.

Her household carried her. They were no longer devoted to her. They were not devoted to anyone. The relic had gone out of the world they knew, and taken their wills with it, and left them like clocks that had been wound once and then forgotten. They walked because they had been told to walk.

On the water-stair, a royal steward in blue handed the leader of her household a purse and a paper.

“Passage south,” the steward said. “On the morning tide. His Majesty thanks the Lady for her service and wishes her a restful journey home.”

The household’s leader, who had once been called Sefu, and had once taught a little girl to swim in the water channels of a house in the sands, took the purse and the paper, and nodded, and said nothing at all.

* * *

Long after midnight, when the palace had gone dark, the First Cup came out of a small side door onto a terrace above the Grand Water, without the mask.

The face beneath was nobody's business. The First Cup kept it in shadow anyway, under a plain dark hood, out of three decades' habit. The terrace was empty. The rain had stopped. Down below, the canal slid by, black and slow, carrying the reflections of the Crystal Spires on the far hills.

There was a coin on the balustrade.

It had not been there when the First Cup came out. It sat on the wet stone, perfectly centred, catching the faint light of the Spires. A silver coin. Old. Stamped on one side with a five-pointed star.

The First Cup picked it up and turned it over. On the reverse, someone had scratched a single word into the metal, very fine, with the point of a knife.

Tonight.

The First Cup stood for a long time looking at it. Then, slowly, closed a fist around it, and looked out over the black water toward the Senate House. Somewhere under that cliff of marble, under the canal and the cisterns and the old black rock, a swordsman from the lower districts was sitting in the dark with a chain at his throat, waiting for bread.

"He has the Lovers," the First Cup said quietly, to no one. "And something else. Something red."

Nobody answered. But from somewhere in the shadows at the far end of the terrace, very faint, came the soft clink of a second coin set down on stone, and then footsteps going away.

The First Cup put the coin in a pocket, pulled the hood lower, and went back inside to write a letter.

Chapter Seven: The Gunner Comes East

The steamship *Constance* came into the harbour of Calice on the sixteenth morning after the night of the great storm, under a sky the colour of wet slate, and the first thing Creez did on reaching land was throw up over the side of the gangway.

“First class,” he told the deckhand who handed him a rag. He wiped his mouth. “Nine days of first class. Silver forks. A little bell to ring for tea. Turns out none of it helps when the floor won’t stay still.”

The deckhand grinned at him. Creez grinned back, out of habit, and then felt the grin go wrong on his face, like a coat put on inside out. He let it drop. He went down the gangway onto the stone quay with his saddlebag over his shoulder and his father’s gun on his hip under his coat, and stood there for a long moment among the porters and the gulls and the shouting, and let the city hit him.

It was enormous. He had known it would be. He had not known what enormous meant. Redwater Crossing had one street, and he had thought it crowded on market day. Calice had ten thousand streets, and half of them were water, and all of them were full. Bells rang from towers he could not count. Gondolas slid past the end of the quay, black and gold and red, so close together that their poles clicked like knitting needles. Behind the

harbour the city went up in terraces of pink and white and ochre, dome on dome, until it met the hills, and on the hills stood the seven spires of glass, burning faintly from within even in the daylight, too bright to look at for long.

And somewhere in all of it, the shard in his coat was pulling.

It had pulled east the whole way across the ocean. Steady. Patient. He had lain awake in his first-class cabin with his hand pressed flat over the pocket and felt it tug against his ribs like a fish on a line, and every day it had grown a little stronger. Now, standing on the quay, it was no longer a tug. It was a hook. It dragged at his chest so hard he had to lean against it, and it was hot, hot enough that he could feel it through the strip of shirt and the coat and his own skin.

It was pulling him up the hill. Toward the north side of the harbour. Toward a great cliff of gold and white rising out of the water there, its windows blazing, its water-stairs crowded with boats.

“What’s that?” he asked the deckhand, pointing.

The deckhand looked at him as if he had asked what the sun was. “That’s the Palace of the Chalice, friend. The King’s house.”

Creez looked at it for a long moment.

“Huh,” he said.

* * *

He did not go to the palace. He was not a fool. He had read the card in the black-wax envelope until its edges went soft. *The swordsman in the cage goes to the block on the eve of the Equinox.* The swordsman was in a cage. The cage, the ship’s purser had told him, would be under the Senate House, which everybody in Calice called the Vault of the Chalice and spat after

saying. So he went looking for the Senate House instead, and a bed for the night, and something to eat that did not move.

He found the bed in a boarding-house behind the fish market, run by a widow who looked at his gun and doubled the price. He found the food in a cookshop on a bridge, a bowl of something black and salty with squid in it, which he ate with deep suspicion and then ordered again. He found the Senate House by asking a little boy selling broadsheets, who led him along three canals and over five bridges and then stopped and pointed, and Creez stood at the edge of a vast oval square of pink and white stone and looked across it at the cliff of marble columns and the red silk balcony, and at the place in the centre of the square where a gang of carpenters were laying the frame of a platform out of raw new timber.

“What’re they building?” he asked.

“The block,” said the boy. “For the Brother-Killer. On the eve of the Equinox.”

“The *Brother-Killer*?”

“The swordsman. From the lower districts. He killed his brother with a knife, in the rain.” The boy held up a broadsheet. There was a drawing on it, a big shaggy-haired man with a cleaver over his shoulder, looking like a brute. “Penny for the picture.”

Creez paid a penny for the picture. He stood looking at it for a long time.

The drawing was nothing. Somebody’s idea of a murderer. But underneath it was a line of type, and the line said: *Struck down his brother Enzo, Clan Head, in the lower city, on the night of the great storm, at the eleventh hour.*

At the eleventh hour.

Creez had been on his knees in the dirt at the eleventh hour. He knew because Elara had asked him what time it was, three hours before, laughing, in her wedding dress, before she had gone to the ruin to fetch the idol to show the bridegroom. *Is it nearly eight, Creez? He's late. He's always late.* Three hours later, by the overturned stagecoach, with the moon going down and the dust hanging in the air like smoke—

The eleventh hour.

He folded the broadsheet very carefully and put it in his coat, next to the shard.

"Mister?" said the boy. "You all right?"

"Fine." The grin came up out of habit again. This time it nearly fit. "Say. If a fellow wanted to buy a few hundred feet of rope, a crowbar, and a map of the sewers under this square, where'd he go?"

The boy's eyes went very wide. Then, slowly, he held out his hand, palm up.

"That," he said, "is going to cost more than a penny."

* * *

They came for him on the third night, on the quay, as he was walking back from the Chandler's with a coil of rope over his shoulder.

He felt them before he saw them. The shard told him. It had been pulling steadily all day toward the palace on the hill. Then, as he turned the corner of the long fish-sheds where the harbour met the Drowned Districts, it suddenly stopped pulling and began to *burn*, flaring so hot against his chest that he gasped aloud and staggered and nearly dropped the rope.

And on the quay ahead of him, in the yellow light of a single lantern, there were men.

Dockhands. Six of them. Big men in leather aprons, with hooks on their belts and arms like hams. They were standing in a line across the quay, shoulder to shoulder, between him and the boarding-house. They were not talking. They were not smoking. They were not doing anything at all, except standing perfectly still in the lamplight, waiting for him.

Every one of them had a faint violet light glowing at his throat.

“Evening,” said Creez.

Six heads turned toward him at exactly the same moment, at exactly the same angle.

“He wants it back,” said the dockhand in the middle. His voice was flat and pleasant and empty, like a man reading a list. “The fragment. His Majesty wants it back. It belongs to him. Give it to us.”

“His Majesty,” Creez repeated.

“He loves you,” said the dockhand on the left, in the same flat voice. “He loves everyone. Give it back and he will love you too.”

“Huh,” said Creez. He let the rope slide off his shoulder onto the stones. “Well, that’s real nice of him. Only, see, I’ve been loved by one of these things before.” He moved his coat back from his hip, slowly. “And it wore my cousin’s face while it did it.”

The dockhands came at him.

They did not run. They walked. All six, in step, and that was the most horrible thing about it, more horrible than the hooks they were pulling from their belts or the violet light at their

throats. They walked toward him like a single animal with twelve legs, and their faces did not change.

Creez drew.

He did not fire. He had one silver bullet in the chamber and two in his pocket, and the priests who blessed them were ashes, and these were men. Just men. Dockhands with stones round their necks, who had probably bought them from a pedlar for a week's wages to make some girl look at them twice. He did not fire. He turned the heavy single-shooter around in his fist and met the first of them with the butt of it, across the jaw, and the man went down without a sound and the other five walked over him.

A hook raked across Creez's shoulder. He felt it go through his coat and into the meat. He yelled. He hit the second man in the throat, and the third in the knee, and the fourth caught him by the collar and lifted him off the ground, one-handed, like a sack of meal, and drew back the hook.

"Give it back," the man said pleasantly. "He loves you."

"Tell him," Creez choked, "*to buy me dinner first—*"

A blade came out of the dark.

It was curved, and it was very fast, and it took the hook out of the dockhand's raised hand with a clean bright sound like a bell. The dockhand turned his head, slowly. Behind him, out of the shadow of the fish-sheds, stepped a girl with her hair tied back and a curved sword in both hands.

"Put him down," she said.

The dockhand did not put Creez down. He only looked at her with his empty face.

So the girl moved. Creez had never seen anything like it. He had seen gunfights, and knife-fights, and once in the badlands a

fight between two men with axes that had gone on so long they both fell down from tiredness. This was not like any of those. This was like water. She went through the four standing dockhands the way the tide goes through the pilings of a pier, and she did not kill any of them. Creez saw that. He saw her turn the edge at the last instant, again and again, and strike with the flat, and the hilt, and the heel of her hand. One by one they went down. The one holding Creez went last. She cut the strap of his apron and the strap of the hook-belt and the cord of the violet stone at his throat in one long stroke, and the stone fell and rang on the quay, and the man let go of Creez and dropped to his knees and began, quite suddenly, to weep.

Creez hit the stones on his back.

A second figure dropped down out of the dark beside him from somewhere overhead. A lean young man in a long grey coat, grinning.

“Hello,” said the young man. “You must be the Knight of Pentacles. You’re late. We’ve been watching this quay for three nights.”

Creez lay on his back on the wet stone and looked up at the two of them.

“I,” he said, “have *no* idea what that means.”

“It means,” said the girl, sheathing her blade, “that you’re carrying something heavy a long way.” She was looking at his coat. At the place over his heart where the shard was. Her face was very hard and very young. “What’s in your pocket, gunner?”

Creez sat up slowly. His shoulder was bleeding. The dockhand without his stone was still on his knees, weeping, saying a woman’s name over and over. *Gianna. Gianna. Gianna, I’m sorry.* The other five lay where they had fallen, stones still

glowing at their throats, and as Creez watched, they began very slowly to get up again.

“Later,” said the young man in grey. “Later is a good time. Right now is a very good time for *running*.”

* * *

They ran.

The young man, whose name was Fennick, led the way. He took them off the quay and down into the Drowned Districts, along the edges of black canals, under bridges so low they had to crouch, through the back of a church whose floor had sunk so far into the water that they waded up the nave past pews sticking up like the ribs of a drowned whale. The girl, whose name was Anna, came last, and every few corners she stopped and listened, with her head tilted, the way a hawk listens.

“They’re not following,” she said at last.

“They don’t need to,” said Fennick. “He’ll just send more.”

“Who will?” said Creez. “The King? The one who *loves* everybody?”

They stopped in a ruined chapel at the end of a dead-end canal, where the roof had fallen in and the rain came down through it onto an altar thick with moss. Fennick lit a stub of candle. In its light he looked at Creez’s shoulder, made a face, and began, without asking, to bind it up with a strip torn from his own coat.

“Nine nights ago,” said Anna, “the King of Calice took a purple stone off my stepmother’s neck and put it on his own.” She was sitting on the altar step with her blade across her knees. “Now every stone in this city answers to him. Every person wearing one. I watched it happen.” She looked at Creez. “And six

men just walked up to you on a quay and asked for something back. So I'll ask you again. What's in your pocket?"

Creez looked at her for a long moment.

Then he reached into his coat and took out the strip of shirt and unwrapped it, and held the shard out on his palm in the candlelight.

It was black and glossy and the size of a thumbnail, and it was warm, and it hummed. And in the candlelight, for the first time, he could see that it was not shapeless. It had been carved. On one face of it, very small, there was part of a figure. A curve that might be a horn. A hand that might have been clutching something. And around the edge, so faint it might have been a crack, a thin red line, like a vein.

Fennick stopped binding his shoulder. He sat back on his heels. The grin had gone completely off his face.

"Where did you get that?"

"Off the ground," said Creez. "By my cousin. After I shot the thing that was wearing her." He swallowed. "It came out of a little idol she found in a ruin. A horned man. Hugging himself. She thought it was pretty."

"A horned man," said Fennick. Very quietly. "On a pedestal. With two little chained people at his feet?"

Creez stared at him. "How do you know that?"

Fennick did not answer. He was looking at the shard as if it might bite.

"I need to send a crow," he said. "Tonight. To Netherfiend." He looked at Anna. Then at Creez. "And you two need to understand something. The stone the King took from your stepmother is a piece of the Lovers. Someone cut a law of the world into pieces and sold it in the market. That's bad enough."

He pointed at the shard on Creez's palm. "But that isn't the Lovers. That's the *Devil*."

The candle guttered.

"It isn't cut," said Fennick. "It isn't broken. It's whole, somewhere. That's just a splinter of it that chipped off when you killed whatever was riding your cousin. And the rest of it is calling it home." He looked out through the broken wall of the chapel, across the black water of the Drowned Districts, toward the hill where the Palace of the Chalice blazed against the night. "And it was calling it to the *palace*."

None of them spoke.

Then there was a sound at the door of the chapel. A small one. A child's footsteps in the wet.

Anna was on her feet with the blade up. Creez's hand went to his gun.

In the doorway stood the boy from the Senate square. The broadsheet boy. He was soaked to the skin and shivering, and he was holding something out in front of him in both hands like an offering.

"A lady give me this," he said, through chattering teeth. "Or a man. I couldn't tell. They had a hood. They give me a silver crown and said, *Take this to the gunner from the west, and the girl with the sword, and the man in grey. In the chapel at the end of the Seventh Canal.*" He swallowed. "They said you'd be here. You *are* here."

Fennick took it from him. It was a thick packet of folded paper, sealed with black wax. The wax bore no sigil. Only a smooth blank oval, like a thumbprint wiped clean.

Creez knew that wax. He had broken it once already, in the back of a telegraph office in Redwater Crossing.

Fennick broke it. Inside were six sheets of thin paper, covered in fine ink lines. Plans. Corridors. Stairs. A great oval square, and beneath it a maze of tunnels, and beneath that, cisterns, and beneath that, cells. One of them, the last on the left at the end of a long corridor, was marked with a single small cross.

And across the bottom of the last sheet, in the same fine slanting hand that had written Creez's card:

*He is fed. He is alive. He will not stay so. Read carefully.
Burn after.*

Chapter Eight: Plans in the Dark

The crow reached Netherfiend two hours before dawn, half-drowned, and fell out of the air onto the floor of the Letter-Hall like a dropped glove.

Nyxa caught it before it finished falling. She always did. She held it in both ink-stained hands while it shook, and warmed it against her chest, and with one fingernail she slit the tiny oilskin tube bound to its leg and drew out the paper inside without ever seeming to look at it. Then she set the crow in a basket of straw by the brazier, and unrolled Fennick's message, and read it, standing perfectly still in the middle of the Letter-Hall among ten thousand pigeonholes and forty years of other people's secrets.

Then she read it again.

Then she went to the Sovereign.

* * *

He was not on his throne. He was in the Ossuary Archive, three levels down, standing among the shelves with Thessaly, and he had been there since the council, Nyxa knew, because the Scribe had sent for lamp-oil four times. Thessaly's archive was a forest of bone. The shelves were bone and the ladders were bone and the books, many of them, were bound in things Nyxa had decided long ago not to ask about. In the middle of it, at a reading desk, the Sovereign of Netherfiend stood with a single

sheet of parchment in his hand. It was very old and very brown, and its edges had been burned.

He did not look up when she came in.

"The Concord," said Thessaly, from somewhere up a ladder. "The original. Or what's left of it. Two clauses missing, my lord, and the last page is ash. I'm sorry."

"Don't be," said Ossiran. "Someone burned it on purpose. That tells me more than the clauses would." He set the parchment down. "Nyxa."

"My lord." She held out Fennick's message. "From the canal city. He has all three."

The fires in the Sovereign's sockets brightened.

"The Queen of Swords. The Knight of Pentacles." She paused. "And the swordsman is alive, still in the Vault. There is a plan to free him. Plans of the Vault were delivered to Fennick tonight by a child. Sealed in black wax." She looked up. "Blank wax, my lord. No sigil. A thumbprint wiped smooth."

Ossiran said nothing.

Nyxa reached into her grey sleeve and drew out a second thing: the folded square of paper from the envoy's saddlebag. *The Tower is for you. Do not come.* She laid it on the reading desk beside the Concord, and turned it so the smear of wax on its edge caught the lamplight.

"The same," she said. "I'd stake my keys on it. Same blend of soot and resin. Same blank seal. Whoever is helping those three in Calice is the same hand that warned you not to go."

"Then they are either a friend," said Ossiran, "or they would very much like me to think so." He touched the wax with one bone fingertip. "What else?"

Nyxa hesitated. It was a small hesitation, but in the Letter-Hall she was known for never hesitating at all, and the Sovereign noticed. She saw him notice.

"The gunner carries a splinter," she said. "Not the Lovers. Fennick says it is carved. A horned figure on a pedestal. With chained people at its feet."

Up on the ladder, Thessaly dropped a book.

It fell a long way. It hit the bone floor with a sound like a door slamming, and lay open, and nobody went to pick it up.

"The Fifteenth," said the Scribe softly. "The Devil."

"Fennick says it is whole," Nyxa went on. "Somewhere. That the splinter chipped from it when the boy killed the thing riding his cousin. And that it pulls toward the Palace of the Chalice." She looked at the Sovereign. "Toward the King."

For a long moment the Ossuary Archive was utterly silent.

"The Devil is not cut," said Ossiran at last. "It has never been cut. It cannot be. It is the law of bondage: of the chain we choose and then forget we chose. You cannot break a chain into pieces, Nyxa. You only make more chains." He turned toward the dark between the shelves. "The Houses never bound it. At the Concord, it was simply... not there. Nobody would say where it was. Everyone at the table knew someone had it. Nobody would say who."

"And the last page of the Concord," said Thessaly, "is ash."

"Yes," said Ossiran. "It is."

He was silent again. And Nyxa, watching him, saw something she had never seen in forty years of service in the Tomb. The Sovereign's hand went up, slowly, as if of its own accord, and touched the side of his skull, just above where an ear

would have been, the way a living man touches his temple when he is trying to remember a word.

“Glue,” he said.

“My lord?”

“Hide glue. And rain on a window.” His fingers stayed against the bone. “There was a bench. And a window, and rain on it, and the smell of glue warming in a pot, and paper. A great deal of paper.” He stopped. The fires in his sockets had dimmed almost to nothing. “I don’t know whose it was.”

Neither of the guardians spoke. Nyxa found that she was holding her breath, though she did not need to breathe.

Then the Sovereign lowered his hand, and the fires came back up, and he was only Ossiran again, tall and still and certain, and whatever had come up out of the dark had gone back into it.

“Where is Velisande?” he said.

* * *

She was at the Table of Reading, alone, with the black candle burning and the Bone Deck in her hands. When the Sovereign came in, she did not stop shuffling. The sound of distant hooves filled the little round room.

“You know already,” he said.

“The crows are loud, my lord. And Nyxa runs.” She did not look up. “The Devil.”

“Yes.”

“In the King’s house.”

“Yes.”

The hooves stopped. She cut the deck. She did not lay it out.

“And you wish me to ask the cards what it means.”

"I wish you to tell me," said Ossiran, "why you were already shuffling before Nyxa reached the Archive."

Velisande's hands went still on the Deck.

She looked up at him then. In the candlelight her face was very pale and very beautiful, and there was nothing in it at all that he could read. Three hundred years he had known that face. He knew every expression it owned. He knew how it looked in rage, and in grief, and in that particular hot bright adoration that made the frost come up out of the floor. He did not know this one.

"Because I have been shuffling every night since the envoy came," she said quietly. "Every night, my lord. Alone. I ask the same question every time, and the Deck gives me the same answer, and I do not like it."

"What question?"

"How to keep you."

The candle did not move. Neither did he.

"And the answer?"

Velisande laid the Deck down on the pale stone, squared it with her fingertips, and did not turn a single card.

"When I understand it," she said, "I will tell you."

He looked at her for a long time. Then he turned and went to the door. At the threshold he stopped.

"Velisande."

"My lord."

"Someone has been reading the cards before me. Someone knew the Tower would come before you turned it. Someone sealed that warning in blank black wax and sewed it into a Cups envoy's saddlebag." He did not turn around. "If you knew who it was, you would tell me."

It was not quite a question.

"I would give you anything," said the Witch-Seneschal of Netherfiend. "You know that."

Which was not quite an answer.

When he had gone, she sat for a long time with her hand resting on the Deck. Then she lifted the top card, alone, and looked at it, and put it face down again, and slipped it not back into the Deck but into the bodice of her gown, against her heart, where no one would ever think to look.

* * *

"Again," said Fennick. "From the top."

The ruined chapel at the end of the Seventh Canal had become a war-room. Six thin sheets of paper lay spread across the mossy altar, weighted down at the corners with stones. A stub of candle burned in the middle. Around it crouched three people who had not known each other's names two days ago, and who had not slept in all of them.

"Again," said Anna. She closed her eyes. "We come in from the canal under the square. There's a sluice gate here—" her finger moved on the paper without her looking, "—that opens into the old cisterns. The plan says it's chained but the chain is rotted through. We go through the cisterns, north, two hundred paces. There's a stair cut in the rock. It goes up to the lowest level of the Vault."

"Guards," said Fennick.

"Two on the stair. Change at the fourth bell. Then the long corridor. One lamp at the end. His cell is the last on the left." She opened her eyes. "And then?"

“And then,” said Fennick, “there’s a door at the end of the corridor that the plans say will be unlocked. By someone else. From the inside.” He tapped the sheet. “And beyond that door is the Vault’s armoury and evidence store, where they keep everything they took off the prisoners. Including, if Nyxa’s crows are right, a very large, very black, very heavy cleaver.”

“Why do we care about a cleaver?” said Creez.

“Because it’s his,” said Anna. “And when a man forsakes his clan, the sword is all he has left of it.” She looked down at the plans. “My father used to say that.”

Creez did not answer. He was sitting on a broken pew with his shoulder bound up in a strip of grey coat and his father’s gun across his knees, and he was turning a single bullet over and over in his fingers. It was silver-lined. It caught the candlelight.

“Two left after that one,” he said, to no one in particular. “And no priests to bless any more.”

“You won’t need it,” said Fennick. “This is a quiet job. In through the water, out through the water. Nobody fires anything.”

Creez gave him a long look.

“Friend,” he said, “I’ve known you two days, and nothing around you has been quiet yet.”

Anna laughed.

It surprised all three of them. It came out of her short and sharp, like a cough, and she put her hand over her mouth as if to push it back in. Creez stared at her. Then, slowly, the corner of his own mouth went up. It was not much. But it was the first time since the canyon that the grin had come up on its own, without being sent for.

“Fine,” said Fennick, with dignity. “Fine. Laugh. When we’re all dead in a cistern I’ll be very smug about it.”

* * *

Later, when Fennick had gone out to the canal mouth to watch the water, Anna sat on the altar step and stared at the plans without seeing them.

“Bastiano came by this morning,” she said. “The smuggler. While you were sleeping.”

Creez looked up.

“My stepmother left the city. On the morning tide, nine days ago. The same morning after the King took the stone. They carried her down to the harbour on a litter. She couldn’t walk. She didn’t speak.” Anna’s hands were knotted together in her lap. “The whole household went with her. South. Home.”

“And you didn’t know.”

“I was on a roof. Watching a palace. Waiting for her to come out.” She laughed again, but this time it was not a laugh. “I came all this way. Across the sea, in the bottom of a bus, with the goats. I’ve been living in the mud for two weeks. Every night I went to sleep thinking, *tomorrow I’ll see her face*. And she’s gone. She was gone the whole time. She’s sailing home to the house where I killed my father, and I’m sitting in a ruined church planning to rescue a man I’ve never met.”

Creez was quiet for a while.

“You could go after her,” he said. “Fennick’d understand. I’d understand.”

“Would you?”

He thought about it. He thought about the canyon, and the small cairn of red stones, and the thing that had worn Elara’s

face saying *she hates you, Creez, she hates that you laugh*. He thought about the broadsheet in his pocket, with the brute's face on it, and the line underneath. *On the night of the great storm, at the eleventh hour*.

"No," he said. "I don't think I would. I think I'd want you to go and get the man out of the cage first."

"Why?"

"Because he's in a cage." Creez shrugged with his good shoulder. "And your stepmother's not going anywhere. Not on a litter. Not without that stone. She'll still be there, and so will the house, and so will what you want to say to her. But that man goes to the block in two weeks for something that happened to him at the same minute it happened to us." He looked at her. "You felt it too. Didn't you? That night. When you were screaming. You felt like you weren't the only one."

Anna turned her head and looked at him for a long time.

"Yes," she said.

"Me too," said Creez.

* * *

The interrogators came to Riegel's cell for the last time that night. They did not bring their chairs.

"Good news," said the woman in grey. She stood in the corridor, outside the bars, with her lamp held high. "You won't have to wait for the Equinox after all. His Majesty has taken an interest in your case. He has asked that the sentence be carried out at dawn. Tomorrow. Privately, in the yard of the Vault, by the Sword Head of the Vantress clan." She smiled. "His Majesty feels that there is no longer any need for a public spectacle. He has found... other ways to unite the clans."

Riegel stared up at her from the floor.

"Tomorrow," he said.

"At dawn." She turned to go. Then she paused. "Oh. And his Majesty wishes you to know that the woman Lucia was released this morning, without charge. She is on her way home." The woman in grey looked at him almost kindly. "His Majesty is very generous. He loves all his subjects. Even you."

When they had gone, Riegel sat in the dark for a long, long time.

He did not weep this time. He found that he had nothing left to weep with. He sat with his back against the wet black rock and his chained hands in his lap and thought, quite calmly, *Lucia is free. Then it doesn't matter. Then let them.*

The lamp at the end of the corridor flickered.

He did not look up. He heard the small sounds: cloth, breath, a cup set down on stone. He smelled water. Bread.

"They've moved it," he said to the dark, without raising his head. "Tomorrow. Dawn."

"We know," said the voice. Low and even and giving nothing away. And then, for the first time, a second voice beside it, just as low, just as careful, but different: drier, older, with something underneath it like the edge of a coin.

"Somebody told him," the second voice said. "Somebody close to us. He knows there's a plan. He doesn't know what it is. Not yet."

"Who are you?" Riegel whispered. "*Both* of you. What do you want?"

Silence. Then the first voice, very quietly:

"Eat your bread, swordsman. You'll need both hands tomorrow."

* * *

At the mouth of the Seventh Canal, Fennick caught the second crow of the night as it came down out of the dark, and unrolled the tiny paper from its leg, and read it by the light of the Crystal Spires on the hill. Two lines. In the fine slanting hand.

Dawn. Not the Equinox. Tomorrow.

Someone talked.

He stood for a moment on the slick stones with the paper in his fist and the black water lapping at his boots.

Then he turned and ran back up the canal to the chapel, and put his head in at the broken door, and looked at the two of them, the girl on the altar step and the gunner on the pew, both half asleep, both already reaching for their weapons at the sound of his feet.

"Change of plan," he said. "We go tonight."

Anna was already standing. Creez was already loading the silver bullet into the chamber of his father's gun, and snapping it closed, and getting to his feet.

"Tomorrow, then," he said.

"Tonight," said Fennick.

"Tonight's just tomorrow," said Creez, "with less sleep." And he went out past Fennick into the rain.

Chapter Nine: The Vault of the Chalice

The sluice gate was not rotted through.

Anna found that out with her hands, at the bottom of the canal under the Piazza of the Chalice, eight feet down in water so black and cold that it felt less like water than like a fist closing on her chest. The plans had said the chain was rotted. The plans had said it would part at a good hard pull. She pulled. The chain did not part. It was new. She could feel the sharp unworn edges of the links under her fingers, and the heavy square body of a padlock, and she hung there in the dark with her lungs burning and understood that somebody had come down here since the plans were drawn and put a new chain on the gate.

Someone talked.

She kicked for the surface.

“*New chain,*” she gasped, coming up under the stone arch where the other two clung to the slimy wall. “New lock. It’s new, Fennick, it’s *new*—”

Fennick swore. He did not do it loudly. He did it with great precision and at considerable length, in a whisper, while unbuttoning the inside pocket of his grey coat and taking out a ring of keys. There were a great many of them. Some were iron and some were bone and one, Anna was nearly sure, was made of glass.

“Hollow keys,” he said, between his teeth. “For the Hollow Roads. They’re not supposed to be used for padlocks.” He picked one, a short black key with teeth like a saw. “My lord will be furious.”

“Your lord,” said Creez, “is a skeleton.”

“He can still be furious. You’d be amazed.” Fennick took a deep breath and went under.

They waited. The water lapped against the stones. Far overhead, through the iron grate at the top of the culvert, the bells of Calice began to toll the second hour after midnight, one tower and then another and then all of them, until the whole city rang. Anna counted. Somewhere above them, beyond all that stone, the sky would be just beginning to think about getting lighter in three hours.

Fennick came up.

“Open,” he said, coughing. “Don’t touch the lock. It’s not a lock anymore. It’s... I’ll explain later.”

* * *

The cisterns were a cathedral built for water.

They waded into them through the sluice and stood, waist-deep, in a vast low hall of stone pillars that went on in every direction until the light of Fennick’s little shuttered lantern gave out. The pillars were thick as oaks and carved with faded figures, men and women pouring water from jugs, over and over, into a sea that did not exist anymore. The air smelled of mineral and old rot. Every drop that fell from the vaulted ceiling made a sound like a coin dropped into a well, and the sound went on, echoing, for a long time.

“North,” said Anna. “Two hundred paces. A stair cut in the rock.”

They went north.

At eighty paces, Creez stopped.

“Wait,” he said.

The others turned. In the shuttered lantern-light his face had gone grey.

“It’s burning,” he said. He had his hand pressed flat against his coat, over the pocket. “The shard. It was just pulling. Now it’s burning.”

Anna’s blade was out of its sheath before he finished. “The King’s people?”

“I don’t know.” He turned slowly, in the black water, and the shard turned him, the way a compass needle turns. He was facing back the way they had come. Toward the sluice. Toward the dark. “It’s not pulling toward the palace anymore. It’s pulling toward something *close*.”

Fennick closed the shutter of the lantern.

The dark was absolute. Anna stood in it with the water to her waist and her blade raised and her heart going so hard she could hear it, and listened. Water dripping. Coins into a well. The faint far-off toll of a single late bell.

And then a sound under all of it.

A chain.

Somewhere back among the pillars, a long way off, someone or something was walking through the water and dragging a chain. She could hear the links knocking together under the surface. Heavy. Slow. *Clink. Clink. Clink.* Unhurried, the way a man walks when he knows there is nowhere for what he is following to go.

“North,” Fennick breathed in her ear. “Now. Quietly. Don’t run. Running splashes.”

They did not run. It was the hardest thing Anna had ever done. They waded north through the pitch-black cisterns at a walk, one hand each on the shoulder ahead, Fennick leading by memory and the faint grey ghost-light that Hollow-folk could see in old stone and no one else could, and behind them, in the dark, the chain came on.

Clink. Clink. Clink.

It was not getting closer. It was not falling behind. It was keeping exactly the same distance, the way a wolf keeps the same distance from a herd.

At two hundred paces Anna’s outstretched hand hit rock. Rough, cut rock. A step.

“Up,” whispered Fennick.

They went up.

* * *

The stair was narrow, and it turned on itself as it climbed, and at the top of it there was a door of iron bars, and beyond the bars a short passage lit by a single lamp, and in the passage there were two guards.

Exactly as the plans said. Two guards. Change at the fourth bell.

What the plans did not say was that both guards would be lying face down on the stone floor of the passage, very still, with their pikes beside them.

Anna stopped on the top step. Behind her, Creez and Fennick stopped too. The three of them stood in the dark of the

stair and looked through the bars at the two motionless men in the lamplight.

“Dead?” whispered Creez.

Fennick knelt, reached through the bars and touched one guard’s neck.

“No,” he said, slowly. “Asleep. Very, very asleep.” He sniffed his fingers and made a face. “Poppy and something else. Something sweet.” He looked at the iron door. It stood very slightly ajar. “And someone’s already opened this.”

“Your friends,” said Anna. “The ones who wrote the plans.”

“Or someone who wants us to *think* they’re our friends,” said Creez. “And wants us to walk right in.”

The three of them looked at each other.

Behind them, far down the stair, in the black water of the cisterns, the chain went *clink*.

“In,” said Anna, and pushed open the door.

* * *

The long corridor was exactly as the plans had drawn it. A hundred paces of weeping black rock. Iron doors on either side, each with a small barred window. A single lamp at the very end, so far away it looked like a star.

Anna ran.

She did not care about splashing now. She did not care about anything. She ran down the corridor with her blade in her fist and her boots slapping the wet stone, past one iron door and another and another, and some of the barred windows had faces in them, grey faces, staring, and one of them called out to her in a language she did not know, and she did not stop. Last on the left. Last on the left. The star at the end of the corridor grew into a

lamp, an ordinary lamp of brass and glass hanging from a hook, and beneath it, on the left, there was a door.

It was open.

She skidded to a stop in front of it.

The cell beyond was small and black and wet. There was a ring set into the wall, and a length of chain hanging from the ring, and at the end of the chain an iron collar lying open on the stone. There was a cup on the floor just inside the bars, and half a heel of bread. There was nothing else.

“No,” Anna said. “No, no, no—”

Creez came up beside her, breathing hard. Then Fennick. They looked into the empty cell.

“They took him early,” said Fennick. His voice was flat. “Dawn’s not dawn anymore. They’ve taken him early.” He spun round. “The yard. The plans showed a yard. North end, beyond the armoury. Where’s the—”

“*There*,” said Creez.

At the very end of the corridor, beyond the lamp, there was a second door. It was iron, banded and studded, and on the plans it had been marked with a single word in the fine slanting hand: *open*.

It was open. It stood wide. And beyond it, in a room lined with shelves and racks and iron-bound chests, a lamp had been left burning on a table, as if someone had only just stepped out.

They went through.

The armoury and evidence store of the Vault of the Chalice was the room where the Senate kept everything it had taken from everyone it had ever thrown into the dark. Anna saw swords on the racks. Muskets. A fiddle. A child’s doll in a glass case with a paper label tied around its neck. Shelves of purses, of rings, of

letters tied in ribbon. Everything labelled. Everything numbered. Everything waiting for owners who were never coming back up the stair.

And on the table, beside the burning lamp, lay a cleaver.

It was enormous. It was longer than Anna was tall, from the end of its leather-wrapped grip to the broad flat tip of its blade, and the blade was as wide across as her hand and forearm laid together, and it was black. Not painted. Not dull. Black the way a starless sky is black, the steel itself, as if the smith had forged it out of the night. A paper label was tied to the grip. On the label someone had written: *No. 4471. Riegel, street-born. Brother-killer. Weapon of the crime (not used).*

Not used.

Anna stared at those two words.

Then she put her hands on the grip and lifted.

She nearly could not. She was strong, and she had trained since she was six with a curved blade and a two-handed practice sword of her father's, but this was not a sword. This was a piece of the earth. She got it off the table. She got it up onto her shoulder. Her knees bent under it. She stood swaying in the lamplight with the thing on her shoulder and her own blade in her free hand.

"Anna—" Fennick began.

"He'll want it," she said through her teeth. "My father always said. When a man forsakes the clan, the sword is all he has left."

"He *didn't* use it."

"That's why he'll want it."

From somewhere beyond the far wall of the armoury, through a high barred window that let in a faint grey light, came a sound.

Voices. Boots. The scrape of something heavy being dragged across stone. And a man's voice, deep and level and carrying, speaking slowly, as if reading aloud.

"Riegel, street-born, of the lower districts. By the justice of His Majesty King Aurelian, and by the mercy of the Senate of Cups, you are condemned to death for the slaying of your brother, Enzo, Clan Head. Have you anything to say?"

There was a pause.

Then, very faintly, a voice they had never heard before, cracked and hoarse and utterly exhausted.

"He slipped."

Anna's whole body went cold.

"He slipped," the voice said again, louder. *"I slipped. It was the rain. I was holding his wrist. I'd have let him cut me. I'd have let him."* A breath. *"That's all. That's all I've got to say. Go on."*

"Window," said Creez. "Window. Now. Give me a—"

Fennick was already dragging a chest across the floor. Creez jumped onto it, got his fingers round the bars of the high window, hauled himself up and looked through. Anna saw his face in the grey light. She saw it change.

"Yard," he said. "Twenty paces down. There's a block. There's a man with a sword. Grey hair, big. He's—" He swallowed. "They've got him on his knees."

"Can you get a shot?"

"Through the bars?"

"Can you get a shot?"

Creez let go with one hand. He drew his father's gun. He pressed his face against the bars and pushed the long silver

barrel between them, and cocked the hammer, and went very still.

“Something else,” he whispered. “There’s something else in the yard.”

“What?”

“I don’t know. It’s — it’s got a chain.” His voice shook. “Anna, the shard’s *on fire*—”

Behind them, in the long corridor they had come down, very close now, a chain went *clink* against the stone.

Anna turned with the black cleaver on her shoulder and her own blade in her hand.

In the doorway of the armoury, where the lamplight of the corridor met the lamplight of the room, something was standing. It was shaped like a man. It was taller than a man. It wore the rags of a Vault guard’s coat. Around its neck, its wrists, its waist and its ankles there were iron chains, heavy ones, and the chains did not end. They trailed off behind it into the dark of the corridor, as if it had been leashed to something very far away, and when it moved its head, slowly, to look at her, she saw that it had no face. Only a smooth, blank, horned shape where a face should be, like a carving that had been left unfinished.

Out in the yard, the deep level voice said: “*Kneel straight. Lay your neck along the wood.*”

And at the very same moment, the faceless thing in the doorway said, in a voice like a chain dragged over iron:

“*Give it back.*”

Chapter Ten: Five Escaped

The yard of the Vault of the Chalice was a square of black stone open to the sky, forty paces across, walled on all four sides by the sheer backs of buildings. High above, a sliver of the night was going grey at the edges. Rain fell into the yard in long straight threads, and in the middle of it, on a low platform of new timber, stood the block.

Riegel knelt before it.

They had taken the chain from his collar but not from his wrists. The irons hung heavy between his hands. He knelt in the rain with his back straight, the way Old Matteo had taught him to kneel before the Elders when he was a boy, and he laid his throat along the cold wet wood, and he closed his eyes.

He was not afraid. He had expected to be. He had lain awake in the dark of the cell imagining this, the wood against his neck, the rain, the sound of the sword coming up. He had thought he would scream, or beg, or fight. He did none of those things. He knelt there in the rain and felt very tired and very calm, and somewhere far back in his mind a voice that sounded like his brother's said, almost kindly, *You stupid, stubborn — you could have just lifted the sword.*

"I know," Riegel whispered. "I know."

Above him, Imre Vantress raised his blade.

The Sword Head of the Vantress clan was a tall man with close-cropped silver hair and a face like a cliff. He had executed eleven men in his life, all by order of the Crown, all cleanly. He did not enjoy it. He did not dislike it. It was a thing that had to be done properly, and he did it properly, because a clumsy execution was a cruelty and the Vantress clan did not deal in cruelty. That was what he told his sons.

He looked down at the man on the block. A great swordsman, they had said. Forsworn of his clan. Brother-killer. He had expected a brute. He saw a tired man in a bloodstained shirt with his eyes closed, who had said, *He slipped*, and nothing else.

Something in Imre Vantress hesitated.

It was a very small thing, and it lasted no longer than a breath. Then he set his feet, and lifted the long blade high above his head, and began the stroke.

* * *

At the high window of the armoury, Creez saw the blade go up.

He had been watching it through the bars down the long silver barrel of his father's gun, and he had been telling himself, the way his father had taught him, *Don't look at the man. Look at the thing in his hand*. The thing in the man's hand was a sword. A long, straight, beautiful sword, catching the grey light. And Creez thought, with total clarity: *If I shoot the man, the sword still falls*.

So he did not aim at the man.

Behind him, in the armoury, the faceless thing in the doorway lunged at Anna.

It came at her in a rush of chains. All of it at once, the iron at its wrists and ankles and throat whipping out ahead of it like the arms of something drowning, and Anna had the black cleaver on her shoulder and her own blade in her other hand and no time at all.

She did not swing the cleaver. She could not have swung it. She did the only thing she could do: she let it fall.

It came off her shoulder and down in front of her like a slammed door, its broad black flat between her and the thing, its tip striking the stone floor with a sound like a bell. The faceless thing hit it. Its hands, its chains, its whole horned weight crashed into the black steel and stopped. Anna was thrown back off her feet. She hit a rack of muskets and went down among them. The cleaver stood upright on its tip for one impossible heartbeat, quivering, and then began to fall.

“Give it BACK!” the thing roared, and reached over the falling blade for Creez’s legs on the chest.

And from the corridor behind it, a voice said a single word.

Anna would never be able to say what the word was. It was not in any language she knew. It was short and hard and cold, like the sound of a coin struck down flat on a stone counter, and when it was spoken the air in the armoury went tight, the way the air goes tight before lightning.

Every chain on the faceless thing went taut at once.

They snapped backward, out through the door into the corridor, dragging it with them. Its reaching hands missed Creez’s boots by a finger’s width. It was hauled off its feet. It hit the floor of the doorway on its back and lay there, writhing, its

chains pinned flat to the stone as though some vast invisible weight had been laid across every link.

In the corridor, beyond it, stood two figures.

They were hooded. They were masked. One mask was pale silver, smooth as a mirror, with eyeholes shaped like five-pointed stars. The other was wine-dark lacquer, with eyeholes shaped like two small chalices on their sides. The figure in the silver mask had one gloved hand raised, palm down, fingers spread, as if pressing something flat to a table.

“Now,” said the figure in the wine-dark mask, to Creez. “Whatever you are going to do. Do it *now*.”

* * *

In the yard, the long blade reached the top of its arc and started down.

At the window, Creez squeezed the trigger.

* * *

The single-shooter spoke.

It was not a gunshot. It was a cannon in a church. The sound of it filled the armoury, and the corridor, and the yard, and went up between the high black walls into the grey sky, and every pigeon on every roof in the north quarter of Calice went up with it. The silver lining of the barrel blazed white. The bullet crossed the yard in a line of pale fire.

It did not hit Imre Vantress.

It hit his sword.

It struck the long straight blade a hand's breadth above the hilt, at the very bottom of the stroke, a finger's width from

Riegel's neck. And the blessed silver met the Vantress steel, and the steel did not bend, or break, or turn.

It *shattered*.

It went to pieces in the Sword Head's hands like a mirror struck with a hammer. A hundred bright fragments burst outward through the rain. Imre Vantress staggered back with his empty hilt in his fist and a dozen fine cuts opening on his face like red threads. The guards around the yard threw themselves flat. And on the block, Riegel opened his eyes, and felt the rain on his neck, and the wood, and nothing else, and understood that he was still alive.

He lifted his head.

Through the rain, across the yard, an iron-banded door in the wall was opening.

* * *

Two left, Creez thought, dropping off the chest. *Two left. Two left.*

He did not say it aloud. He reloaded with shaking fingers as he ran, a fresh silver-lined bullet from his pocket into the chamber, and snapped the gun closed, and then he was through the armoury door and out into the yard behind Anna and Fennick, into the rain.

Anna was dragging the cleaver.

She had it by the grip, both hands, and the black blade was scraping behind her along the stone, throwing up dull orange sparks, and her face was set like a stone. She dragged it across the yard straight toward the block, and the guards, getting up off the ground, looked at her and looked at the sparks and did not try to stop her.

Riegel got to his feet. His wrists were still in irons. He stood swaying in the rain beside the block and watched a girl he had never seen in his life drag his own black cleaver across the yard toward him.

She stopped in front of him. She was gasping. She let the blade fall flat at his feet with a crash.

"Yours," she said.

He stared at her. Then at the cleaver. Then back at her face.

"Who—"

"*Later!*" shrieked Fennick, from somewhere behind her. "Everybody keeps asking that! Later! Later is the best time!"

"Hold out your hands," said Anna.

He held them out. Her curved blade flashed down once, twice, and struck the chain between his wrist-irons where it met the cuff, at the weak place where the rivets went in, exactly as her father had taught her to strike a chain, and the chain fell away.

"Pick it up," she said.

Riegel looked down at the cleaver.

"I don't fight," he said. His voice cracked. "I don't — I won't lift it. I didn't lift it for him. I *won't*."

"I didn't ask you to lift it," said Anna. "I asked you to pick it up."

He bent down. He took the grip in both hands. It was warm, the way it had always been warm, as if the black steel remembered him. He did not raise it. He let the blade hang, its tip on the stone. But he held it.

"*There!*" Creez yelled. "*The door! Go!*"

On the far side of the yard, the iron-banded door stood open on a black passage. In it stood the two masked figures, the silver

and the wine-dark. The silver one still had a gloved hand raised. The wine-dark one was beckoning.

They ran.

Riegel ran with the cleaver dragging behind him and the sparks flying. Anna ran at his side. Fennick ran ahead. Creez ran last, walking backward half the time with the gun up, covering the yard, and the yard was filling now with guards pouring out of every door in red cloaks and grey steel, shouting, and at the centre of them stood Imre Vantress with his face running blood and his empty hilt in his hand, not shouting at all. Only watching.

Behind him, in the doorway of the armoury, the faceless thing got up.

Whatever word the silver mask had spoken, it had worn off. The chains had come loose from the floor. The thing came out into the rain, into the yard, its blank horned face turning, turning, until it found Creez. It made a sound that was not a word. Then it came across the yard in a rush of chains, straight through the guards, scattering them like ninepins, straight for the open door and the five figures running through it.

Creez stopped in the doorway and turned and raised the gun.

Two left.

He did not fire.

A swordsman got there first.

He was young, younger than Creez, with a fair braid and the river-grey steel of the Vantress clan. He came out of the ranks of guards at a dead run and put himself between the faceless thing and the door with his long blade up, and he did not hesitate, and he did not look back.

“Abomination!” he screamed at it. *“Not in the Sword Head’s yard! NOT IN OUR YARD!”*

The thing hit him.

Creez saw it. He would see it for a long time afterward, lying awake on ships and in desert camps and in the dark under the earth. The young swordsman’s blade going into the blank horned face. The chains closing around him. The two of them going down together onto the black stone in the rain.

“Torvald!” That was Imre Vantress. The Sword Head was running now, his empty hilt thrown away, his bare hands out. *“TORVALD!”*

“Creez!” Anna had him by the collar. *“Come on!”*

He went. The iron door slammed behind them on the yard and the screams and the rain.

* * *

The passage beyond went down, steeply, in the dark. They ran it blind. At the bottom there was water, and a low arch, and then the night air and the smell of the canals, and they came out on a narrow ledge of stone above the black water of a back canal under a bridge, with the sky going grey above the rooftops.

The two masked figures were already there, standing at the edge of the ledge.

Five of them, on the stones. Riegel with the cleaver. Anna with her blade. Creez with his father’s gun. And the two in masks, silver and wine-dark, hooded, motionless, and between them all, panting, with his hands on his knees, a courier in a long grey coat who did not count.

For a moment nobody said anything at all. The rain fell. Somewhere far off the bells began to ring for dawn.

“*Who are you?*” said Riegel. He was looking at the masks.
“You brought me bread. Every night. You — *who are you?*”

The wine-dark mask turned to him. For a moment Riegel thought it was going to answer.

“Friends you haven’t met,” it said.

“That’s not an answer.”

“No,” the mask agreed. “It isn’t.”

The silver mask was looking at Creez. At his coat. At the pocket over his heart.

“The King knows you have it,” it said. Its voice was dry and careful and had that edge underneath it, like the rim of a coin. “He felt it the moment you landed. That thing in the yard was his. There will be more.” It paused. “Do not let him have it. Whatever it costs. Do you understand me? *Whatever it costs.*”

Creez’s hand went to his chest. “What is it?”

But the silver mask had already turned away. It looked at the wine-dark one. Some silent thing passed between them. Then the two of them stepped back, together, toward the low arch they had come out of, toward the passage that led back up into the Vault and the yard and the Senate House and the city.

“Wait—” said Anna. “You can’t go *back*. They’ll know — the guards saw you, the Sword Head—”

“The guards saw two masks,” said the wine-dark one. “There are thirteen masks in Calice. And a great many more faces.” It paused at the arch. “We have to go back. That is the whole point of us.”

“*Why are you helping us?*”

The wine-dark mask looked at her for a long moment.

“Because the King is wearing your stepmother’s stone,” it said, “and something else that is far worse. And because nobody

in a crystal tower or a marble palace has ever once looked down.”
A pause. “We are trying to look down.”

Then the arch was empty.

The four of them stood on the ledge in the rain. Fennick straightened up slowly. He was looking at the empty arch with an expression none of them had seen on him before.

“Five,” he said quietly.

“What?” said Creez.

“Five of you came out of that Vault. Not four.” He shook his head. “My lord’s going to want to hear about that.”

“We were never here,” said a voice from the dark of the arch, very faint, already far away. Then nothing.

* * *

High on the hill above the Grand Water, in a room in the Palace of the Chalice where no lamps were lit, King Aurelian sat alone by a window with the Lovers relic burning on his chest and listened to the bells ring for dawn.

He had felt it. The holy shot. It had gone through him like a needle. He had felt the thing in the yard die too: the chained one, the little servant he had sent down into the Vault to wait. He had felt a young swordsman’s blade go into it, and the chains close, and the two of them go out together like candles pinched between finger and thumb.

And he had felt, in the same instant, very faint and very far, the splinter.

His splinter. Running. Getting away.

A door opened behind him. He did not turn.

“Majesty.” The voice of Imre Vantress was very level. “The prisoner has escaped. There were others. A girl with a sword. A gunner. A man in grey. And two in masks, who—”

“I know.”

“Torvald is dead, Majesty. My swordsman. He was nineteen.”

“I know that too.” The King turned his head at last. In the dark, his eyes were violet. And behind the violet, very faintly, deep down, something red. “I’m sorry for it. Truly. He loved the Crown. Most people do, now.” He smiled. “Find them, Sword Head. All of them. Bring me the boy with the gun, and whatever he has in his pocket. You may do as you like with the others.”

Imre Vantress stood in the doorway with the fine red cuts across his face and said nothing for a long moment.

Then he bowed.

“Yes, Majesty,” he said. “I will bring them all back.”

Chapter Eleven: The Hollow Roads

There were no lamps on the Hollow Roads. There was no need. The walls gave off a light of their own, faint and grey, like the sky an hour before dawn, and in that light the four of them ran.

Fennick took them in through a crack in the foundations of a drowned church in the Ninth Canal, so narrow that Riegel had to turn sideways and drag the cleaver after him by its grip, and on the far side of the crack the world changed. The brick and mud of Calice fell away. In its place was stone, old and smooth and dry, cut into tunnels so long ago that the chisel marks had worn to ripples, like sand under shallow water. The air was cold and clean and smelled faintly of dust and something else, something like cut flowers left too long in a tomb.

They ran through tunnels and across bridges of black stone over chasms with no bottom. They waded through water so cold it burned. They climbed stairs that wound upward for so long that Riegel, who had been beaten for a fortnight and laid his neck along the block an hour ago, began to lose count of the steps, and then of everything else.

He fell on the three hundredth step. Or the four hundredth. The cleaver went clanging down the stair behind him, sparks flying, and he lay on his face on the cold stone and did not get up.

Anna caught him under one arm. Creez caught him under the other. Fennick went back down for the cleaver, and came back up dragging it, and swearing. None of them said anything to Riegel at all. They hauled him the rest of the way between them.

At the top was a round chamber with a dry floor and a ceiling of carved stars, and there Fennick stopped at last and bent double with his hands on his knees.

"Rest," he gasped. "Ten minutes. Then we keep going. They'll be behind us."

* * *

Riegel lay on his back on the floor and stared up at the carved stars.

He could not stop shaking. He did not know whether it was cold, or hunger, or something else. His hands, lying on the stone at his sides, still had the iron cuffs on them, with short broken ends of chain hanging from each. The cleaver lay beside him where Fennick had dropped it, black and silent.

"Why?" he said.

They looked at him.

"Why did you —" He got up onto his elbows. "Why did any of you do that? I don't know you. You don't know me. I killed my *brother*."

Silence.

"I know," said Anna at last. "I heard you. In the yard. *He slipped*." She was sitting on her heels with her blade across her knees, wiping it slowly on the hem of her coat. It was already clean. She went on wiping it. "My father slipped too. The ground went out from under him. A sinkhole. He fell onto my guard."

Her voice was very flat. "On the night of the great storm. At the eleventh hour."

Riegel stared at her.

"He was trying to kill me," she said. "Not him. The thing my stepmother had done to him. She had a stone. A purple stone. She made him love her so perfectly that when she told him to kill me, he did not even hesitate." She turned her blade over. "He got his eyes back right at the end. Just for a breath. Long enough to tell me to run."

"I'm sorry," Riegel whispered.

"Don't be. Not yet." She did not look up. "Be sorry when I know what I'm going to do about her."

They both looked at Creez.

The gunner from the badlands had not sat down. He stood by the arch they had come through, his back to the wall, his father's gun loose in his hand, watching the dark. For a long time it seemed he would not answer.

"Cousin," he said at last. "Elara. Nineteen. Getting married. She found a little idol in the ruin of the old mission. A horned man, hugging himself. She thought it was pretty." He did not turn around. "Something came in through it. It wore her. It wore her for three days. It killed the whole wedding party. I shot it with my father's gun. When it came out, she was still there. For about a minute. Long enough to say it was cold." A pause. "Eleventh hour. Same night. I know because she'd asked me the time."

Nobody spoke.

"Three of us," said Riegel. His voice was hoarse. "At the same—"

"*Same heartbeat,*" said Fennick, from the floor by the wall. He had his eyes closed. "My lord heard you. All three of you. Through four hundred feet of stone, and a thousand miles, and three hundred years of not hearing anything. You screamed, and he heard you." He opened his eyes. "That's why I came. That's why any of this. He wants to know why."

"*Who* wants to know?" said Riegel.

Fennick hesitated. Then he grinned. It was a tired grin and it did not reach his eyes.

"My lord," he said. "The Sovereign. Of the Tomb of Netherfiend."

* * *

Riegel did not move. He did not have the strength. But Anna saw his face change. She watched it go through disbelief, and something very like fear, and come out the other side as a kind of stunned, exhausted laughter that never quite reached his mouth.

"Netherfiend," he said. "The skull king. My grandmother used to say if you didn't finish your supper, the Bone Lord would come up out of the ground and take you down to—"

"Everybody's grandmother says that," said Fennick. "It's very tiresome. He has never once come up out of the ground for anybody's supper. He's been sealed in the Tomb for three hundred years by treaty with the Houses." He waved a hand back toward Calice. "He's kept that treaty. They've been doing *that*."

"He's a monster," said Riegel.

"He's dead," said Fennick. "It's different. You'll see."

"And why should he care?" said Creez quietly, from the arch. "About us. The lower castes. Nobody else does."

Fennick looked at him for a long moment.

“Ask him yourself,” he said. “He’ll answer. He always does. That’s the frightening part.”

From far down the tunnel behind them, faint and growing, came a sound.

It was a hound baying. But no dog had ever had a voice like it. It was too clear, too pure: a single ringing glassy note, like a wet finger drawn round the rim of a crystal goblet, and it went on and on, and it made the teeth ache.

Fennick was on his feet before the note had finished.

“Up,” he said. “Up, up, all of you. That’s a Spire-hound. Crystal. The Magicians breed them for hunting in the old tunnels.” He grabbed Riegel’s arm. “It can smell your shard, Creez. Through a mile of rock.”

“Then I’ll drop it,” said Creez.

“No.” Anna and Fennick said it together. They looked at each other.

“The silver mask told you,” said Anna. “*Whatever it costs.*”

* * *

They ran.

The hound’s voice followed them down the Hollow Roads like a tide coming in. They went through a long gallery carved with bone figures dancing hand in hand, and through a hall of pillars like the cisterns under Calice but dry, and down a stair and up another, and the note never stopped and it never fell behind. Riegel ran with the cleaver dragging. It slowed him. It slowed all of them. Twice Fennick turned and opened his mouth to say *leave it*, and twice he looked at Riegel’s face and shut his mouth again.

They came out of a tunnel onto a bridge.

It was a narrow span of black stone, no wider than a cart, over a chasm so deep that the grey light gave out halfway down and below that there was only nothing. At the far end of it, a hundred paces off, was an arch carved with a sigil Riegel did not know: a figure on a pale horse, holding a banner, with a rose upon it.

"That's ours," said Fennick. "Past that arch, the Roads belong to Netherfiend, and nothing out of the Spires can follow. Go!"

They were halfway across when the hound came out of the tunnel behind them.

It was the size of a horse, and made of glass. Or something like glass, clear and faceted, refracting the grey ghost-light into a thousand sharp rainbows, and in its chest where its heart should have been there was a coal of violet fire. Its eyes were two shards of the same violet. It did not run so much as pour itself along the stone.

Behind it came the Vantress clan. Six swordsmen in river-grey steel, and at their head a tall man with close-cropped silver hair and a face like a cliff, scored now with a dozen fine half-healed red lines. He carried a new long blade. It was already drawn.

"*Halt!*" Imre Vantress's voice rang across the chasm. "In the name of the Crown! *Halt!*"

"No, thank you!" Fennick yelled back.

The hound sprang.

Creez turned on the bridge. He braced his feet. *Two left.* He raised his father's gun.

One left after this.

He fired.

The holy shot rang down the chasm like a cathedral bell. The silver in the barrel flared white. The bullet took the hound full in the chest, and the glass body exploded into rainbows, a thousand flying shards ringing off the black stone, but the violet heart came on through them, a burning coal hurled through the air straight at Creez's face—

Anna's blade took it out of the air.

She swung two-handed, and the steel rang like a struck bell, and the violet coal flew sideways out over the edge and down into the dark and was gone.

One left.

Creez stood on the bridge with the empty gun smoking in his hand.

The Vantress swordsmen came on across the bridge at a run.

"Go," said Anna. "Get him across. I'll hold them."

"Don't be stupid," said Riegel.

"I'm not *being*—"

"*You're being stupid!*" It came out of him like the bark of a dog. He was swaying, grey-faced, the broken chains swinging from his wrists, and he grabbed her by the shoulder and spun her round. "You don't get to do that! You don't get to stand on a bridge and die for strangers because you think you owe somebody something! A boy died in that yard for us an hour ago! *Nineteen!* I watched him! I'm *not* watching another one! *Not one more!*"

Anna stared at him.

The first swordsman reached them.

Riegel did not lift the cleaver. He let it go. It hit the bridge with a crash that shook the span, and he threw himself bare-handed at the swordsman's knees, and the two of them went

down together on the black stone, rolling toward the edge. Anna's blade met the second swordsman's in a shower of sparks. Creez turned his empty gun around in his grip and clubbed the third across the jaw.

And Fennick, swearing a long continuous stream of words that the kitchens of Netherfiend would have blushed to hear, dragged a heavy iron key out of his coat and jammed it into a crack in the stone at his feet.

"Everybody hold on to something that isn't the bridge!" he screamed, and turned it.

The bridge broke.

Not all of it. Only a section a dozen paces long, just behind them, where the rest of the Vantress swordsmen were running. It dropped out of the span as cleanly as a tooth pulled from a jaw. Two swordsmen went down with it, shouting, into the dark. The others flung themselves backward onto the solid stone.

Riegel and his swordsman were rolling on the very lip of the new gap. The man's hand was locked on the broken chain hanging from Riegel's wrist. Riegel tore free, and the chain came away in the swordsman's fist, and the swordsman lost his balance and went over.

Anna caught Riegel's collar before he followed.

She hauled him back onto the bridge. He lay there gasping on his back with his head hanging over the edge into nothing, and she knelt over him with her fists in his shirt, and for a moment neither of them said anything at all.

"Not one more," said Anna. Her voice was shaking. "You said."

"I said," said Riegel.

* * *

On the far side of the gap, Imre Vantress walked slowly to the broken edge and stood looking across.

He did not try to jump it. He was not a fool. He only stood there with his new blade lowered and his scored face very still, and looked at the four of them on the far side, one by one.

“You’ve broken the Concord road,” the Sword Head said. His voice carried perfectly across the chasm. It was not angry. It was very tired. “There’s no mending that. The Crown will call it war.”

“The Crown tried to cut my head off for slipping in the rain,” said Riegel. He got to his feet. “And something with chains on it tried to tear a boy’s legs off for a stone in his pocket. And *your* swordsman—”

“Torvald,” said Imre Vantress.

“—Torvald, died fighting it.” Riegel’s voice cracked. “So you tell me. Who’s at war with who?”

Imre Vantress was silent for a long time.

“I know what that thing in the yard was,” he said at last. “I have served the Crown for thirty years. I have seen things come out of the King’s cellars that should not exist. I have told myself they were the Crown’s business.” He looked down at the blade in his hand. “Torvald did not tell himself that. He saw an abomination and went for it. He was nineteen.” He looked up. “I will remember it. I will remember that you did not stop to bury him.”

“We couldn’t,” said Anna.

“I know.” The Sword Head sheathed his blade. “Then here is something for nothing, swordsman, since you are going where you are going.” His eyes moved past them, to the arch at the far end of the bridge, with its figure on a pale horse. “When you stand before the Sovereign of Netherfiend, ask him what he

asked of the Houses three hundred years ago, as the price of his surrender. Ask him why he agreed to be sealed. Ask him what he was given." His mouth twisted. "And see how quickly he answers."

He turned and walked back into the tunnel. The Vantress clan followed him. The dark closed behind them.

* * *

They passed beneath the arch of the pale horse an hour later, and the walls of the Hollow Roads changed.

The grey light grew warmer, and faintly violet. The stone was carved now with roses and banners and long processions of bone figures, kings and beggars and children and old women, dancing hand in hand, all in a line, all going the same way. The air grew warm and dry. Very faintly, from somewhere far ahead, there came a smell that Anna knew in her bones before her mind could name it.

Sand.

Hot sand, and old stone baking under a sun she could not see.

"Where are we?" she said.

"Under the sea," said Fennick. "Then under the coast. Then under the desert." He glanced at her. "Your desert. The southern sands. Netherfiend lies under them. It always has."

Anna stopped walking.

"My desert," she said.

"About eighty miles from your father's house, as the crow flies," Fennick said. "Nyxa's crows, anyway." He looked at her with an odd, gentle expression. "You grew up on top of it, Anna.

All those years. Everybody's grandmother told them the Bone Lord was under the sand." He shrugged. "Yours was right."

Ahead of them, at the end of the long violet gallery of dancing bones, there was a gate. It was enormous, and it was black, and it was open. On its threshold, so small against it that at first Anna took her for a shadow, stood a pale woman in grey, with close-cropped hair and ink-stained fingers and a dozen tiny keys hanging on a cord at her throat. A crow sat on her shoulder. Neither of them moved.

"Welcome to Netherfiend," said Nyxa, Warden of the Letter-Hall, in a voice barely above a whisper. "My lord has been expecting you." Her eyes went to Riegel, to Anna, to Creez. Then, for a moment, past them, to the empty dark of the gallery behind, as though she were counting.

"Only three?" she said softly. "The cards said five."

"The other two had to go home," said Fennick.

"Ah," said Nyxa. The crow on her shoulder shifted its feet. And then, after a moment, with what might have been the ghost of a smile: "So they always do."

Chapter Twelve: The Black Gate

They let them sleep first.

That surprised Riegel more than anything else, later, when he thought about it. He had expected chains, or a throne room, or a pit. Instead the small grey woman with the crow on her shoulder led them through the Black Gate and along a corridor of warm violet stone, and up a short stair, and into a room with three beds in it. Real beds, with linen. There was a fire. There was a table with bread and dates and cold roast fowl and a jug of water so clean it hurt to look at. There was a basin of hot water steaming on a stand. There was a man in a tabard of night-blue, broad and grey-bearded, who bowed to them and said in a voice like a cello, “When you have eaten and washed and slept, my lord will see you. Not before. He was very clear,” and went away.

Riegel stood in the middle of the room with the cleaver hanging from his hand and the broken chains swinging from his wrists.

“It’s a trap,” he said.

“Probably,” said Creez, who was already eating.

“It’s a *tomb*. We’re in a *tomb*. Under the *desert*.”

“Yes.” Creez tore the leg off the fowl. “And it’s got chicken.”

Anna said nothing. She went to the basin and put her hands in the hot water, and held them there, and watched the dirt of the Drowned Districts and the cisterns and the Hollow Roads come

off them in clouds. Her father's blood had come off long ago. She looked at her clean hands in the water for a long time.

Then she lay down on the nearest bed with her blade beside her, still in its sheath, her hand on the hilt, and was asleep before the others had finished arguing.

* * *

The man in the night-blue tabard came back for them the next evening. Or what Riegel supposed was evening. There were no windows in Netherfiend. There were only the warm violet walls, and the faint far-off sound of bells somewhere deep in the stone, and an old, slow, enormous quiet, like the quiet inside a great bell before it is struck.

"I am Bramwell," the man said. "Herald of the Black Gate. I arrived home from the Ember Marches an hour after you did, and my lord has asked me to bring you before him myself." He looked at the three of them. They had washed. They had slept. Someone had laid out clean clothes in the night, plain dark linen, and taken the iron cuffs off Riegel's wrists with a tool that hissed. "You will walk the white line. Eighty paces. You will not be asked to kneel. You will only be asked to be honest. Can you do that?"

"What happens if we're not?" said Creez.

Bramwell looked at him for a moment.

"Then my lord will know," he said, "and he will be disappointed. And the Seneschal will be standing beside him." A pause. "I would be honest, if I were you."

* * *

The Hall of the Thirteenth Seat was the largest room Riegel had ever stood in.

He had thought the cisterns under Calice were vast. He had thought the yard of the Vault, with its sheer black walls, was the bottom of the world. They were nothing. The Hall went up into a darkness that no lamp had ever reached. Its pillars were carved from bones, long bones, the bones of beasts so enormous that Riegel could not imagine them alive. The floor was black stone polished like still water. When he looked down he saw himself standing on his own reflection, upside down, the cleaver hanging from his reflected hand toward a reflected ceiling that did not exist.

And down the centre of the floor, straight as a sword, ran a single strip of white.

At the far end of the white, on a dais, there was a throne.

Something sat in it.

Riegel walked.

He had not meant to walk first. He had not decided. But Bramwell stepped aside at the doors and said, very softly, "*Riegel, street-born, of the lower districts. Anna, daughter of Tariq, of the southern sands. Creez, of the western badlands, who carries his father's gun,*" and the names went up into the dark of the ceiling and came back down, and Riegel's feet started moving before the echo had stopped.

Ten paces. Twenty.

He did not look at the throne. He looked at the floor. At himself walking upside down underneath himself, with the black cleaver dragging. It made a sound on the polished stone, a long low hiss, and no sparks, as if even the cleaver knew better here. Beside him Anna walked with her back straight and her chin up and her hand on her hilt. On his other side Creez walked with his

thumbs hooked in his belt, as if he was walking down Main Street on a Saturday, and his face was the colour of chalk.

Forty paces.

At forty paces, Riegel looked up.

He had been told about it his whole life. *The Bone Lord*. He had imagined it as a child, lying in the dark in the room he shared with Enzo, both of them giggling and terrified under one blanket. A skeleton in a crown, with a grinning skull. Rattling. Hungry.

It was not like that at all.

The Sovereign of Netherfiend sat in a throne of plain grey stone, robed in layered black that drank the light, and he did not move. That was the first thing. Riegel had never seen anything so still. Not a statue. Statues were still because they were made. This was still the way the bottom of the sea is still, the way the dark between stars is still: because nothing had ever been able to make it move. His hands lay on the arms of the throne. They were bone, finger and knuckle and wrist. A crown of dark iron sat on his skull, set with a single stone the colour of a bruise. And in the sockets of the skull, where eyes should have been, two small fires burned, violet at the core and pale at the rim.

The fires were looking at him.

Not at the cleaver. Not at his face. At *him*. Riegel felt it the way he had felt the block against his neck: a cool, absolute, impersonal weight, settling on the place where he was most himself. *I see you*, it said. *I see what you are*. *I see the rain*.

Sixty paces.

Then he saw the woman.

She stood at the Sovereign's right hand, a little forward of the throne, and she was the most beautiful thing Riegel had ever

seen, and he was more afraid of her in that moment than he had been of the faceless thing in the Vault. She wore black and violet, high at the throat. Her hair was darker than the hall, bound up with silver pins like little keys. At her waist hung a case of bone and lacquer. She was watching the three of them come down the white line toward her lord with an expression of perfect, smiling courtesy, and all around her feet, on the black polished floor, frost had grown in the shape of thorned roses.

Eighty paces.

They stopped at the foot of the dais. Nobody knelt. Bramwell had said they would not be asked to.

For a long moment, the Hall was silent.

“Thank you,” said the Sovereign of Netherfiend, “for coming.”

His voice was not what Riegel expected either. It was quiet. It was dry and low and courteous, and it came from nowhere in particular, the way the light did. And underneath it, very far down, there was something that sounded almost like tiredness.

“I am Ossiran,” he said. “I am the Bearer of the Thirteenth, and this is my house. You are under its protection for as long as you choose to stay in it. No one in this Tomb will harm you.” The violet fires moved, very slightly, toward the woman at his side. “No one.”

The frost around her feet stopped growing.

“Velisande,” said Ossiran. “My Seneschal.”

The woman inclined her head to them. It was a beautiful, gracious movement, like a queen acknowledging peasants at a fair. Her smile did not change.

“My lord,” she said, without taking her eyes off Creez. “The boy has it on him. I can feel it from here. In his coat. Over his heart.”

“I know.”

“He walked it into your hall. Down your line. Eighty paces from your throne.” Her voice was very soft. “A splinter of the *Fifteenth*, my lord.”

“I know, Velisande.”

“Give it to me,” she said to Creez.

Creez’s hand went to his coat. He did not take anything out. He only put his palm flat over the pocket, the way he had on the ship, and looked back at her.

“No, ma’am,” he said. “I don’t think I will.”

The frost came up off the floor.

It did not grow this time. It *leapt*. It went across the black stone between them in a single white flash, thorns and petals and stems all forming at once, and climbed Creez’s boots, and his legs, and his hands, and closed around the hand pressed over his heart. Creez gasped. His breath came out of him white. He did not move his hand.

Anna’s blade was out.

Riegel did not decide. He found himself standing in front of Creez with the black cleaver hanging from his fist, between the gunner and the Seneschal, the frost crackling up around his own ankles now, so cold it burned.

“Don’t,” he said.

Velisande looked at him for the first time. It was like being looked at by a winter sky.

“Or what, swordsman?” she said gently. “You’ll lift that?”

Riegel did not answer.

"I didn't think so," she said.

"Velisande."

It was not loud. The Sovereign's voice was never loud. But the frost stopped. It stopped everywhere at once, the way a held breath stops, and then, very slowly, with a sound like a great many tiny bells, it began to fall apart. It flaked off Creez's legs and boots and hands and fell to the black floor in a fine white dust. Creez staggered. Anna caught his elbow.

Velisande had not moved. She stood at her lord's right hand with her eyes lowered.

"Forgive me, my lord."

"There is nothing to forgive," said Ossiran. "You said what half the Tomb is thinking. Someone ought to say it." He turned the violet fires on Creez. "But it is his. He carried it across an ocean. He will give it up when he chooses, or he will not give it up. That is the whole point of us, here. Things in Netherfiend end when they choose to end." He paused. "Creez. Is it heavy?"

Creez stared up at him.

"Sir?"

"The splinter. Is it heavy?"

The gunner was quiet for a long moment. Then, slowly, he nodded.

"Yes," he said. "It's real heavy. It didn't used to be. It's heavier every day."

"Yes," said Ossiran. "That's how you'll know." He did not say what Creez would know. He turned his gaze on Anna. "And you. You grew up eighty miles from my door. Your father's father's father brought his people to the sands with my leave, three centuries ago, when the Concord drove the southern clans out of the river provinces. Did you know that?"

Anna's blade was still out. She did not lower it.

"No," she said.

"No. They stopped telling the story." He looked at her for a moment. "I heard you on the night of the great storm. All three of you. You screamed, and I heard you through four hundred feet of stone. I have not heard anything through that stone since the night the Concord was signed." The fires dimmed, very slightly. "I want to know why. I suspect you do too."

Nobody answered.

Then Riegel said, "Imre Vantress told me to ask you something."

Beside the throne, Velisande's eyes came up.

"The Sword Head," said Ossiran. "Yes. He would."

"He said, *Ask him what he asked of the Houses three hundred years ago, as the price of his surrender.*" Riegel's voice was hoarse, but it did not shake. "*Ask him why he agreed to be sealed. Ask him what he was given.* And he said, *See how quickly he answers.*"

The silence that came down on the Hall of the Thirteenth Seat then was not like the others. It was not patient, or attentive. It had in it something of the moment before a blade comes down.

Ossiran answered at once.

"I asked for nothing," he said.

Riegel stared at him.

"I asked the Houses for nothing," the Sovereign of Netherfiend said. "Not land. Not gold. Not freedom. Not a single thing. I agreed to be sealed because I was asked, and because I believed the peace was worth it." The fires in his sockets did not move. "They gave me something anyway. I did not ask for it, and

I did not want it, and I have been trying to give it back for three hundred years.”

“What?” said Anna. “What did they give you?”

Ossiran was silent.

It was not a long silence. A breath, perhaps. But in it, Riegel saw the woman at the Sovereign’s side turn her head and look at her lord, quickly, and then away, and he saw her hand go to the bodice of her gown, just over her heart, and stay there.

“That,” said Ossiran, “is not tonight’s question.” He rose.

When the Sovereign stood, everything in the Hall seemed to settle around the fact of it, the way water settles around a stone. He was very tall. Taller standing than Riegel had imagined, sitting. He came down one step from the throne, and then another, and stood on the last step of the dais, so that he was almost at their level, with the hem of his black robe lying on the polished floor in the white dust of the fallen frost.

“Tonight’s question,” he said, “is this. Three of you were broken in the same heartbeat, in three kingdoms, by two fragments of the laws of this world. One was the Lovers, cut and forced, which is now hanging around the neck of the King of Calice. The other is the Devil, which is not cut, which cannot be cut, and which, I am beginning to believe, has been his for a very long time.” The violet fires moved from face to face. “The Equinox is twelve days from now. On that day I am expected to walk into Calice and kneel before that King and surrender the Thirteenth. The Lovers. The Devil. And the Ending. Three laws of the world, in one pair of hands.” He paused. “I would rather that did not happen.”

“So would we,” said Creez. His voice came out cracked.

“Good,” said Ossiran. “Then tomorrow, each of you will draw a card.” He looked at Velisande. She did not look back. “And we will find out what that costs.”

Chapter Thirteen: The Price

The Table of Reading had never had so many people around it.

It was a small round chamber behind the throne, lit by a single black candle, and it had been built for two: one to read and one to be read for. Tonight there were six. Velisande sat at the pale stone table with the bone case open before her. The Sovereign stood behind her, very still, his shadow thrown up the curved wall by the candle until it filled half the ceiling. Riegel, Anna and Creez stood on the other side of the table, close enough that their shoulders touched. And in the doorway, half in the dark, a tall stooped figure in a deep hood had come up from the Archive with a book open in one grey hand. She had not been invited. Nobody asked her to leave.

“Thessaly,” said Ossiran, without turning. “You may as well come in.”

“Thank you, my lord. I’d rather stay in the door.” The Scribe’s voice was soft and dry as old paper. “I like to be able to run.”

Creez laughed. It came out of him before he could stop it, and the hooded figure turned toward him, and for a horrible moment he thought he had made a mistake. Then, from deep inside the hood, there came a small dry sound that might, on a living person, have been a chuckle.

“Good,” said Thessaly. “Somebody in this room should.”

“Before anyone draws,” said Ossiran, “you must understand what a card is. Here. In this house, in this deck. It is not a fortune.”

He laid one bone hand flat on the table beside the Bone Deck.

“The twenty-two Major Arcana are the laws of the world. You know that. Everyone knows it, the way everyone knows the sea is deep, without ever once going down to look. The Lovers is the law of choice. The Devil is the law of bondage. The Ending, which I carry, is the law that everything finishes so that something else can begin.” The fires in his sockets moved over their faces. “The Minor cards, the suits, are the laws of smaller things. Of hearts and coins and blades and fire. Of what people do with their lives. When you draw from this Deck, you are not asking what will happen to you. You are asking which law your life is already bent around. And when you know that, you can bargain with it.”

“Bargain,” said Anna.

“Every law can be worked,” said Ossiran. “That is what the Magicians in their towers have always known. That is what the King has learned. A law can be leaned on. Pulled. Turned over. And a law that is worked will always, always take its price.” He was quiet for a moment. “Something of equal weight. A memory. A year. A bond. Blood, sometimes. The law does not care what. It only keeps the scales level. *Every bargain costs blood.* That is what the old saying means. It is not a metaphor.”

“And you?” said Riegel. “What does it take from you?”

The fires did not flicker.

“Whatever it likes,” said Ossiran. “Velisande. Begin.”

She took up the Deck. She shuffled.

The sound filled the little room. Distant hooves, on hard ground, coming closer. Velisande shuffled with her eyes half-closed and her face perfectly smooth, and Riegel, watching her hands, thought that he had never seen hands so beautiful or so sure, and that he would not have let them anywhere near his throat for any money in the world.

The hooves stopped.

“Swordsman,” she said, without looking up. “Cut.”

Riegel reached out and cut the Deck. His hand was shaking. She gathered it and fanned the cards face down across the pale stone in a long smooth arc.

“Draw.”

He drew. He turned it over.

A woman in white, in a green field, with a crown of flowers on her head. She was bending over a lion. Her two hands were on its great jaws, one above and one below, and she was closing its mouth. Gently. As one closes a book. The lion did not fight her. Above her head, faint as a breath, hung a sideways figure eight.

“Strength,” said Velisande.

Riegel stared at it. “I don’t — that’s not—”

“It is not the strength of the arm,” Velisande said. Her voice was cool and precise, like a teacher’s. “Look at her. She is not fighting the lion. She is not even holding it. She has her hands on its jaws, and it lets her, because it knows she could, and because she won’t.” She tapped the lion. “The beast is not your enemy, swordsman. The beast is *you*. That great black thing you drag around behind you. That fury you will not let out because it once nearly came out against your brother.” She looked up at him.

“Strength is the law of the beast that is mastered by gentleness. Not caged. *Mastered*. It is the law your whole life is bent around. You have been holding the lion’s mouth shut for so long you have forgotten that you are allowed to let it roar.”

Riegel could not speak.

“And the bargain?” said Ossiran.

“He wants his clan,” said Velisande. “Not back. *Safe*. He wants the war the Cups are trying to light in the lower districts put out before it starts.” She looked at Riegel. “Don’t you?”

“Yes,” Riegel whispered. “Gods. Yes.”

“Then here is what the law asks,” she said. “On the day you lift that blade, you will lift it for someone else. Not for yourself. Not for vengeance. Not for your pride, or your clan, or your brother’s memory. For someone else, and only for someone else. And whatever it costs you in that moment, you will pay it.” She tilted her head. “Will you?”

“Yes.”

“Then the Tomb will send its Herald to the Elders of your clan,” said Ossiran, “with a message in my name. And they will listen. They always have.” He paused. “The dark remembers.”

Riegel looked down at the card. At the woman’s hands on the lion’s jaws.

When he looked up again, Velisande had already turned to Anna.

* * *

“Queen of Swords,” she said. “Cut.”

Anna cut.

“Draw.”

She drew. She turned it over. And she went very still.

A figure sat on a stone throne between two pillars, robed in red, with a crown on its head. In its right hand, a sword, upright. In its left, a pair of scales, perfectly level.

“Justice,” said Velisande softly.

Nobody spoke.

“The law of the balance,” said Velisande. “Of cause and consequence. Of what is owed.” She did not look at the card. She looked at Anna. “You want to know where your stepmother is.”

“Yes.”

“You want to stand in front of her.”

“Yes.”

“And then?”

Anna did not answer. Her hand had gone to her hilt. It stayed there.

“Justice does not tell you what to do,” said Velisande. “That is the thing nobody understands about it. They think the sword is for striking. It is not. Look at it.” She touched the card. “It is upright. It is held still. It is a promise, not a blow. Justice is the law that says *every act weighs something*, and that the scales will always come level in the end, one way or another. It does not say *how*.” She sat back. “I can tell you where she is. The Tomb’s crows have been watching her since the morning tide. But the law will take its price. When you stand in front of her, you will have to choose. And whatever you choose, it will cost you exactly as much as it costs her.”

“Where is she?” said Anna.

“Home,” said Ossiran. “At your father’s house in the sands. Eighty miles from here. She arrived four days ago. She has not left the courtyard.” He paused. “Her household has gone.

Scattered. Most of them do not know their own names. She is alone.”

Anna did not move. Her knuckles had gone white on the hilt.

“Will you take the bargain?” said Velisande.

“Yes,” said Anna.

* * *

“Knight of Pentacles,” said Velisande. “Cut.”

Creez cut the Deck. He was grinning. It was not a real grin. It was the kind you put on when a horse is about to throw you, so that you’ll be smiling when you hit the ground.

“Draw.”

He drew. He turned it over.

A child on a white horse, naked and laughing, under a vast golden sun with a face. Behind the child a wall, and over the wall, sunflowers. Everything in the picture was bright, so bright the candle seemed to dim beside it.

Except that it was upside down.

“The Sun,” said Velisande. “Reversed.”

Creez’s grin stayed on his face. It was the bravest thing Riegel had ever seen.

“That bad?” he said.

“It is the law of joy,” said Velisande. Her voice was different now. Quieter. “Of the light that does not ask permission. Of children laughing on horses. It is the brightest card in the Deck.” She looked at him. “And it is upside down, gunner. Eclipsed. Something has put out your sun.”

Creez’s grin went.

It did not fade. It simply went, all at once, the way a lamp goes out. And under it his face was very young and very tired.

“Yeah,” he said. “Something did.”

“It is not gone,” said Velisande. “A reversed Sun is not a dead Sun. It is a Sun behind a wall.” She was quiet for a moment. “What do you want, Creez of the badlands?”

He did not answer for a long time.

“She’s still in there,” he said at last. “Isn’t she?”

In the doorway, Thessaly closed her book.

“Yes,” said the Scribe gently. “I’m sorry. Yes.”

Creez turned to look at her.

“The Devil is the law of bondage,” Thessaly said. “It does not kill what it wears. It *keeps* it. Every soul it has ever ridden is still in the chain. Your cousin. The wedding party. Whatever the King has fed it since. They are still there, all of them, linked, in the dark, at its feet.” She turned a page that was not there. “The thing you shot was only a hand of it. A finger, reaching out from somewhere very far away. You cut off the finger. The body is still whole. And so is the chain.”

“Then how do I get her out?”

“You tear the Devil out of whoever is bearing it,” said Ossiran. “Out of the hands that hold the chain. And then the chain breaks, and everything it holds goes free.”

The room was silent.

“With what?” said Creez.

Ossiran looked at the gun on his hip.

Creez looked down at it too. Slowly, he drew it. He thumbed open the chamber and tipped it, and nothing fell out, because it was empty, and then he reached into his pocket and took out the one thing left in it and held it up in the candlelight.

One bullet. Silver-lined. Blessed by priests who were ashes now.

“One,” he said. “That’s all. There were three after the canyon. Now there’s one.”

“Then it had better be the right one,” said Ossiran.

“And the price?”

Velisande looked at the reversed Sun for a long time.

“The Sun asks for joy,” she said at last. “That is its law. It gives joy, and it takes joy. If you take the bargain, then on the day you fire that last bullet, you will have to fire it laughing.” She raised her eyes to his. “Can you still do that, gunner? After the canyon? Can you still laugh?”

Creez stared at her.

“I don’t know,” he said.

“Then that is the price,” said Velisande. “You will have to find out.”

He looked at the bullet. Then he put it back in his pocket, carefully, next to the shard.

“Deal,” he said.

* * *

It was then that the shard began to bleed.

Creez felt it first. A warmth spreading through his shirt, under his coat, over his heart. He thought for a moment that the hook-wound in his shoulder had opened. Then he looked down and saw a dark stain coming through the cloth of his coat, right over the pocket, spreading.

“*Take it out,*” said Velisande. She was on her feet. “*Take it out, now, put it on the table—*”

He tore it out. The strip of shirt around it was soaked. He unwrapped it with shaking fingers and dropped it on the pale stone.

The black splinter lay in the candlelight among the Major Arcana, beside Strength and Justice and the Sun upside down. The thin red line around its edge, the one that looked like a crack, like a vein, was no longer thin. It had swollen. It was pulsing. And from it, slowly, there seeped onto the stone a single thread of something dark and red and thick, which moved. It moved against the slope of the table. It crept uphill. Toward the Bone Deck.

And in the Bone Deck, fanned face down across the stone in its long arc, one card turned itself over.

No one touched it. It simply turned, the way a sleeper turns, and lay face up among the others.

A horned figure on a pedestal. Wings like a bat's. A torch held downward. And at its feet, two small naked figures, a man and a woman, with chains around their necks. The chains were loose. They could have lifted them off. They did not.

The Fifteenth. The Devil.

Velisande made a sound Riegel had never heard a human being make. She drew back from the table as if from a fire, and the frost came up out of the floor around her, wild, thorns everywhere.

"He's *looking*," she said. "My lord. He's looking at us. Through it. Through the splinter. *He can see the room.*"

Ossiran did not move.

He stood behind the table with the black candle throwing his shadow up the wall, and he looked down at the Devil card lying face up in his Deck, and at the red thread crawling toward it across the stone, and the violet fires in his skull went very bright.

"Yes," he said quietly. "I expect he can."

He reached out. He laid one bone fingertip on the black splinter.

Nothing happened. And then, everything did.

The candle flame went flat, as if pressed down by a hand. The red thread stopped moving. The frost on the floor stopped growing. And the room went cold, colder than Velisande's frost, colder than the Vault, a cold that had nothing to do with ice at all. It was the cold of a door closing. Of the last page of a book. Of the moment after the last breath, when the body is still warm but no one is in it anymore. Riegel felt it go through him, through his bones, and for one heartbeat he could not remember his own name.

The red thread on the table turned grey, and dry, and crumbled into dust.

The splinter's pulse stopped.

Ossiran took his finger away.

"That is the Ending," he said. "I have ended his sight. Only for the splinter, and only for tonight. It will not last." He looked down at his own hand. "Nothing does."

He was silent for a moment, looking at his hand. Then he turned his head slowly toward the doorway.

"Thessaly," he said. "In the Archive, a few nights ago. I told you and Nyxa something. About a bench. And a window." He paused. "What did I say?"

The Scribe did not answer at once. Riegel could not see her face, deep inside the hood. But he saw her grey hand tighten on the closed book.

"You said there was rain on the window, my lord," Thessaly said at last, very gently. "And a smell of glue."

"Ah," said the Sovereign of Netherfiend. "Did I."

He did not say anything else. He did not need to. Riegel saw Velisande's face, in the flattened light of the candle. He saw it go white to the lips.

On the table, among the cards, the Devil still lay face up. Its horned head was turned a little to one side, as though it were listening. And in the thin dry dust that had been the red thread, there was a shape. It might have been a crack in the stone. It might have been chance.

It looked like a crown.

Chapter Fourteen: The Guardians' Doubt

Riegel could not sleep in the Tomb.

It was not the bed. The bed was the softest thing he had lain on in his life. It was not the dark, either, or the bones, or the deep slow quiet that lay over everything like snow. It was the cold he had felt at the Table of Reading when the Sovereign laid his finger on the splinter. That moment when he had not been able to remember his own name. He kept reaching for it in the dark, the way a tongue goes back and back to a broken tooth, to make sure it was still there.

Riegel. Street-born. Of the lower districts. Brother of Enzo.

Still there.

On the third night he gave up, and got out of bed, and took the cleaver, because he did not know how to go anywhere without it anymore, and went walking.

Nobody stopped him. That was the strangest thing about Netherfiend. He had expected guards. There were none, or none he could see. Corridors of warm violet stone went off in every direction, lit by lamps that burned without oil, and the only sounds were his own bare feet on the stone and the long soft hiss of the cleaver dragging behind him. Once he passed an open door and saw a library going down and down into the dark, shelves of bone, ladders of bone, and far below a single small lamp moving

among them like a firefly. Once he passed a kitchen where something huge and patient and many-armed was kneading dough by the light of an oven, humming, and it turned its head and looked at him with no eyes at all and went on kneading.

He kept walking.

He came at last, without meaning to, to the edge of a vast dark space with no walls, only a ring of thirteen pillars standing in nothing. In the centre, under a single hanging lamp, stood a great table of black stone, forty feet long. And on the table, carved in perfect relief, lay the world.

Riegel stopped at the edge of the light and stared.

He had never seen a map. Not really. Not like this. He saw the canal city of Calice with its threaded waterways, small as his hand. He saw the Crystal Spires, seven tiny needles on their hills. He saw the coast and the long rail-line running down it, and at the end of the rail-line, a cluster of crooked streets above a harbour that he knew, suddenly, with his whole body. The lower districts. Home. He could have covered it with his thumb.

“Strange, isn’t it?”

Riegel turned.

A tall figure stood at the far end of the table, half in the shadow. It wore black armour, old and battered and very fine, of a make Riegel had never seen, and over the armour a cloak of crow feathers that rustled when it moved. Its face was half bone and half something else, something older, like weathered stone. It was holding a small iron playing-piece in its gauntleted fingers.

“Your whole life is in that little patch,” said the figure. “Every street you ever ran down. Every fight. Every girl. Your brother’s grave.” It set the iron piece down gently on the lower districts, with a click. “And from up here, it is the size of a coin. That is

what the Houses see when they look at a map. Coins.” It looked at him. “I am Corvinus. I see armies.”

* * *

“You wanted to sleep and couldn’t,” said Corvinus, “so you came to the War-Table. Good. Everyone ends up here eventually. Velisande calls it my sickness.”

Riegel did not know what to say. He set the tip of the cleaver on the floor and leaned on it, the way an old man leans on a stick.

“Twelve days,” he said at last. “He said twelve days.”

“Eleven now. It is past midnight.” Corvinus moved another piece: a small silver cup, set down in the middle of Calice. “Eleven days until the Equinox. On that day, every House in the realm gathers in the Senate House for the Conclave, before the King and the High Table. And my lord is expected to walk in through the Black Gate of Calice and kneel.” He set down a third piece, a small black skull, at the edge of the city. “Do you know what I would do, swordsman, if it were my choice?”

“No.”

“I would burn the Spires.” Corvinus said it the way another man might say *I would take the early train*. “All seven. I would send the dead of Netherfiend up out of the sand, every one of them, and march them north through the Hollow Roads, and come up under the Crystal Spires at midnight on the eve of the Equinox and pull them down into the earth. And then I would go into Calice and take the King’s head off his shoulders before he finished asking why.”

Riegel stared at him.

“Can you?”

“Yes,” said Corvinus. “Probably. I have had three hundred years to plan it. I have planned it eleven different ways.” He looked down at the table. “It would kill perhaps a hundred thousand people. Perhaps more. Most of them would be the lower castes, because the lower castes always die first. It would break the Concord past mending. And every House left standing would spend the next three hundred years making sure no one ever remembered Netherfiend as anything but a horror under the sand.” He moved the skull piece back, very gently, to the east. “That is why my lord will not let me.”

“So what will he do?”

“He will go to the Conclave.” Corvinus was silent for a moment. “He will walk in, alone, as he promised. And he will try to end it some other way. Some quiet way. Some way that costs only him.” The feathers of his cloak stirred, though there was no wind. “He always does. It is the thing about him I would change, if I could change anything.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

The strategist looked up from the table. Under the bone and the stone of its face, its eyes were small and dark and very bright.

“Because she won’t,” it said. “And somebody should.”

* * *

He found the Analyst by following a sound like a music-box.

It came from a low round room off the corridor beyond the Hollow Hall, and when he looked in through the open door he saw a woman perched on a tall brass stool that went up and down on gears, with a pair of spectacles on her nose that had at least ten lenses on hinged arms. She was surrounded by globes of glass, each holding a small flame of a different colour, and she

was humming to them. The flames brightened and dimmed in time with her humming. A huge ledger lay open on a stand in front of her, and she was writing in it with her left hand while her right hand moved over the globes like a woman playing a harp.

“Come in, swordsman,” she said, without turning. “You’re letting the numbers out.”

He came in.

“Ottoline,” she said. “Analyst. Reckoner of the Counting Lamps.” She swung three lenses down and peered at him through them, and swung two back up. “You’re the one who wouldn’t lift the sword. I liked that. It’s unusual. Most people lift swords far too often. It throws off all my figures.” She went back to her ledger. “Sit if you like. Don’t touch the red one. It’s having a bad night.”

Riegel looked at the red globe. Its flame was crouching low in the glass and flickering. “Why?”

“Because I’ve been following a sum,” said Ottoline, “and I don’t like where it’s going.”

She tapped her ledger. It was full of columns of tiny figures in brown ink.

“Eleven years ago, certain Magicians in the Crystal Spires began buying heart-glass through three trading houses licensed by the Senate,” she said. “I told my lord at the council. I thought then that it was the Magicians’ own business. A rogue faction. Clever men in a glass tower making themselves rich by cutting up the Lovers and selling it in the market.” She sniffed. “I was wrong. I don’t like being wrong. It happens about once every forty years.”

“Wrong how?”

“The money didn’t start with the Magicians.” She turned the ledger round so he could see it. He could not read a word. “It went *to* them. It came from somewhere else first. Through four more houses. Through two banks in the river provinces. Through a shipping company with no ships. I’ve been unpicking it since the council, every night, one thread at a time, and tonight I got to the end of it.” She laid one finger on the last line of figures. “It came out of the Privy Purse.”

Riegel stared at her blankly.

“The King’s own money,” said Ottoline gently. “Not the Crown’s. Not the treasury. His. The private purse of King Aurelian of Calice, which no one in the realm is allowed to look at.” She took her finger off the page. “He paid them to cut it, swordsman. The Magicians didn’t think of it. He did. He found a few hungry men in the Spires and paid them to cut a law of the world into pieces, and sell the pieces cheap to people like you.” She looked at the red globe. “And the Cups took their share of the sales, and never asked where the stones came from. Because the stones made people love the Crown.”

“Then everything—” Riegel began. His voice failed. “The stones. Anna’s father. The dockhands. The—”

“All of it,” said Ottoline. “One man’s purse.” She closed the ledger. “I’ll tell my lord at first light. I wanted to be sure.” She hesitated. “And I wanted to tell someone who isn’t us, first. Someone from outside the Tomb. Because when I tell the council, Corvinus will want to burn something, and Velisande will want to stop my lord going, and Nyxa will want to know who else knows, and my lord—” She stopped.

“Your lord will go anyway,” said Riegel.

Ottoline looked at him over the top of all her lenses.

“Yes,” she said. “That’s the sum I don’t like.”

* * *

He was on his way back to his room when he heard the crow.

It was not loud. A single harsh caw, cut off short, somewhere ahead of him in the dark. Then the sound of wings beating against stone, and a woman’s voice, very low, saying something sharp.

He came round the corner and found himself at the bottom of a narrow shaft that went straight up through the rock, so far that at the top he could see a single star. The small grey woman with the keys at her throat was standing at the foot of it with a crow in her hands. It was struggling. She was holding it gently, firmly, the way one holds a frightened child, and with one fingernail she was slitting open a tiny oilskin tube bound to its leg.

She did not look round.

“Go back to bed, swordsman,” said Nyxa.

“Is that one of yours?”

“Every crow in Netherfiend is mine.” She drew a slip of paper out of the tube. “This one was going *out*.”

She unrolled it. Riegel saw her face in the light of the single lamp at the foot of the shaft. It did not change. But her ink-stained fingers went very still on the paper.

“What does it say?”

Nyxa did not answer at once. Then she turned the paper toward him.

It was a single line. In a hand he did not know. *They are in the Tomb. All three. Eleven days.* And at the bottom of the slip, a small smear of wax.

Black wax. Blank. A thumbprint wiped smooth.

"The same," said Riegel. "That's the — the plans for the Vault came in that. The letter for Creez. Fennick said—"

"Yes."

"Then whoever's been helping us—"

"Is sending crows *out* of my lord's house in the middle of the night," said Nyxa. "With our names on them." She rolled the paper up very small. "To whom, I don't know. The crow doesn't know either. It was told only to fly north, and that someone would catch it."

"The masks," said Riegel. "The two in the Vault. They brought me bread. They—"

"Perhaps." Nyxa looked at him. Her eyes were pale and steady. "Or perhaps someone in this Tomb uses the same wax as your masks, to make me think it is them. Or perhaps your masks are not who you think they are. Or perhaps they are, and they have someone here, inside, who reports to them. I have thought of eleven perhapses since the crow came down that shaft, swordsman, and I like none of them." She let the crow go. It flew up into the dark and was gone. "The only thing I know for certain is that somebody talked, before the Vault. Somebody told the King to move your execution up. And now somebody is talking again."

"Who?"

"Go back to bed," said the Warden of the Letter-Hall. "And don't tell anyone what you saw. Not the girl. Not the gunner. Not my lord."

"Why not your lord?"

Nyxa turned away toward the dark.

“Because if I’m wrong,” she said, “I’ll have frightened him for nothing. And if I’m right, I’ll have to tell him who.”

* * *

He did not go back to bed.

He went the long way, because he was lost, and because he could not stop thinking, and the long way took him past a small round door behind the Hall of the Thirteenth Seat, where a single black candle was burning.

The door was ajar. Inside, at the pale stone table, Velisande was sitting alone with the Bone Deck.

She was not shuffling. She was laying out cards. One. Then another. Then a third, in a row. She looked at them for a long time. Then she gathered them up, and shuffled, and laid them out again. One. Another. A third.

Riegel stood in the dark outside the door and watched her do it five times.

He could not see the faces of the cards. He could only see her face, and her face did not change, and every time she laid the third card down her hand went to the bodice of her gown, just over her heart, and pressed there, and stayed.

On the sixth time, she spoke without looking up.

“Come in, swordsman. You breathe like a bull.”

He came in. He stood on the other side of the table with the cleaver.

Velisande gathered the cards and set the Deck down and looked up at him. In the candlelight she was so beautiful it hurt. She did not seem angry. She seemed, more than anything, tired.

“You’ve been walking,” she said. “You’ve been to the War-Table. And the Counting Lamps. And the crow-shaft.” She smiled

faintly. "This Tomb has no secrets from me, Riegel of the lower districts. It is mine. I have kept it for three hundred years."

"Then you know about the crow."

"I know about everything." She tilted her head. "Do you want to ask me?"

He did. He wanted to ask her a hundred things. *Did you send it? Was it you, in the Archive, who knew the cards before he did? What is the card in your dress? What did they give him, three hundred years ago, that he wants to give back?*

He asked none of them.

"What are you asking the cards?" he said instead. "Every time. The same three. What's the question?"

Velisande looked at him for a long moment.

"How to keep him," she said.

"And what do they say?"

She did not answer that. She rose instead, and came round the table, and stood in front of him. She was not tall. The top of her head came to his chin. But the cold came off her like the cold off a glacier, and the frost crept out across the floor from her feet toward his, slow, thorned, unstoppable.

"Listen to me, swordsman," she said, very softly. "I am going to tell you something, and I want you to remember it. Not now. Later. On the day you have to choose." The frost reached his toes. "I love him. I have loved him for three hundred years, and I will love him when this world is ash. There is nothing I would not do to keep him. *Nothing*. Not to the King. Not to the Houses. Not to you, or the girl, or the gunner who laughed in his Scribe's doorway." She lifted one cold hand and laid it flat against his chest, over his heart, exactly where she pressed her own. "Do you understand me? Nothing."

“Why are you telling me?” Riegel whispered.

“Because you’re the one who won’t lift the sword,” said Velisande. “And someday soon, somebody is going to have to.” She took her hand away. “I want you to remember, when that day comes, that I warned you.”

She turned back to the table. She sat. She picked up the Deck and began to shuffle again, and the sound of hooves filled the little room.

“Go to bed,” she said. “Your girl leaves for her father’s house at dawn.”

* * *

Anna was waiting in the corridor outside their room, dressed, with her blade on her back and a pack on her shoulder. Creez was beside her, yawning, his father’s gun on his hip. Fennick leaned against the wall behind them, grinning, with mud already on his boots.

“There you are,” said Anna. “We were about to leave you.”

“Dawn,” said Riegel. “She said dawn.”

“It’s dawn.” She looked at him. Then at the cleaver. Then at his face. Something in her own face changed, just slightly. “What happened? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

He thought of the War-Table. The red globe. The crow going up the shaft into the dark. The frost on his toes.

“It’s a tomb,” he said at last. “I’ve seen hundreds.”

Creez laughed. Anna didn’t.

“Eighty miles,” she said. “Fennick says there’s a Hollow Road that comes up under the old wells on the eastern edge of the estate. We’ll be there by nightfall.” She hitched the pack higher. “You don’t have to come.”

“Yes I do,” said Riegel.

“Why?”

He thought about it. About Strength, and the woman closing the lion’s mouth. About *for someone else, and only for someone else*.

“Because you’re going to stand in front of her,” he said. “And you shouldn’t have to do it alone.”

Anna looked at him for a long moment. Then she turned and started walking down the violet corridor toward the Hollow Roads, and the others followed her, and none of them looked back.

Behind them, in the little round room behind the throne, the black candle burned on. And the sound of hooves went on, and on, and on, as though something were riding very fast toward a place it could not reach.

Chapter Fifteen: Sandstone and Ash

The Hollow Road came up under the old wells at the eastern edge of the estate an hour before sunset, exactly where Fennick had promised, and Anna climbed the last iron rungs out of the dark into the light of her childhood, and stood there, and could not move.

It was so quiet.

That was the first thing. The estate had never been quiet. Not once in her whole life. There had always been someone: the water-men at the sluices, the boys driving goats to the palms, the women singing in the courtyard over the washing, her father's voice somewhere ringing off the walls as he drilled the young blades of the clan. Even at night there had been the fountains. She had fallen asleep to the sound of the fountains every night until she was eighteen years old.

The fountains were dry. The channels that had carried water from the wells to the palms were cracked open to the sky, full of sand. The palms themselves stood along the dead channels with their fronds hanging brown and broken, like the arms of people who had given up. And beyond them, on its low hill, the house.

What was left of it.

"Gods," said Creez, behind her, very quietly.

The great courtyard had fallen in. Even from here she could see it: the shape of the hole where the ground had given way, a wound in the earth half the width of the yard, with the broken stumps of sandstone pillars standing around its rim like teeth. Half the east wing had gone down with it. The rest leaned. The roof of the great hall was open to the sky in three places, and the setting sun came through the holes and lay across the ruins in long red bars.

“You don’t have to go in,” said Riegel.

Anna did not answer. She walked.

* * *

She walked through the palms. She walked along the dead channel where Sefu had taught her to swim, when it was full of water and she was seven, holding her up under the belly with one hand while she kicked and shrieked and swallowed half of it. She walked past the stables. The doors were open. There were no horses.

Behind the stables, where the kitchen garden had been, there were graves.

She stopped.

There were eleven of them. Low mounds of sand, each with a flat stone at its head, and on each stone a name scratched with the point of a knife. She knew every name. Hana, who did the bread. Old Yusuf, who kept the bees. The twins, Karim and Samir, who had been fourteen and fought over everything. Little Mira, from the kitchens. Eleven people who had been loyal to her father, and who had not been brought north on iron chains, and who had not run.

“Who buried them?” said Fennick softly.

Anna knelt beside the nearest stone. *Hana*. The letters were deep and careful, scratched by someone who had taken a long time over it.

“I don’t know,” she said.

But she did. She knew the hand. It was the hand that had scratched her height on the doorpost of the kitchen every year on her birthday, from the year she was born until the year she turned twelve and said she was too old for it. It was Sefu’s hand.

He had come home. Before the household was carried north. Or after, emptied, sent south on the morning tide with a purse and a paper. He had come home with nothing left in him at all, and he had dug eleven graves and scratched eleven names.

Anna stood up. Her face was dry. She did not trust herself to speak.

She went on up the hill to the house.

* * *

The sinkhole was deeper than she remembered. She had only ever seen it from the bottom, in the dust, with her father falling.

From the rim it went down perhaps forty feet, in a rough funnel of broken stone and sand and the shattered remains of the courtyard tiles, blue and gold, scattered all the way down like petals. At the bottom, in the shadow, lay the stump of the pillar that had exploded. And beside it, half buried in sand, something long and straight caught the last of the red light.

“Anna,” said Riegel.

She was already climbing down.

She went down the broken stone the way her father had taught her to climb the cliffs above the wadi as a girl: three points

always touching, never hurry, never look at the drop. Sand slid out from under her boots and hissed away into the dark. Halfway down, her hand came to rest on a blue-and-gold tile, unbroken, and she recognised it. It was the one with the little chip in the corner, from the year she had dropped her first practice sword on it. She left it where it was.

At the bottom, she knelt in the sand beside the sword.

It was her father's. The great two-handed blade of the Sword Head of the southern clans. It had lain here since the night of the storm. Sand had drifted over most of it, and the red evening light came down the funnel and lay along the half of the blade that showed, and there was a stain on it, near the hilt, dark and dry and old.

She brushed the sand away with her hands. She lifted it.

It was heavy. Lighter than Riegel's cleaver, but heavy, heavier than she remembered. She stood at the bottom of the sinkhole with her father's sword in both hands and looked up at the ragged circle of red sky forty feet above, where three small figures were looking down at her.

She did not cry. She thought she would. She did not.

"Father," she said quietly. "I'm home."

Then she heard someone singing.

* * *

It came from the great hall. Very faint, very thin, a woman's voice, cracked and wandering. The tune was a lullaby. Anna knew it. Every child in the southern sands knew it. *Sleep, little bird, the night is long. Sleep, little bird, the sand will sing.*

Anna climbed out of the sinkhole with the sword on her back.

Nobody spoke. Riegel took one look at her face and stepped aside. Creez's hand went to his gun, and then, slowly, came away from it. Fennick had stopped grinning a long time ago.

She walked across the ruined courtyard to the doors of the great hall. They were hanging off their hinges. Beyond them, the hall was full of red light from the holes in the roof, and dust hanging in the light, and at the far end, on the dais where her mother's chair had stood, someone was sitting.

It was Amara.

Anna would not have known her. Not from the doors. The woman on the dais was thin, so thin that the violet silk of her gown hung off her like a curtain off a broken rod. Her hair, which had always been bound up in gold, was loose and filthy and tangled down her back. Her feet were bare and black with dust. She sat hunched on the edge of the dais, rocking, with her arms wrapped around her own body, and her right hand kept going to her throat, to the place where the iron chain had been, over and over, touching the bare skin and coming away, touching and coming away, like a moth at a window.

She was singing to no one.

Sleep, little bird. Sleep, little bird.

Anna walked down the length of the hall. Her boots crunched on fallen stone. Amara did not look up until Anna was standing directly in front of her, at the foot of the dais, with her own curved blade drawn and her father's great sword on her back.

Then she raised her head, slowly, and looked at her stepdaughter with eyes like two holes burned in paper.

"Oh," said Amara. "It's you."

* * *

“Do you know what it’s like?” said Amara.

Anna’s blade was at her throat. It had been there for some time. The point rested in the hollow below Amara’s jaw, exactly where the iron chain had hung, and every time Amara spoke, it moved with her breath. She did not seem to notice.

“Do you know what it’s like, little bird, to have loved something perfectly? *Perfectly*. With nothing held back. Not a drop.” Her voice was hoarse, dreamy. “For three years I loved. I loved him, your father. I loved the household. I loved the land and the water and the sand. I loved the stone. Oh, I loved the stone. And it loved me back, and everything I loved did whatever I asked, because it loved me too.” Her hand went to her throat. Touched. Came away. “And then he took it.”

“The King,” said Anna.

“He *took* it.” Amara’s face twisted. “He wrote to me. For two years. He sent me a man. A thin man in wine red, with silver hair and a ledger. Such a polite man. He showed me how to make the stone stronger. *Feed it*, he said. *Feed it what you love most and it will grow*.” She laughed. It was a horrible sound. “So I fed it. I fed it your father. I’d have fed it you. And when it was the biggest stone in the world, I carried it across the sea to him, because he’d written that he loved me. And I knelt on his stair, and he took it off my neck like a man picking a fruit, and he put it on his own, and he never looked at me again.”

Behind Anna, at the doors of the hall, Riegel had gone very still.

“A thin man,” he said. “Silver hair. A ledger.” His voice was strange. “He met my train. In Calice. He said he was an undersecretary. He said he was nobody.”

“He’s the King’s,” said Amara dully. “Everything is the King’s.” She looked up at Anna again. “And now I can’t feel anything. Do you understand, little bird? Nothing. Not love. Not hate. Not grief for your father. I *know* I should grieve. I know it the way I know the sky is up. And I can’t. It took all of it with it when it went.” Her hand went to her throat. “There’s only a hole. Here. Where it was. I can feel the hole.”

Anna said nothing.

“So do it,” said Amara. She leaned forward, into the blade. A thread of blood ran down her throat into the violet silk. “You came all this way. Across the sea, I suppose, in some filthy hold. To stand here. Do it. Kill me.” Her burned-paper eyes held Anna’s. “I killed him. Not you. I did. I put the sword in his hand and the stone round my neck and told him to cleanse the bloodline. Do it, little bird. Make the scales come level.”

Justice, thought Anna. Every act weighs something. The scales will always come level. It doesn’t say how.

She stood in her father’s hall with her blade at the throat of the woman who had destroyed him, and she looked into those empty eyes, and she waited to feel the thing she had carried across the sea. The rage. The hate. The white heat that had kept her alive in the hold of the bus with the goats, and in the mud of the Drowned Districts, and on the roof above the Grand Water.

It was there. It was all there. It burned in her like a coal.

And under it, deeper, there was something else.

It was the face of a woman with nothing behind her eyes. It was Sefu’s face on the jetty in Calice, slack and patient, waiting for orders. It was her father’s face coming out of the golden dust. It was the old bus driver’s daughter, sitting by the door like a

dog. It was the dockhands on the quay, getting up, and getting up, and getting up. All of them, emptied. All of them, *used*.

He took it off my neck like a man picking a fruit.

Anna's hand did not shake. But it did not move forward, either.

"No," she said.

Amara stared at her.

"Not yet," said Anna. "Not here. Not like this." She took the blade away from her stepmother's throat, slowly, and the thread of blood ran down and stopped. "You're coming with me."

"Why?"

"Because you're the only person alive who has worn that stone and lived," said Anna. "Because you know the man in wine red. Because the King took it from you, and I'm going to take it from *him*." She sheathed her blade. "And because when I decide what you're worth, I want to be sure. I want to be sure, Amara. I want to *know*."

Amara looked at her for a long, long time. And something moved, very deep, at the bottom of those burned-out eyes. It was very small and it did not last. It might have been nothing.

It might have been fear.

* * *

They came at dusk.

Creez felt them first, again. He was standing at the doors of the hall, watching the light go, when the shard in his coat, which had been quiet since the Table of Reading, went suddenly hot.

"Company," he said.

Fennick ran to a hole in the wall and looked out, and swore.

They were coming up the hill through the dead palms. Not running. Walking. In a long, ragged, perfectly silent line. Farmers. Water-carriers. Herdsmen. Women from the villages along the river, with their headscarves on. Children. Fifty of them, perhaps more, and every one of them had a faint violet light glowing at the throat.

"The villages," said Anna. She had come to the doors with Amara stumbling behind her, one wrist tied to Anna's belt with a strip of silk. "My father's villages. He protected them for twenty years."

"And the King's been selling them stones," said Riegel.

"He can't see us," said Fennick. "My lord ended his sight through the splinter. He can't *see*—"

"He doesn't need to see," said Creez. "He just needs to tell them where to walk." He pulled out his father's gun and looked at it, and at the single silver bullet in his other palm, and put the bullet back in his pocket. "One left. Not for these. These are just people."

"Then what?"

"The wells," said Fennick. "The Hollow Road. If we can get back to the wells—"

"They're between us and the wells," said Anna.

They were. The line of devoted had come up out of the palms and spread across the eastern side of the hill, between the house and the old wells. And now, at their head, another figure came out of the dusk.

He was tall and gaunt and grey-bearded, in the black and gold livery of the estate, stained and torn. He walked at the front of the line with his hands loose at his sides and his face slack and

patient, and at his throat, on a new iron chain, a new purple stone glowed.

“Sefu,” Anna whispered.

“The Lady,” said Sefu in his flat, empty voice, “must come home. His Majesty loves the Lady. His Majesty needs the Lady. Give her to us.” He stopped twenty paces from the doors. Behind him, fifty people stopped at the same instant. “Give her to us, and you may go.”

Behind Anna, Amara made a sound like a trapped animal.

“He wants me,” she whispered. “Why does he want me? He threw me away. Why—”

“Give her to us.”

Anna stepped out of the doors of her father’s hall into the dusk.

She left her curved blade in its sheath. She drew instead the great sword on her back, her father’s, and held it in front of her in both hands, point down, the way he had always held it before a bout. The way he had held it when he taught her. She walked out across the ruined courtyard, past the rim of the sinkhole, toward the man who had taught her to swim.

“Sefu,” she said. “It’s me. It’s Anna.”

He looked at her with nothing in his face.

“Little b—” His mouth moved. Stopped. Tried again. “Little —”

“Give her to us,” said fifty mouths at once.

Sefu raised his hands and came at her.

Anna did not lift the sword. She dropped it.

She let it fall in the sand at her feet, and caught Sefu’s wrists in both hands, and stepped inside his reach, the way her father had taught her to step inside a bigger man’s guard, and as she

stepped she took her curved blade out of its sheath in one movement and cut. Not at him. At the chain. The new iron chain at his throat. The edge went through it a finger's width from his skin and the purple stone fell away into the sand.

Sefu's knees buckled.

She held him up. She was not strong enough, but she held him anyway. He sagged against her, enormous and gaunt and shaking, and his head fell on her shoulder, and she heard him breathing. Great ragged sobbing breaths, like a man who has been under water.

"*Anna*," he said. His own voice. Cracked to pieces. "Little bird. Oh, little bird. I buried them. I buried them all. I couldn't — I didn't — your father—"

"I know," she said. "I saw. I know."

Behind him, fifty devoted started walking.

* * *

They ran for the wells.

There was no other way. Riegel went first, with the cleaver dragging behind him, straight into the line of devoted, and he did not lift it. He used his body. He went through them like a bull through a fence, shoulder down, scattering farmers and herdsmen into the sand, and they got up, and got up, and kept coming. Creez went after him with the empty gun reversed in his fist. Fennick went after Creez, dragging Amara by her silk tether. Anna came last, with her father's sword back on her shoulder and Sefu's arm across her neck, half carrying him.

At the wells, Fennick dropped through the iron grate into the dark and dragged Amara down after him. Creez went. Riegel stood at the lip of the shaft swinging his arms like flails, knocking

back hands and hooks and children's grasping fingers, roaring.
"Go! Anna! Go!"

Anna got Sefu to the grate.

He would not go down.

"No," he said. He took his arm off her shoulders. He stood up straight, by himself, for the first time, at the edge of the well. Behind him the devoted were coming through the palms in a dark silent tide. "No, little bird. You go."

"Sefu—"

"Someone has to close the grate," said Sefu. "From the top. And someone has to stay with the graves." He put his big scarred hand on her head, the way he had when she was seven and had swallowed half the water channel. "Your father would want someone to stay with the graves."

"They'll put another stone on you!"

"Then I'll take it off," said Sefu. "I know how now." He smiled. It was his own smile. She had not seen it in three years. "Go, little bird. Run."

Riegel caught her round the waist and took her down the shaft.

The grate slammed shut above them. The last thing Anna saw, through its bars, against the deep blue of the evening sky, was Sefu's face looking down at her, smiling, and behind him a dark tide of people closing over the top of the well like water.

Then there was only the Hollow Road, and the grey light, and Amara's voice in the dark ahead, high and thin, singing to herself.

Sleep, little bird. Sleep, little bird.

And then, very softly, in a different voice, as if to no one at all:

“He needs me because I fed it. Don’t you understand? It’s bonded to me. He can wear it, but it still knows my heart. And when he goes to take the Ending, he’ll need a vessel to pour the extra love into.” She laughed, a broken little sound. “He’s going to come for me. Little bird. He’s going to come.”

Chapter Sixteen: The Concord Cracks

On the eighth day before the Equinox, the Speaker of the Senate of Cups stood on the red-silk balcony above the Piazza of the Chalice and read the King's proclamation to the city.

The square was full. It had been full since dawn. The criers had been through every district the night before, ringing bells, and the city had come: the clerks and the porters, the fishwives and the gentlemen under black umbrellas, and, thick along the edges of the square where the lamps did not reach, the grey silent people of the Drowned Districts. In the middle of the pink and white stone, where the carpenters had once laid the frame of a block, there was nothing now but a rectangle of paler stone where the timber had stood. The block had been taken down. Nobody had said why.

Speaker Lucan Merrow was a soft pale man with rings on every finger, and a voice like watered wine. He held the King's proclamation in both hands, on heavy cream paper sealed in blue, and he read it without once looking up.

"Whereas," he read, "the Tomb of Netherfiend, bound by the Concord of the Houses these three hundred years to keep the Thirteenth Arcanum within its walls and to meddle not in the affairs of the realm, has in this month sent agents into the city of Calice, the seat of the Crown;

“And whereas those agents did break by force the Vault of the Chalice, and free from it a condemned man, and slay in the doing a sworn swordsman of the Vantress clan, Torvald by name, aged nineteen years;

“And whereas the said Tomb has given shelter to that condemned man, and to a parricide of the southern sands, and to a gunman of the western lands who bears upon his person property of the Crown;

“Now therefore His Majesty Aurelian, by grace of the Arcana King of Calice and first among the Cups, declares the Tomb of Netherfiend in breach of the Concord.”

A sound went through the square. Not a shout. Something lower. Like a wave drawing back off a beach.

“His Majesty,” Merrow read on, “of his great love for his people and for the peace, will nonetheless receive the Bearer of the Thirteenth at the Conclave on the Equinox, as was agreed. Should the Bearer come, and kneel, and surrender the Thirteenth Arcanum into the keeping of the Crown, the breach will be forgiven, and the Concord renewed for a further century in the King’s name.

“Should the Bearer not come, the Houses are summoned to make war.”

The Speaker lowered the paper.

For a moment he stood at the balustrade, looking out over the crowd. His soft pale face was perfectly composed. Nobody in the square could have said what he was thinking. A few of the people nearest the balcony said afterward that he had seemed tired. One woman, an old fishwife from the Ninth Canal, swore to her dying day that his hands had been shaking. But she was a

long way off, and it was raining, and she had always said things like that.

Then he turned and went inside.

Behind him, on the balcony, two figures in wine-red and silver stood watching the crowd. They were not masked. They were only a pair of undersecretaries, slender and grey, with ledgers under their arms. One of them was a thin man with silver hair.

He was smiling.

* * *

"In the King's name," said Corvinus. "Not the Houses'. The King's."

The Hollow Hall of Netherfiend was full for the first time in a century. Every guardian stood at the War-Table: Corvinus in his crow-cloak at the western edge, Ottoline on her brass stool with her lamps, Thessaly in her hood with a book open in each hand. Nyxa, at the eastern end, beside the carved shape of the Tomb, holding the crow that had brought the proclamation, which had flown a thousand miles in a night and was now asleep in her hands. Bramwell, by the place where a door would have been. Fennick, filthy, leaning on a pillar.

And three outsiders, standing together a little back from the table, in the light of the single hanging lamp.

"He doesn't want the Concord renewed," said Corvinus. "He wants it *ended*. He wants every House in the realm to watch my lord kneel to him and hand over the Thirteenth, and then he wants the next century signed in his name. Not the Cups. Not the Senate. *His*." The crow-feathers rustled. "A King who holds three Arcana and the Concord itself. My lord, it is—"

“Elegant,” said Ossiran. “Yes. You said.”

“I was going to say *a nightmare*.”

“That too.”

The Sovereign stood at the head of the table, looking down at the carved world. He had not spoken much since the reading. The guardians had noticed. None of them had said so.

“Ottoline,” he said.

The Analyst swung down her lenses. “My lord. I told you this morning. The Privy Purse. The King’s own money, eleven years back, paying the Magicians in the Spires who cut the Lovers. Every stone in every market in the realm was made with his coin.” She touched the red lamp. “I have the ledger. I can prove it. Every thread.”

“To whom?”

Ottoline opened her mouth. Shut it.

“Exactly,” said Ossiran. “Prove it to the Houses, and the Houses will say that the Analyst of the Tomb of Netherfiend, which has just been declared in breach of the Concord, has produced a ledger. Of course she has.” The fires in his sockets moved over the table. “The King has been clever. Very clever. He has made sure that the only people who know what he is are the people no one will believe.”

“The masks know,” said Riegel.

Every guardian turned to look at him. He felt his face go hot. He did not look away.

“The two in the Vault,” he said. “The silver and the wine-dark. They sit at the High Table. They watched him take the stone off Amara. They *know*.”

“And they cannot say so,” said Thessaly softly, from inside her hood, “without unmasking. And if they unmask, they die.”

“Then what’s the *point* of them?”

“The point of them,” said Ossiran, “is that they are still sitting there.” He laid one bone hand flat on the carved city of Calice. “Eight days, guardians. I will hear what you think. Then I will decide.”

* * *

What they thought took most of the night.

Riegel stood at the back of the Hollow Hall with Anna and Creez and listened, and understood perhaps half of it. Corvinus wanted to march. Of course he did. He wanted to send the dead of Netherfiend north through the Hollow Roads and come up under the Spires at midnight before the Equinox and pull them down. He had a plan for it drawn on the War-Table in small iron pieces, and it was beautiful and terrible and Riegel could not stop looking at it.

Ottoline wanted to send the ledger to every House at once, by crow, on the same night, so that they could not all ignore it at the same time. Nyxa thought half the Houses would burn it unread and the other half would use it to blackmail the King. Bramwell wanted to go to Calice himself, as the Herald of the Black Gate, and stand in the Piazza of the Chalice and read it aloud. Thessaly said that the last Herald of the Black Gate to stand in the Piazza of the Chalice had been torn apart by the crowd in the year of the Concord, and she had the account in the Archive if anyone wanted to read it.

And Velisande said nothing at all.

She stood at her lord’s right hand through the whole long night, very still, with her hands folded at her waist and her eyes

lowered, and when Corvinus asked her directly what she thought, she raised her eyes and looked at Ossiran and said only:

“I think he should not go.”

The Hall went quiet.

“That is not a plan, Seneschal,” said Corvinus.

“No,” said Velisande. “It is a wish.”

* * *

The Hearth-Queen of the Ember Marches arrived at the Black Gate an hour before dawn, and she did not wait to be announced.

She came down the long stair out of the dunes on foot, with a dozen of her Clan Heads behind her and their Sword Heads behind them, all in red leather, all armed, all smelling of smoke. She was a broad, scarred woman of sixty with a braid of iron-grey hair down her back and a staff of black oak in her fist that smouldered at the tip. She walked straight past Bramwell at the gate without breaking stride, and down the corridors of violet stone, and into the Hollow Hall, and the guardians turned at the sound of her boots.

“So,” said Calda Rook. “This is the Tomb.”

She looked round the ring of thirteen pillars. At the War-Table. At the guardians. At the three outsiders by the wall. And at last, at the tall still figure at the head of the table, robed in black, with violet fires where his eyes should be.

“And you’re the Bone Lord,” she said. “Smaller than I expected.”

“Most people say taller,” said Ossiran.

“Most people haven’t spent forty years on the Marches.” Calda Rook planted her staff on the black floor. Sparks went up.

“Your Herald came to my fire three weeks ago with a question. *How long have the Magicians been telling the Senate to cut the coin for your beacons?*” She snorted. “I could have told him. Eleven years. Same as everything else. And now the Senate’s stopped paying altogether, and my beacon-wardens are burning their own furniture to keep the fires lit, and on the northern Marches something’s started coming over the border at night that I don’t have a name for. It has chains on it.” She looked at Creez. “Faceless. Horned. *That* kind of chains. Ring a bell, gunner?”

Creez’s hand went to his coat.

“I read my fire before I came,” said Calda Rook. “I always do. I’ll read it again here, if the Bone Lord’s witch will allow it.” She glanced at Velisande. “Bone reads one way. Fire reads another. Sometimes they agree.”

Velisande inclined her head. It was the first thing she had done all night.

The Hearth-Queen of the Ember Marches knelt on the floor of the Hollow Hall and opened a small leather case and drew out a tarot deck painted on thin sheets of wood, every one of them scorched black at the edges. She did not shuffle it. She held the deck in her open palm and blew on it, gently, the way one blows on a coal, and the top card caught fire.

It burned with a small, clean, steady flame. She laid it down on the black stone. It went on burning, but it did not burn away.

“*Ten of Wands*,” she said. A figure bent double under a great bundle of staves, struggling toward a distant town. “The burden. Too much carried too long by one back.” She did not look up at Ossiran. She did not need to.

She blew on the deck again. The second card caught.

“Judgement.” An angel in the sky with a trumpet, and below, the dead rising out of their graves with their arms raised. “The call. The reckoning. What’s buried comes up.” She looked at Thessaly. “Your Scribe’s got the last page of something, I hear. Burned. Well. Ashes come up too, under Judgement.”

She blew a third time.

The third card did not catch. It smouldered. A thin line of smoke went up off it, and it curled at the corners, and Calda Rook frowned and turned it over with the end of her staff.

“The World,” she said slowly. “Reversed.”

No one spoke.

“The end of the road,” said the Hearth-Queen. “The whole circle. The dance that completes.” She looked up at last, straight at the Sovereign of Netherfiend. “Upside down, it means the circle isn’t closed. Something’s unfinished. Something’s been left out.” She tapped the smouldering card with her staff. “Someone, maybe.”

Ossiran looked down at the three cards burning on the floor of his Hall. Then, slowly, he turned his head and looked at Velisande.

She did not look back.

“So,” said Calda Rook, and got up off her knees with a grunt. “Here’s my answer to your Herald’s question, Bone Lord. The Wands will stand with Netherfiend. Not because I like you. I don’t know you. Because the King’s been starving my fires for eleven years so that when his chained things came over the border there’d be no one awake to see them.” She spat on the floor. It hissed. “And because my fire says your burden’s too big for one back. And I’ve carried enough bundles of sticks up enough hills in my life to know what that looks like.”

* * *

Lucia's letter came the next night.

It came by crow, through Nyxa, and Nyxa brought it to Riegel herself, which she did not have to do. She found him sitting on the edge of his bed with the cleaver across his knees, and she put the letter in his hand, and went away again without a word.

It was not sealed. It had been, once, with the plain brown wax of the lower districts, and Nyxa had opened it and read it, and resealed it, and then, apparently, changed her mind and opened it again and left it open. Riegel understood that. He understood that it was a kind of courtesy.

He read it by the light of the lamp that burned without oil.

Riegel,

The Herald from the Tomb came to the Elders three days ago. You should have seen their faces. Old Matteo fainted. I mean it. He went down like a sack.

The Herald said you asked the Bone Lord to keep the clans from war. In your name. He said you bargained something for it. He wouldn't say what. Matteo wanted to know if you'd sold your soul. The Herald said no, only your sword arm, and that you'd get it back if you used it right. Nobody knew what that meant.

It's working, I think. Half the Elders wanted your blood. Half wanted to march on the Senate. Now they're all just sitting in the clan hall shouting at each other, which is what they always do, which is better than what they were going to do.

I went to see you in the cellar. That night. You remember. I stood on the stair and I didn't say anything, and then I went up

again. I've been thinking about why. I think it was because I didn't know what I'd say. I still don't.

I don't forgive you. I don't blame you. It's both. I didn't know it could be both until now.

Enzo loved me. I know you think I didn't love him back. I did. Not the way he wanted. Not the way he thought I loved you. But I did. And he loved you too, Riegel, before the jealousy ate him up. He used to tell me about the two of you under the blanket, scaring each other with stories about the Bone Lord.

Funny. Now you're there.

When it's done, come home. I don't know what we'll be. But come home and we'll find out.

Lucia

Riegel read it four times. Then he folded it very small and put it inside his shirt, against his skin, and sat there for a long time on the edge of the bed with his hands over his face.

Across the room, Creez pretended to be asleep. He was very bad at it.

* * *

The guardians did not see Ossiran again until the sixth day before the Equinox, when he came down to the cells.

There were cells in Netherfiend. Riegel had not known that. They were very deep, deeper than the Archive, deeper than the Hollow Hall, cut into the oldest rock of the Tomb, and they were not like the Vault of the Chalice at all. They were clean and dry and lit, and their doors were not iron but bone, and the only one in use held a single prisoner.

Amara sat on a narrow bed in a plain grey shift with her hands in her lap. She was rocking. Very slightly, back and forth. Her right hand went to her throat, and touched, and came away.

Anna stood outside the door. She had been standing there, the guardians said, for most of five days.

The Sovereign of Netherfiend came down the last stair and stood beside her, and for a long time neither of them said anything.

"She sings at night," said Anna at last. "The lullaby. Over and over."

"I know."

"She says he'll come for her. She says the stone is bonded to her heart, and he can wear it, but it still knows her. She says he'll need a vessel for the Equinox." Anna's hands were fists at her sides. "Is that true?"

"I don't know," said Ossiran. "Perhaps. The Lovers is the law of choice. It was hers. She chose it, three years ago, in a trader's cart at the southern ports. Whatever was made of it after, it began as her choice." He looked through the bone door at the woman on the bed. "Laws remember who chose them. The dark remembers."

"Then he *will* come."

"Yes," said Ossiran. "I expect so."

Anna turned and looked up at him.

"Then let him," she said. "Let him come here. To your Tomb. For her. And when he's standing at the Black Gate with the Lovers on his chest and the Devil in his eyes—"

"He will not come himself," said Ossiran. "Kings do not. He will send things." He paused. "And he will send them soon, now. Because he has felt the Wands come to my door, and he knows

that the Concord is cracking, and he cannot afford for it to crack before the Equinox.” The fires in his sockets went very bright, very still. “Go and find your swordsman and your gunner, Anna. Tell them to sleep in their boots tonight.”

“Why?”

But the Sovereign had already turned away, and was looking up, as if through all the stone above them, at something very far off.

Far above, at the top of the long stair that wound down out of the dunes, the crows of Netherfiend were rising off the Black Gate all at once, in a great black storm of wings, screaming.

Chapter Seventeen: Siege of the Black Gate

They came up out of the desert at midnight, and there were more of them than there were stars.

Riegel saw them first from the top of the long stair, where Bramwell had brought the three of them when the crows went up. The stair wound up out of the Black Gate through a great cut in the rock, and at the top of it there was nothing but a low arch of weathered stone half buried in a dune, and beyond the arch, the open desert, silver under a half moon.

The desert was moving.

It took him a long moment to understand what he was seeing. At first it looked like the dunes themselves were shifting, sliding, the way sand slides in a wind. Then the moon came out from behind a thin cloud and he saw that it was people. Thousands of people. They were coming across the desert from the north and the west in long dark lines, walking, all at the same pace, all in step, and at every throat, in every line, a faint violet light was glowing. From up on the arch it looked like a field of tiny purple stars that had come down to earth and started walking.

“Gods,” said Creez.

“The river villages,” said Anna. Her voice was flat. “All of them. Every village my father ever protected. Every market the traders ever sold a stone in.”

“Not only them,” said Bramwell quietly.

Among the walking lines, here and there, there were other shapes. Taller. Thinner. Moving differently. They did not walk in step. They lurched, and dragged, and when the moonlight touched them it slid off something like iron. Riegel saw one lift its blank horned head and turn it slowly toward the arch, the way a hound lifts its head toward a scent.

And behind the lines, coming over the farthest dune, there were lights. Clean, cold, glittering lights, like chandeliers carried on poles. A dozen of them. They threw rainbows on the sand.

“Spire-hounds,” said Bramwell. “The Magicians have sent their pets.” He was silent for a moment. “The King has sent everything he owns.”

“For what?” said Riegel. “Us?”

“No,” said the Herald of the Black Gate. “Not you.”

* * *

The Sovereign of Netherfiend did not come up to the arch.

He could not. Riegel learned that in the next quarter of an hour, in pieces, from Bramwell and from Fennick, shouted over the rising noise as the Tomb woke up around them. The Black Gate was the seal. The Concord had bound the Thirteenth inside it, and the Bearer of the Thirteenth had agreed, and for three hundred years he had not set foot beyond the threshold. Not once. Not to see the sun. Not to see the stars. The Tomb’s guardians could go where they liked. The Sovereign could not.

“Then who’s going to stop *them*?” Creez shouted.

Fennick pointed down the stair.

The dead of Netherfiend were coming up out of the dark.

Riegel had seen the dancing figures carved on the walls of the Hollow Roads, the long lines of bone kings and beggars and children holding hands. He had thought they were decoration. They were not. They came up the long stair from the Black Gate in ranks, in silence, and they were bone, all of them, bone and old armour and older cloth, and they carried spears and swords and long hooked bills, and in the empty sockets of every skull burned a small violet flame like the fires in the eyes of their lord. They came up past Riegel on the stair and he flattened himself against the rock to let them by and felt them go, cold as a wind off a winter sea, hundreds of them, and none of them looked at him.

At their head walked Corvinus.

The Strategist had put on a helm. It was black and winged and ancient, and under it his face of bone and stone was perfectly calm. He carried no weapon. He did not need one. He walked up the stair at the head of the dead of Netherfiend with his crow-cloak spread behind him, and when he passed Riegel he turned his head and looked at him, and Riegel saw that under the helm, the small bright eyes were *glad*.

"Eleven plans," said Corvinus. "For three hundred years. And never once did I get to use one." He smiled, very slightly. "Stay behind the line, swordsman. Unless you mean to lift that."

He went up through the arch and out into the moonlight, and the dead of Netherfiend went after him and spread across the top of the dune in a long silent line, facing the walking stars.

* * *

The first wave hit the line at a quarter past midnight.

It was not like any battle Riegel had imagined. There were no war-cries. The devoted did not shout. They did not curse or scream or call out to their gods. They simply walked up the dune into the spears of the dead in perfect silence, in step, and the spears went into them, and they kept walking. They did not try to kill. They tried to *pass*. They put their hands on the bone soldiers and pushed, the way a crowd pushes against a gate, and the ones behind pushed the ones in front, and the line of the dead bent backward like a bow.

“Hold!” Corvinus’s voice rang over the dune. *“Hold, and do not kill them! They are the lower castes! They are not our enemy!”*

“Then what do we DO?” Creez howled.

The answer came from the arch behind them.

It was a voice. A single voice, deep and broad and grey, rising up out of the cut in the rock and going out across the desert. It did not shout. It *sang*. It was a song Riegel had never heard, in a language he did not know, slow and dark and old, and it filled the night from the dune to the moon the way water fills a basin.

Bramwell stood on the top of the arch with his arms at his sides and his head back, and sang.

And the walking stars began to falter.

Not all of them. Not even most. But here and there along the line of the devoted, as the Herald’s voice went over them, someone stopped. A farmer in a torn shirt. A woman in a headscarf. A boy of twelve. They stopped pushing. They stood still in the press with their faces turned up toward the arch, and the violet light at their throats flickered, and on some of their

faces, very slowly, something began to come back. Confusion. Fear. A wet, astonished blinking, like someone waking from a dream in a strange room.

“He was a singer,” said Fennick, at Riegel’s elbow. “Before. A funeral singer. He sang the dead to sleep.” He swallowed. “Turns out he can sing the living awake too. A bit. For a while.”

“*NOW!*” Nyxa’s voice. It came from nowhere, from everywhere, a whisper that carried over the whole battle. “*Now, my darlings! Now!*”

The crows came down.

They came out of the dark above the desert in a black storm, thousands of them, every crow in Netherfiend, and they went for the throats of the devoted who had stopped. They did not peck. They did not claw. They went for the iron chains. Riegel saw a crow land on a woman’s shoulder and seize the chain at her throat in its beak and *pull*, and the chain snapped, and the stone fell, and the woman dropped to her knees in the sand with her hands over her face and began to sob. He saw a dozen crows do it at once along the line. A hundred. The violet lights began to go out along the front of the dune, one by one, like candles in a church at the end of a service.

But behind them, there were thousands more.

And behind those, the chained things were coming.

* * *

The faceless ones came through the line of devoted like sharks through a school of fish.

They did not care who they trampled. They waded through the press of walking bodies, throwing farmers and children aside with their chains, and hit the line of the dead at a dozen places at

once, and where they hit, the line broke. Bone soldiers went flying, shattering. One of the chained things got a skeleton spearman by the skull and ripped its head clean off and threw it into the sand, and the violet flame in its sockets went out like a pinched wick.

Riegel saw the gap open.

He saw it the way he had always seen gaps, in the old days, in the street-fights of the lower districts and the practice yard of the clan hall: with his whole body, before his mind could catch up. A breach in the line, three bone soldiers wide, with a faceless horned thing standing in it, and beyond it the low arch and the cut in the rock and the long stair down to the Black Gate, wide open.

And on the arch, singing, with his eyes closed and his head back, Bramwell.

The chained thing turned its blank face toward the Herald.

Riegel ran.

He did not decide. His body did. It ran up the back of the dune with the black cleaver dragging behind him in the sand, sparks flying off the buried rock, and it put him in the breach between the faceless thing and the arch before he had time to be afraid.

The thing looked at him. Its chains lifted.

He did not lift the cleaver. *On the day you lift that blade, you will lift it for someone else.* He did not know if this was the day. He did not know if Bramwell was *someone else* in the way the law meant. He did not know anything, except that he could not do it. Not yet. His arms would not.

So he did what Anna had done in the Vault armoury. He let it fall.

He stood the black cleaver up on its tip in the sand in front of him, broad flat outward, and put both hands on the back of it, and his shoulder against it, and braced.

The chained thing hit it like a falling wall.

The shock went through Riegel's whole body. He felt it in his teeth, his spine, the soles of his feet. He was driven back a full stride, the cleaver's tip ploughing a furrow in the sand. The thing's chains whipped round the edges of the blade and lashed at his face, his arms, his chest. One caught him across the cheek and opened it to the bone. He did not let go.

"Not one more!" he roared at it. Blood ran into his mouth. *"NOT ONE MORE!"*

Something hit the chained thing from the side.

It was a girl with a curved blade. Anna came out of the dark along the line of the dune with her sword up and her father's great blade on her back, and she went into the faceless thing low, under its chains, and cut its legs out from under it. It went down on its knees in the sand. And from somewhere behind Riegel a gun went off, not the cathedral-bell of a holy bullet but the flat ugly crack of ordinary lead, once, twice, three times, as fast as Creez could thumb the single-shooter's chamber open and slam another round in. The lead did not kill it. Nothing would kill it but silver. But the lead hit it in the blank horned face, again and again, and knocked its head back, and back, and back.

"Bramwell!" Anna was shouting. *"Keep singing!"*

The Herald kept singing.

* * *

At a quarter to one, the fire came.

It came from the east, where the dunes ran down toward the river, in a long red line that Riegel took at first for the dawn. Then he heard the drums. Then he saw the riders: a hundred of them, two hundred, in red leather, with burning staves held high, coming over the eastern dunes at a gallop, and at their head a broad grey-braided woman on a tall black horse with a staff in her fist that blazed like a torch.

“WANDS!” Calda Rook bellowed. “WANDS OF THE MARCHES! BURN THE CHAINS!”

They hit the flank of the King’s army like a wave of fire hitting dry grass.

They did not burn the devoted. Riegel saw that, and loved them for it. The Wands rode through the walking lines of the lower castes with their staves held high, scattering them, and went straight for the chained things and the cold glittering lights of the Spire-hounds behind. And where the burning staves touched the faceless ones, the iron of their chains glowed red and then white and then ran like water, and the chained things screamed with no mouths and went down into the sand.

A Spire-hound came over the dune toward the arch, pouring itself across the sand in a blaze of rainbows.

The frost met it halfway.

Riegel turned his head. Velisande was standing on the arch beside Bramwell. He had not seen her come up. She stood there in black and violet with her hands at her sides, perfectly still, and from her feet a river of white went down the face of the dune, thorned and flowering, faster than a horse could run. It met the crystal hound in mid-stride and went up it like ivy up a wall. The glass body went white. Then it went *silent*: the ringing note it made as it ran cut off as if a hand had closed over it. The hound

stood frozen on the dune for one heartbeat, a sculpture of ice and glass with a violet coal burning in its chest.

Then it shattered into a thousand pieces, and the violet coal fell into the sand and went out.

Velisande did not look at it. She was looking out over the desert, at the battle, at the burning Wands and the falling chains and the sobbing farmers on their knees in the sand with their stones torn from their throats. Her face was white and hard and absolutely calm.

“Too easy,” she said.

Riegel stared at her.

“*Easy?*”

“He sent everything he owns,” said Velisande. “Thousands of them. Every stone he has. Every chained thing. The Spires’ pets. Against the dead of Netherfiend, the Herald’s song, my frost, and now the Wands.” She turned her head and looked at Riegel, and for the first time since he had met her, he saw fear in her face. “He is not a fool, swordsman. He knew he could not take the Gate. He never meant to take the Gate.” Her eyes widened. “He meant to keep us *looking* at it.”

“Then what does he—”

But she was already gone. Down off the arch. Down the stair. Running.

* * *

Anna got to the cells first.

She did not know how. She had been on the dune, fighting, and then she had heard Velisande’s words, *keep us looking at it*, and something in her had gone cold and certain, and she had run. Down the stair, past the dead coming up, through the Black

Gate, down the violet corridors and the long stair below the Hollow Hall and the longer stair below the Archive, down and down into the oldest rock of the Tomb, with her father's great sword banging on her back and her heart going like a war-drum.

The corridor of cells was silent.

The lamps were lit. The floor was clean. Every bone door was closed. Every one except the last.

It stood open.

Anna stopped in the doorway.

The cell was empty. The narrow bed. The grey blanket. A cup of water on the floor, untouched. And in the middle of the floor, running from wall to wall, a crack in the stone. It had not been there five days ago. It was a long, black, jagged crack, as though the rock had been split from beneath, and it was the width of a hand, and from it, very faintly, came a sound.

A chain. Moving. Going *down*.

And somewhere far below, much too far, a woman's voice, high and thin, singing.

Sleep, little bird. Sleep, little bird.

"AMARA!"

Anna threw herself flat on the floor and thrust her arm into the crack up to the shoulder. Black. Cold. Nothing. She could feel the chain going past, links grinding against the rock, down and down, impossibly far, and she grabbed at it, and it tore through her fingers and took the skin off her palm, and was gone.

The singing faded.

"AMARA!"

Footsteps behind her. Velisande, in the doorway, white as bone. Behind her, Nyxa, with her dozen keys swinging at her throat. They looked at the crack. They looked at the open door.

“Who opened it?” said Anna. She was on her knees on the floor of the cell with her bleeding hand pressed to her chest. *“Who opened the door?”*

Nyxa knelt and looked at the lock. She looked at it for a long time.

“Not forced,” she said at last, very quietly. “Opened. With a key.”

“Whose key?”

Nyxa did not answer. She looked up at Velisande. Velisande looked back at her. And neither of them said anything at all.

High above them, at the top of the long stair, out on the moonlit dunes, the battle was ending. Riegel would tell Anna later how it went. How at the very moment the chain went down into the dark, every violet stone on every throat in the King’s army flared once, very bright, and then went dark. How thousands of farmers and fishwives and herdsman and children all stopped walking at the same instant and stood there in the sand, blinking, lost, as if they had been sleepwalking and woken in a desert. How the chained things simply sank. Down into the sand, like stones into water, and were gone. How the cold glittering lights of the Spire-hounds turned and went back over the dunes to the north, one by one, and did not come back.

How the King’s army had not been defeated at all.

It had simply finished what it came for.

Chapter Eighteen: The Masked Letter

They counted the dead at dawn.

There were not many. That was the strangest thing about the siege of the Black Gate, and the thing nobody would believe afterward. Thousands had come across the desert. Hundreds of the dead of Netherfiend had gone up to meet them, and two hundred riders of the Wands, and the Herald's song, and the Seneschal's frost. And when the sun came up over the dunes and the guardians went out across the sand among the bodies, they found that almost all the bodies were getting up.

Farmers. Fishwives. Herdsmen and water-carriers and boys of twelve. They sat up in the sand and looked around them at the desert and the dunes and the strange low arch half buried in the hillside, and they had no idea where they were. Most of them did not remember walking. Some of them did not remember buying the stone. A few of them, the ones who had worn it longest, did not remember their own names, and sat in the sand with their hands in their laps and waited for someone to tell them.

Calda Rook's riders gave them water. The Wands knew how to do that, at least. They had been giving water to lost people on the Marches for three hundred years.

Of the dead of Netherfiend, forty-one had fallen and would not get up. Corvinus walked among the shattered bones in the

sand in his winged helm, and knelt by each one, and said something too quiet for anyone else to hear. Of the Wands, six. Of the devoted, nineteen, mostly trampled by the chained things in the first rush. The Wands buried them on the dune with their faces toward the river.

And of the King's chained things, and the Spire-hounds, and the Lady Amara, there was no trace at all.

* * *

"With a key," said Ossiran.

The Hollow Hall was very quiet. The guardians stood around the War-Table. Nobody had sat down. The three outsiders stood a little apart, as they always did, and Anna's right hand was bound up in white linen where the chain had torn the skin off her palm. She had not said a word since dawn.

"With a key," said Nyxa. She held up the cord at her throat with its dozen small keys. "Not one of mine. I checked them all. Twice. The lock wasn't forced. It wasn't picked. It was opened, from the outside, with a key that fit it."

"Who holds keys to the cells?"

"I do," said Nyxa. "And the Seneschal does. And you do, my lord." She lowered the cord. "That is all."

The silence in the Hall changed.

Nobody looked at Velisande. Riegel noticed that. Every guardian at the table was very carefully not looking at the Witch-Seneschal of Netherfiend, who stood at her lord's right hand in her black and violet with her hands folded at her waist, perfectly still. She did not look at anyone either. She looked at the War-Table, at the small carved shape of the Tomb, and her face was like marble.

“A key can be copied,” said Corvinus at last. Roughly. “A lock can be made to think it has been opened. There are things in the Spires that can—”

“Yes,” said Ossiran. “There are.” He did not look at Velisande either. “Nyxa. The crow.”

The Warden of the Letter-Hall hesitated.

It was very slight. Riegel saw it because he was watching for it. Nyxa’s eyes flicked to him, just once, across the table. *Don’t tell anyone what you saw.* Then back to her lord.

“There was a crow, my lord,” she said. “Five nights ago. Going out. North. With a message that said *They are in the Tomb. All three. Eleven days.* Sealed in black wax.” She paused. “Blank.”

The violet fires in Ossiran’s sockets did not move.

“Five nights ago,” he said. “And you did not tell me.”

“No, my lord.”

“Why?”

Nyxa lifted her pale eyes to his.

“Because I did not know who,” she said. “And I did not want to frighten you for nothing.”

For a long time the Sovereign of Netherfiend said nothing at all. Then he did something that none of the guardians had ever seen him do. He laughed. Not the dry, dropped-stone laugh of the council. Something else. Something tired and almost gentle.

“Nyxa,” he said. “I am the Ending. I have been dead for three hundred and eleven years. What exactly did you think was going to frighten me?”

Nobody answered.

“There is someone in this Tomb,” said Ossiran, “who knows what the cards will say before they are turned. Who seals letters

in blank black wax. Who sent word of our guests to someone in the north, and who opened a door with a key that should not exist.” He laid both bone hands flat on the War-Table. “I do not know who it is. Perhaps it is the masks. Perhaps it is the King’s undersecretary with his silver hair and his ledgers, who seems to get into a great many places. Perhaps it is someone I would not believe.” He was silent for a moment. “And perhaps it does not matter, now, because the Lady Amara is gone, and the King has what he came for.”

“Why?” said Anna.

It was the first word she had spoken since dawn. It came out of her like a crack in ice.

Every face turned to her.

“Why does he want her?” Her voice shook. “He threw her away. He took the stone off her neck like a fruit off a tree and put her on a boat. Why would he send *thousands* of people across the desert to get her *back*?”

Ossiran looked at her for a long moment.

“I think,” he said, “that we are about to find out.”

From the far end of the Hall, from the darkness beyond the thirteenth pillar, came the sound of wings.

* * *

It was not one of Nyxa’s crows. Riegel knew that at once, though he could not have said how. It was smaller, and blacker, and it flew differently: straight, fast, without circling, like an arrow shot down a corridor. It came out of the dark of the Hollow Hall and dropped onto the War-Table, onto the carved city of Calice, and stood there among the tiny canals with its feathers slicked flat and its chest heaving.

Bound to its leg with a thread of crimson silk was a small thick fold of paper. Sealed in black wax.

Blank.

Nobody moved.

Then Nyxa reached out with her ink-stained fingers and untied the crimson thread, and broke the wax, and unfolded the paper. She read it. Her face did not change. Then she held it out, not to her lord, but to Riegel.

"It's addressed to you," she said. "All three of you."

He took it. The hand was fine and slanting. He knew it. He had seen it on the plans of the Vault, and on the card that Creez carried in his coat.

To the swordsman, the blade and the gunner, at the Tomb.

He has the Lady. You will know that by now. We are sorry. We could not stop it, and we could not warn you in time without being seen.

Understand what he is doing. He wears the Lovers. He carries the Fifteenth, which has been his since before the Concord, and which is not whole. A splinter was broken from it in the badlands of the west on the night of the great storm, when a gunner fired a holy bullet into one of its hands. The gunner carries that splinter still. Without it the Fifteenth is wounded, and the Ending touched it at the Table of Reading and he felt it. He is afraid.

He will not take the Thirteenth at the Conclave. He knows now that the Bearer will not kneel, and that the Ending cannot be taken from a Bearer who will not give it. It can only be torn from him. And only a whole Devil can tear it.

So he goes to make it whole. The heart of the Fifteenth lies where it was first buried, before the Concord, beneath the floor

of the chapel in the canyon of the western badlands where the priests once blessed silver. The chapel that burned. When he stands on that floor with the Lovers on his chest and the splinter in his hand, the Devil will be whole again, and nothing in this world will be able to stand against it. Not the Wands. Not the Houses. Not the Ending.

He needs the Lady because the Lovers was her choice, and still knows her heart. When the Devil wakes whole it will be hungry, and he means to pour into her what it cannot hold. She is a vessel. When she is full she will break.

He sails west the morning after the Equinox, with the Lady, and with the High Table, so that they may witness. We will be with him. We have no choice.

Be there first. Keep the splinter from him. Whatever it costs. Friends you haven't met.

Riegel read it aloud. His voice did not shake until the end. When he finished, he lowered the paper and looked at Creez.

The gunner from the badlands was standing very still. All the colour had gone out of his face.

"The chapel," he said. "In the canyon. That's — that's my canyon. That's the chapel my father got his bullets from. It burned when I was a kid. The old priests went in after the relics and the roof came down." He swallowed. "Elara found the idol in the ruin of the old mission. A mile up the canyon. She thought it was just—" He stopped. "It was never just. Was it. It was a piece. It wandered."

"*Things that love me always come home,*" said Anna. Very quietly. Everyone looked at her. "That's what Amara said he said. The masks wrote that the King said it at the High Table. That the third was already his, that it had only wandered a little."

“And now he’s going home to get it,” said Fennick.

* * *

“Velisande,” said Ossiran. “Read.”

She laid out the cards on the War-Table, among the carved mountains and rivers, right in the middle of the sea that lay between the realm of Calice and the western lands. Three cards. Past, present, path. The simplest spread. She did not shuffle long. The sound of hooves came and went quickly, like riders passing in the night.

The first card.

The Devil. The horned figure on the pedestal. The two chained people at its feet, man and woman, with the chains loose around their necks.

“The past,” said Velisande. Her voice was steady. “The chain chosen long ago and forgotten. What has been his since before the Concord.” She did not look up.

The second card.

The Lovers. Two figures, a man and a woman, beneath an angel with wings of fire. Upside down.

“The present. Choice turned to compulsion. Love that cannot be refused.” Her voice tightened very slightly. “The Lady. The vessel.”

The third card.

She hesitated. Her hand rested on it face down for a moment. Then she turned it.

Death. A skeletal rider on a pale horse, with a black banner bearing a white rose. Before it, a king lay fallen in the road, his crown in the dust. A bishop knelt with his hands together. A child

held out a flower. And far away, between two towers, the sun was rising.

The Thirteenth. The Ending.

Velisande looked at it for a long time.

"The path," she said at last. "Ending. Transformation. What must finish so that something else can begin." Her voice was almost a whisper. "A king fallen in the road."

"Which king?" said Corvinus.

Velisande did not answer. She did not take her eyes off the card. And Riegel, watching her, saw her hand go once more to the bodice of her gown, over her heart, and press there, hard, as though something under it were trying to get out.

* * *

They made the plan in an hour. There was not much to make.

The three of them would go west. With Fennick, because Fennick knew roads and boats and how to get people places they should not be. Not through the Hollow Roads: the Roads ran under the near sea, but not under the great ocean. "There was a road under the ocean, once," Thessaly said from inside her hood. "The Deep Road. Before the Concord. It drowned. Nothing has walked it in three hundred years." She did not say anything else, and nobody asked her to.

So they would go by sea. Calda Rook's Wands would ride them to the coast, two days, and at the coast there was a port where the freighters went west, and a captain Nyxa knew who owed the Letter-Hall a very great deal. With luck, and a good wind, they would make the western lands four or five days before

the King's royal steamer, which would not sail until the morning after the Equinox.

"And then?" said Creez.

"And then you go home," said Ossiran. "To your canyon. To your burned chapel. And you find the heart of the Fifteenth before he does, and you keep it from him."

"With what?" Creez laughed. It was not a real laugh. "One bullet? A girl with a bandaged hand? A swordsman who won't lift his sword?"

"Yes," said Ossiran. "With those."

"And you?" said Riegel.

The Sovereign of Netherfiend did not answer at once.

"Bramwell will go to Calice for the Equinox," he said at last. "He will walk into the Senate House at the Conclave, in front of every House in the realm, and he will give them Netherfiend's answer." He paused. "I will stay here. Where I have always been."

"You're not coming," said Anna.

"I cannot," said Ossiran. "The Concord binds the Thirteenth within these walls. If I cross the threshold of the Black Gate, the seal breaks. And seals that break..." He stopped.

"Cost something," said Riegel.

"Yes."

"What?"

The fires in the Sovereign's sockets dimmed very slightly. He did not look at Velisande. She did not look at him.

"Go and sleep, swordsman," said Ossiran. "You ride at noon."

* * *

Velisande came to him after they had gone. Into the Hall of the Thirteenth Seat, where he sat on his grey stone throne in the dark, alone.

She did not walk the white line. She came from behind the throne, from the little round room where the black candle burned, and stood beside him at his right hand, where she had stood for three hundred years. For a long time neither of them spoke.

"You will go," she said at last. "When the time comes. You will cross the threshold and walk the Deep Road and go west, and you will stand in front of a King who holds the Devil and the Lovers, and you will try to end him." Her voice was very quiet. "And it will cost you."

"Perhaps."

"Not perhaps." She turned to face him. "I have read it, my lord. Every night since the envoy came. I know what it costs."

"Then tell me."

Velisande looked at him for a long time.

Then she knelt. Not at the foot of the dais. Beside the throne, close, so that her head was level with his hand on the arm of the stone chair. She took his hand. His bone hand, finger and knuckle and wrist. She held it in both of hers and pressed it to her cheek, and her cheek was cold as frost, and he felt, very faintly, through three hundred years of not feeling anything, that it was wet.

"I can't," she whispered. "I can't tell you. If I tell you, you'll go anyway. You'll go knowing. And I couldn't bear that." Her eyes closed. "Let me find another way. Please. There's still time. Let me find another way."

The Sovereign of Netherfiend looked down at the top of her dark head, at the silver pins like little keys in her hair.

“Velisande,” he said gently. “What is the card you keep over your heart?”

She did not answer.

She did not let go of his hand.

* * *

They rode at noon, as he had said. Calda Rook’s Wands went ahead in a long red line over the dunes, with the sun blazing on their burning staves. Riegel rode in the middle of them on a borrowed horse, with the black cleaver strapped across its back and Lucia’s letter inside his shirt. Anna rode beside him with her father’s sword on her shoulder and her hand bound in white. Creez rode behind, singing something under his breath that might once have been a cowboy song, very badly. Fennick rode last, complaining about horses.

At the top of the first dune, Riegel turned in the saddle and looked back.

The low arch of weathered stone lay half buried in the hillside behind them, and through it, the long stair went down into the dark. And at the very bottom of the stair, so far down that he could barely see it, the Black Gate stood open. And just inside it, on the threshold, a tall still figure in black stood looking up the stair toward the sun.

He was standing very close to the line. Closer than Riegel had ever seen him. One step from it. Perhaps less.

He did not cross it.

But he did not go back inside, either. And he was still standing there, small and dark and patient at the bottom of the long stair, when the dune turned and took him out of sight.

Chapter Nineteen: The Crossing

The freighter was called the *Saint Agatha*, and she was the ugliest ship Creez had ever seen, and on the fourth night out she nearly killed them all.

She was old. Her iron hull was streaked with rust like dried blood and her single funnel leaned a little to port, as if she had been punched once and never quite stood up straight again. She carried cotton bales and copper ingots and, on this voyage, four passengers who were not on her manifest, in a cabin behind the boiler room so hot that the walls sweated. Her captain was a vast silent woman called Ines with tattooed forearms and one gold tooth, who had looked at Nyxa's letter of introduction on the quay, and then at the four of them, and then at the black cleaver on Riegel's back, and said only, "Below. And stay below."

They did not stay below. Nobody could have, in that heat. On the second night Creez went up on deck and was sick over the rail for an hour, and then lay on his back on a pile of tarpaulins under the stars and laughed at himself, quietly, for being sick on a third ship in three weeks. On the third night Anna went up and sat with him. On the fourth night they were all up there, all four of them, when the storm came.

* * *

It came out of the south-west like a wall.

One moment the sea was long and black and slow, heaving under a sky full of stars. The next, the stars to the south-west went out, all at once, in a straight line, as though someone had drawn a curtain across the sky. The wind dropped to nothing. The air went thick and warm and strange.

“Below,” said Captain Ines, walking past them toward the bridge. “Now.”

They did not make it below.

The first wave hit the *Saint Agatha* on her port quarter and lifted her stern out of the water so that the screw raced screaming in the air. The deck went up under Creez’s feet like a door kicked open. He grabbed a rail. Riegel grabbed him. The second wave came over the bow green and solid, a hill of black water, and swept the length of the deck and took Fennick’s feet out from under him and carried him twenty yards aft and slammed him against the deckhouse.

“Fennick!”

Anna was already moving. She went along the rail hand over hand, with the deck tilting under her and the rain coming sideways like flung gravel, and got to him as the third wave came, and got her arm through the rail and her other arm round his chest, and held on.

Then the lights went out.

* * *

Three thousand miles to the east, at the same hour, the bells of every tower in Calice began to ring for the Equinox.

The Senate House was full. It had never been so full. Every House in the realm had come for the Conclave, as the Concord required. The Cups in wine-red, on the long curved benches of

the Senate floor. The Pentacles in white and silver, high in the eastern gallery, with the crystals stitched into their robes catching the light of a thousand candles. The Sword clans in river-grey steel along the western wall, every Clan Head and Sword Head in the realm, standing, because the Swords did not sit in the presence of the Crown. The Wands' benches were empty. Every one of them.

And above it all, on a great dais of white marble at the northern end of the chamber, beneath a canopy of deep blue, the High Table: thirteen chairs in a half-ring, and in each chair a mask. And in the centre of the half-ring, unmasked, on a throne of gold and sapphire, the King.

King Aurelian of Calice wore blue. He wore his crown, the plain gold circle with the great sapphire cut like a cup. And on his chest, over the blue, on a broken chain knotted at the back of his neck, the Lovers burned violet.

Every face in the Senate House was turned toward him. And every face, in its way, was shining.

In the fourth chair on the left, behind wine-dark lacquer, the First Cup bit down on the inside of one cheek and held on.

* * *

The Saint Agatha's lights came back with a stutter and a bang. In their sudden yellow glare Creez saw the deck tilted at an impossible angle and the sea standing up beside the ship like a cliff, and in the middle of the deck, standing perfectly upright on the tilted iron as if the storm did not touch it at all, something with chains.

It had come up out of the hold.

The hatch was open behind it, its iron cover thrown back, and the thing stood beside it in the rain. It was smaller than the ones in the Vault and at the Black Gate. Thinner. Its chains were finer. But it had the same blank horned face. And it was turning that face, slowly, through the storm, toward Creez.

The shard in his coat went hot as a coal.

“*Stowaway,*” Riegel bellowed in his ear, over the wind. “*In the cotton! It’s been in the hold the whole time!*”

“*It wants the splinter!*”

“*Then don’t give it to it!*”

The thing came across the deck.

The ship rolled. Creez went sideways, slid, slammed into the rail. Riegel went with him. The thing did not slide. It walked across the tilted deck as if the deck were flat, its chains streaming out sideways in the wind, and every step it took the shard burned hotter.

Creez drew his father’s gun.

One bullet. Silver. Blessed. He had it in his pocket. He had not loaded it. He had sworn on the bridge in the Hollow Roads and again at the Table of Reading that he would not load it until the day. *Then it had better be the right one.* He thumbed the chamber open with numb fingers and found the gun was empty, and he had nothing else, no lead, nothing.

“*Riegel!*”

The swordsman was already moving. He tore the cleaver off his back and stood it on its tip on the streaming deck in front of Creez, braced it, put his shoulder to it.

“*Not one more!*” he roared.

The chained thing hit it.

* * *

Bramwell walked into the Senate House alone.

The doors at the southern end of the chamber swung open, and the Herald of the Black Gate came through them in his tabard of night-blue, broad and grey-bearded, with his hands empty at his sides. He walked down the long aisle between the benches of the Cups. He did not hurry. Every head in the chamber turned to follow him. A murmur went up from the benches and swelled and died away.

He stopped at the foot of the white marble dais. He did not kneel.

“Bramwell,” said King Aurelian pleasantly, from his throne. “The Herald of the Tomb. I had hoped for your master.”

“My lord sends his regrets,” said Bramwell. His voice filled the Senate House to the dome without rising. “He cannot come. He is bound by the Concord within the walls of Netherfiend. As the Houses required of him. Three hundred years ago.”

Laughter, from the Cups. Uneasy. Brief.

“Then he will not kneel,” said the King.

“He will not kneel.”

“Then the Houses will make war.”

“Perhaps,” said Bramwell. “But not under the Concord. Because there is no Concord.”

Silence.

From the folds of his tabard, the Herald drew a single sheet of brown parchment. It was very old. Its edges were burned. He held it up so that the whole chamber could see.

“The Concord of the Houses,” said Bramwell, “signed in this chamber three hundred and eleven years ago. Kept in the Ossuary Archive of Netherfiend. The Houses’ own copy was lost in a fire in the Palace of the Chalice, sixty years later. Perhaps

His Majesty remembers.” He did not look at the King. “The last page of ours is ash also. But not the clause above it. Our Scribe has read it a thousand times. I will read it once.”

He lowered his eyes to the parchment.

“And whereas the Bearer of the Thirteenth does freely consent to be sealed within the Tomb, so let the Concord stand for so long as he consents, and no longer. For the Ending cannot be bound save by its own will. And should he at any time declare before the Houses that his consent is withdrawn, then the Concord is ended, and the Houses are released, and the seal is broken.”

He looked up.

“My lord the Sovereign of Netherfiend, Bearer of the Thirteenth, by my voice, before the Houses, declares it,” said Bramwell. “His consent is withdrawn. The Concord is ended.”

The Senate House erupted.

** * **

On the deck of the *Saint Agatha*, the chained thing ripped the black cleaver out of Riegel’s hands.

It did not try to go around. It took hold of the broad black blade with both chain-wrapped fists and simply wrenched it away from him, sideways, and threw it. The cleaver went spinning across the deck and hit the rail with a sound like a bell and stuck there, half its length over the black heaving sea. Riegel stood with nothing in front of him at all.

The thing reached past him for Creez.

Anna hit it from behind with her father’s sword.

She had left Fennick lashed to the deckhouse rail with her own belt. She came across the tilting deck with the great two-

handed blade up over her shoulder, the blade the Sword Head of the southern clans had carried for twenty years, and she swung it the way he had taught her: from the hips, with the whole body, the way you swing to cut through a man's guard and his armour and the man.

It went through the chained thing's arm and the chain on it and buried itself in the deck.

The thing screamed with no mouth. Its severed arm fell away, still wrapped in iron, and slid across the tilted deck and went over the side.

It turned on Anna.

And Creez, crouched against the rail behind Riegel with his empty gun in his hand and the shard burning through his coat like a brand, looked up at the thing turning, and the girl with her father's sword stuck in the deck, and the swordsman standing there with his empty hands, roaring, roaring *not one more* into the storm.

And he laughed.

He did not mean to. It came up out of him from somewhere so deep he had forgotten it was there. It was not a brave laugh, or a bitter one, or the kind you put on when the horse throws you. It was the real one. The one Elara used to throw clods of dirt at him for. The one the whole of the canyon road had known him by, before. It came out of him on the heaving deck in the dark in the middle of the ocean and it would not stop. He was laughing at the storm. At the ugly rusted ship. At the three of them, a swordsman who would not swing and a girl with a bandaged hand and a gunner with no bullets, standing on a deck in the rain against a thing with no face. At how stupid it was. At how *stupid* and how *brave*.

The chained thing stopped.

It turned its blank horned face toward him. It did not move. And the shard in his coat, which had been burning, went suddenly cold.

Creez stood up. He was still laughing. He walked across the deck, past Riegel, toward the thing. He did not know why. His feet were doing it.

“Hey,” he said to it. He was grinning so wide his face hurt. “Hey. You know what? Your boss? Your King? He’s never been laughed at in his *life*, has he? Not once. I bet nobody’s ever—”

The thing took a step back.

“*Look at it,*” Riegel said hoarsely, behind him. “Creez. *Look at it.*”

The chained thing was backing away across the deck. Its chains were trembling. It raised its one remaining arm in front of its blank face, as if against a light.

The Sun asks for joy, Velisande had said. It gives joy, and it takes joy.

It is the law of the light that does not ask permission.

The ship rolled. The thing staggered. And Captain Ines, who had come down from the bridge at some point in the last minute with a fire-axe in her tattooed fists, walked up behind it without a word and put the axe through the back of its horned head.

It fell. It did not get up. The next wave came over the rail and took it, and when the water drained away off the deck, there was nothing left but a few links of chain.

* * *

King Aurelian did not erupt.

He sat on his throne beneath the blue canopy while the Senate House roared around him. Cups on their feet, shouting. Pentacles leaning over the rail of the eastern gallery. The Sword clans along the western wall, utterly silent, every Clan Head and Sword Head turning to look at one another. At the end of their line, tall and grey and cliff-faced, with a dozen fine half-healed scars across his face, Imre Vantress stood with his hand on the hilt of his blade and looked at nobody.

The King waited. At last the noise died. Not because anyone had called for silence. Because the King was smiling.

"Thank you, Herald," he said. "That was beautifully done. Truly."

He rose. Behind him, around the half-ring of the High Table, thirteen masks turned to follow him.

"The Concord is ended," said King Aurelian. "So be it. Let it end. I find I have no further use for it." He came to the edge of the dais and looked down at Bramwell, and in the candlelight of the Senate House his eyes were violet. And behind the violet, very deep, there was something red. "Go home and tell your master this. He has released the Houses. Very well. The Houses are released. And so am I."

He turned to the chamber.

"Tomorrow," he said, "I sail west. The High Table will sail with me, to witness. When I return, there will be a new Concord, and it will be written in my hand alone." He smiled at them all. "You will love it. I promise."

And every face in the Senate House, every single one, shone.

Except one, perhaps. In the fourth chair on the left. And one other, directly across the ring, behind a mask of silver.

The storm blew itself out by dawn.

The *Saint Agatha* came limping out of it into a grey, heaving, exhausted sea with her funnel leaning even further to port and half her deck cargo gone and a crack in her forward plates that the crew spent all morning stuffing with oakum and cursing at. Nobody had died. Captain Ines said that was a miracle. She said it the way another woman might say it was a Tuesday.

The cleaver was still stuck in the rail.

Riegel pulled it out. It took him three tries. He stood on the wet deck holding it in both hands and looking at it for a long time.

"I didn't lift it," he said.

"You didn't need to," said Anna. She was sitting against the deckhouse with her father's sword across her knees and Fennick asleep against her shoulder. "Creez did the lifting."

Creez was lying on his back on the tarpaulins again with his hat over his face. He did not move.

"Did you know?" said Anna. "That it would work?"

"No," said Creez, from under the hat.

"Then why did you do it?"

He was quiet for a long time. The *Saint Agatha* rolled. A gull went over, crying.

"Because it was funny," he said at last. "Because the whole thing was so funny I couldn't stand it." He lifted the hat off his face. He was smiling. It was small and tired and real. "Elara would've laughed. She'd have laughed till she fell over."

Nobody said anything.

Far ahead of them, under the grey sky, low on the western horizon, there was a line. Thin and dark and steady. It did not move with the swell.

“Land,” said Captain Ines, walking past. “Three days.”

Chapter Twenty: The Western Badlands

The train from the eastern port ran for four days across a country so big that Riegel stopped believing in it.

He had grown up in the lower districts, where you could walk from the harbour to the hills in an afternoon and every street had a name and a grudge. He had seen Calice, and the desert above Netherfiend, and the ocean. He had thought he understood what *far* meant. He had not. The train ran west out of the port through green hills, and then through flat brown farmland that went on for a day and a night without a single rise in it, and then through grassland, and then through scrub, and every hour the sky got bigger and the towns got smaller and further apart, until on the third day there were no towns at all, only the rails going on ahead of them in two straight silver lines to a horizon that never came any closer.

On the fourth morning, the land turned red.

Creez was at the window when it happened. He had been at the window, Anna realised, since before dawn. He was not saying anything. He was only watching. The grassland thinned and broke into patches, and between the patches the earth showed through, and it was red: the deep rust red of old blood, of brick, of iron left out in the rain. Rock came up out of it in long ridges. Mesas stood along the horizon like the stumps of enormous

broken pillars. The sun came up behind the train and lit them all at once, and the whole world went the colour of a coal.

“Home,” said Creez.

He said it the way Riegel said *Enzo*. The way Anna said *Father*. As if it were a word with a stone in the middle of it.

* * *

Redwater Crossing had not changed.

The railroad ended there. That was all the town was: the end of a line. A water tower. A depot. A single street of false-fronted timber buildings baking in the sun, with a saloon and a general store and a church with a broken bell and a telegraph office with a sign that said TELEGRAPH in letters that had once been gold. The four of them got down off the train onto the platform with the black cleaver and the great two-handed sword and Fennick’s long grey coat and Creez’s father’s gun, and every head on the street turned.

A girl of about twelve came running out of the telegraph office.

“Ma!” she yelled over her shoulder, without slowing down. “Ma, he’s back! The gunman’s back! And he’s brought friends!”

* * *

The woman with the telegraph tape round her wrist gave them coffee in the back of the office and did not ask any questions. Not one. She looked at the cleaver and the sword and at Anna’s bandaged hand and at the shadows under all their eyes, and she put a pot of coffee on the stove and a plate of biscuits on the table and went back out to the front of the office and sat down at her key and began to tap. Her daughter stayed. Her

daughter's name was Dot, and she asked enough questions for both of them.

"Did you go across the *ocean*?"

"Yes," said Creez.

"Was it big?"

"Real big."

"Did you see the King?"

Creez was quiet for a moment.

"No," he said. "But he's coming here."

Dot's eyes went very wide. In the front of the office, the telegraph key stopped tapping.

* * *

His aunt's house was eight miles up the canyon road, and he walked it alone.

He would not let them come. Not for this. Anna argued. Riegel did not argue; he only looked at Creez for a long moment and then nodded, slowly, and put a hand on Anna's arm. Fennick said he would wait at the mouth of the canyon with the horses and not look, and then followed at a quarter of a mile for the whole eight miles, and did not look, in the most obvious way Creez had ever seen anyone not look at anything.

The house was where it had always been. A low adobe place under a cottonwood tree, at a bend in the creek, with a porch along the front and a pump in the yard and a row of red geraniums in tin cans along the porch rail that his aunt had kept alive in that dry heat by sheer stubbornness for twenty years. The geraniums were dead now. Their stalks stood up out of the cans, brown and brittle.

His aunt was on the porch.

She was sitting in Elara's chair. The little cane rocker that Elara had sat in to shell peas, and braid her hair, and tease him. His aunt sat in it with her hands folded in her lap and her face turned toward the canyon road, the way she must have been sitting every evening for a month, waiting.

She saw him coming a long way off. She did not get up.

He walked up the path. He stopped at the bottom of the porch steps. He took his hat off.

"Aunt Ruth," he said.

She looked at him. She was a small hard brown woman, with grey hair scraped back and eyes like Elara's. Exactly like Elara's. He had forgotten that. Or he had not let himself remember.

"They told me," she said. "The sheriff's men. They found the wagon. And the — the others. The wedding party." Her voice was very steady. "And they found a little cairn, out by the stagecoach. Red stones. Somebody had built it real careful." She looked at his hands. "You built that."

"Yes, ma'am."

"With your hands."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Is she under it?"

"Yes, ma'am."

His aunt nodded, slowly. She looked out at the canyon road again.

"They said there was a shot," she said. "The sheriff. He said the dunes out there were all flattened, like something blew up. He said there was a burn on the ground in a circle, white, like lightning, and in the middle of it—" She stopped. "In the middle of it, the little cairn." She turned and looked at him again. "Did you shoot her, Creez?"

The question went into him like a knife.

"Yes," he said.

His aunt closed her eyes.

"It wasn't her," he said. His voice cracked. "It was wearing her. There was a thing in the idol, the little horned idol she found in the mission, and it got into her and it wore her. It killed everybody. It said—" He could not say what it said. "It wasn't her, Aunt Ruth. I swear it wasn't. Except right at the end. At the end it was her. Just for a minute. And she said—"

"What did she say?"

"She said it was cold." He was crying now. He had not cried since the canyon. Not in the hold of the steamship, not in the Vault, not on the bridge, not in the Tomb. It came now all at once, as if a door had opened. "She said, *Creez, it burns, make it stop, shoot it*. And I did. And then she said it was cold."

His aunt did not move for a long time.

Then she got up out of Elara's little cane chair, slowly, the way old people get up, and came down the porch steps, one at a time. She stood in front of him. She was a head shorter than he was. She reached up and put both her hard brown hands on either side of his face.

"She'd been asking you to shoot things since she was six years old," said his aunt. "Snakes. Rats. That old rooster. *Creez, shoot it, Creez, make it stop*." Her thumbs wiped the tears off his face. They were rough as sandpaper. "And you never would. You were always too soft. You'd chase them off. You'd laugh at them till they ran away." She was crying too, now, without a sound, her face perfectly still and the tears just running. "This one time, you did what she asked."

He could not speak.

“Come inside,” said his aunt. “I’ll make you supper. Then you tell me what you came back for.” She looked past him, down the canyon road, to where a lean young man in a long grey coat was standing a quarter of a mile off with his back very carefully turned. “And tell your friend he can stop pretending he’s not there.”

* * *

That night, all four of them sat on Aunt Ruth’s porch under the cottonwood, and Creez told her everything.

She listened. She did not interrupt. When he got to the part about the King, and the Devil, and the heart buried under the chapel floor, she got up and went inside and came back with a lamp and a small tin box, and sat down again, and opened the box on her lap.

Inside was a key. Big, old, iron, the kind that opens church doors.

“Your father’s,” she said. “He was the last one. Of the old ones, that went to the chapel. The priests gave it him before the fire. Said somebody should keep it, who wasn’t a priest.” She looked at the key for a long moment. “He never told me what for. He said there was something under the chapel that nobody should ever let out, and that the priests had kept it shut for two hundred years with the bullets and the blessing, and that when the chapel burned it wasn’t an accident.” She shut the box. “He said they burned it themselves. The last two priests. With themselves inside. To seal it better.”

Nobody said anything.

"He said if anybody ever came asking for the key," said Aunt Ruth, "that I was to give it to the one with the gun." She held out the box to Creez. "So here."

Creez took it. His hands were shaking.

"And Elara found the idol," said Riegel slowly, "a mile up the canyon. In the old mission."

"The old mission was where the priests lived," said Aunt Ruth. "Before the chapel. When they first came. Two hundred years ago." She looked at Riegel. "Maybe they took a piece of it with them, when they first sealed it. To study. To keep an eye on it. Priests'll do that." Her mouth thinned. "And maybe they left it there when they moved down to the chapel. And it sat in the dark for two hundred years with nobody to love it. And then one day a pretty girl came along, getting married, and picked it up."

The cottonwood rustled overhead. Somewhere far off up the canyon a coyote was singing.

"It wandered," said Anna softly. "*Things that love me always come home.*"

"Then it's not coming home," said Creez. He shut the tin box. "Not this time."

* * *

They went down to the burned chapel the next morning.

It stood in the throat of the canyon where the red walls came closest together, on a low shelf of rock above the creek. Or what was left of it stood. The walls were adobe and had not burned, only blackened, but the roof had fallen in long ago and the tower had come down across the nave, and the whole place was a tangle of charred beams and fallen bells and drifted red sand. Creez remembered it whole. He remembered being carried into it on

his father's shoulders when he was four years old, and looking up at the ceiling, which had been painted blue with gold stars, and the old priest in black who had given him a sugared almond out of his pocket and patted his head.

He had been seven when it burned. He remembered the smoke. You could see it from the house, eight miles off, a black column going straight up into a sky with no wind.

They went in through the gap where the door had been.

The heat inside was terrible. Not the heat of the sun: something else. It came up out of the floor, out of the ground, through the drifted sand and the charred beams and the cracked red tiles, and it was not hot like a fire is hot. It was hot like a fever. It was hot like the inside of a mouth.

And the shard in Creez's coat was screaming.

Not burning. Not pulling. *Screaming*. He could hear it. A high thin silent shriek, right through his chest, like a nail drawn down glass. He staggered. Riegel caught him.

"*Here*," Creez gasped. "It's — it's *here*, it's right *under*—"

The altar was a block of red stone at the eastern end of the nave, cracked through the middle by a fallen beam. In front of it, set into the floor, there was a square slab of black iron, a yard across, sunk flush with the tiles. There was a keyhole in the middle of it. And all around its edges, deep in the stone of the floor, there were marks. Hundreds of them. Small round dents. As if someone had pressed something into the stone, over and over, for a very long time.

Anna knelt beside them and touched one.

"Bullets," she said slowly. "They're the marks of *bullets*. Pressed in. Hundreds of them. In a ring."

“The blessing,” said Fennick. His face had gone grey. “That’s how they did it. Every bullet they cast, they blessed here. On this slab. Pressed it into the floor around the lid and said the words. Two hundred years. Every bullet for every priest-gun in the badlands.” He looked at Creez. “Your father’s too. All twelve.”

Creez looked at the ring of little dents in the red stone. Then at the black iron slab inside it. Then down at the gun on his hip, with its silver-plated barrel, and at the single bullet in his pocket.

“So that’s what they were for,” he said. “Not demons. Not really. They were *keeping the lid on*.”

“And then the chapel burned,” said Riegel, “and there was nobody left to bless them.”

“And the lid started to come off,” said Anna.

From underneath the slab, very faintly, there came a sound.

It was not a voice. It was not a chain. It was slower and deeper than either. It was like a heartbeat heard through the wall of a body: a great, slow, sullen pulse, *thud*, and then a long silence, and then *thud* again. Every time it came, the heat came up off the floor in a wave, and the shard in Creez’s coat shrieked, and the hundreds of little round dents in the stone around the slab glowed, for just an instant, very faintly, a dull red.

Thud.

“It’s awake,” said Fennick.

Thud.

“It’s been awake,” said Creez. “Since the canyon. Since I shot its hand.” He put his own hand flat over the pocket where the shard was. “It’s been waiting for this. For the piece. For him.”

Thud.

“Can we move it?” said Riegel. “Take it away? Bury it somewhere he can’t—”

Fennick shook his head. "You can't move the heart of an Arcanum, swordsman. It's not a stone. It's a *law*. It's here because it was put here, and here's where it is." He looked down at the iron lid. "We can only keep him from opening it."

"*With what?*" said Riegel.

Nobody answered.

Creez turned his father's key over in his hands. Then he put it in his pocket, beside the bullet and the shard. He walked out of the chapel into the hot red sunlight of the canyon, and stood on the shelf of rock above the creek, and looked down the long throat of the canyon to the east, toward the flat lands and the railroad, and stood very still.

"Creez?" said Anna, behind him.

He pointed.

Far off down the canyon, beyond the mouth of it, out on the flat red plain where the railroad came in from the east, there was a line of smoke on the horizon. Thin and dark and steady, like a pencil line drawn on the sky.

It was not the regular train. The regular train came on Thursdays. This was a Monday.

And the smoke was coming from something long. Longer than any train that had ever come to Redwater Crossing. Longer than a train had any right to be. As they watched, the sun caught something along its length. Windows. Dozens of them. And on the front of the engine, small as a pin at that distance but unmistakable, a flash of gold and blue.

"He's early," said Fennick quietly. "He's days early."

"How?" said Anna. "The masks said the morning after the Equinox. We left four days before, we had a good wind, we—"

"He didn't sail," said Riegel.

They all turned to look at him.

“He didn’t sail the morning after,” said Riegel. His voice was very flat. “He sailed the *night of*. Straight from the Senate House. He told the whole Conclave *tomorrow*, so that anyone listening would hear *tomorrow*.” He looked at the thin dark line of smoke on the horizon. “Someone talked. Again.”

Thud, said the floor of the chapel behind them.

And far out on the red plain, coming on, steady as a heartbeat, the royal train of the King of Calice blew its whistle, once, long and high, and the sound came rolling up the canyon between the red walls and broke against the burned chapel like a wave.

Chapter Twenty-One: The King's Train

The railroad crossed Redwater Creek six miles east of town on a timber trestle eighty feet high, and that was where they took the train.

It was Dot's idea. That was the thing Riegel would remember afterward, and never quite be able to believe. They had come down out of the canyon at a gallop with the whistle still echoing between the red walls, and burst into the telegraph office, and Fennick had said *we need to stop a train*, and while the four of them were still arguing about how, a twelve-year-old girl with dust on her nose had looked up from the floor where she was sitting and said, "The trestle. Over the creek. They have to slow down for the trestle, or it shakes. Everybody knows that."

They had looked at her.

"Pa used to jump on there," said Dot, "when he was a kid. Off the bluff. Right on the roof of the cars. Ma says he was an idiot." She shrugged. "He didn't fall off, though."

* * *

The bluff stood over the eastern end of the trestle, a wedge of red rock thirty feet higher than the rails, and from the top of it Riegel could see the train coming for a long time.

It was enormous. He had not understood, from the canyon, how enormous. It was twenty cars long. The engine was painted deep blue, with gold along its boiler and gold on its wheels and on its front a great golden cup, catching the sun. Behind it came the cars. Blue and gold, every one, with windows of clear glass and curtains of white silk drawn behind them. Near the middle there was a car that was not blue. It was black, and windowless, and longer than the others, and from it, even at a mile's distance, Riegel could feel something. A pulse. Slow and heavy. Like the heartbeat in the chapel floor.

And at the very end of the train there was a car made entirely of glass.

Its walls were glass. Its roof was glass. The sun went through it and lit it from inside like a lantern, and in the middle of it, alone, there was a chair. Someone was sitting in the chair. Someone in violet.

"Amara," said Anna.

She was lying flat on the rock beside him, with her father's sword on her back and her curved blade in her bandaged hand. Her face was very white.

"He's put her in a *glass box*," she said. "So everyone can see."

"Or so he can," said Creez, on Riegel's other side.

Fennick was not on the bluff. Fennick was down at the bottom of it, a quarter of a mile east, in a dry wash with four horses, waiting. If it went wrong he would come. That was the plan. It was not much of a plan. Riegel had stopped expecting plans to be much.

The train reached the trestle.

Dot had been right. It slowed. The great blue engine eased out onto the timbers at a walking pace, its whistle sighing, its wheels clacking slow and loud and careful over the joints. The trestle groaned under it. The first car came after it. The second. The third.

“Now,” said Creez, and jumped.

* * *

They landed on the roof of the ninth car in a tangle. Creez first, rolling, swearing. Anna after him, light, on her feet before she had finished landing. Riegel last, with the black cleaver strapped to his back, and he hit the roof so hard that the whole car rocked on its wheels and somewhere below him, through the blue painted wood, he heard a china cup break and someone cry out.

They lay flat on the roof as the train crawled across the trestle. Eighty feet below, the creek was a thread of brown water among red stones.

“Back,” said Anna. “To the glass car. Eleven cars.”

They went back along the roofs.

It was not hard. That was the strangest thing. The train was moving at a walk; the gaps between the cars were narrow; the roofs were flat and painted and smooth. Riegel kept waiting for the shout. For the guard. For the chained thing coming up through a hatch. Nothing came. They passed over car after car of blue and gold, and through the skylights in their roofs Riegel caught glimpses of what was inside: a dining room with white cloths. A library. A bedchamber with a canopy. A car full of men in wine-red, sitting very still on velvet benches, their faces slack and shining, staring at nothing.

And then the black car.

They had to cross it. There was no other way. It lay between them and the glass car at the end, long and windowless and black, and its roof was not painted wood but iron, and when Riegel put his foot on it the iron was hot.

Under his foot, through the metal, something went *thud*.

He froze.

Thud.

Creez's hand was pressed flat to his coat. His face had gone grey.

"*Don't stop,*" he breathed. "Don't stop. Don't stop. It's just a heartbeat. It's just a—"

Thud.

They crossed the black car on their hands and knees. It took a hundred years. The iron burned through their trousers. The heartbeat came up through the roof into their palms and their knees and their teeth. At the far end, Anna dropped down onto the little open platform between the black car and the glass one, and turned, and caught Creez as he came down, and then Riegel.

They stood on the platform in front of the glass car's door.

Through it they could see Amara.

* * *

She sat in the middle of the glass car in a chair of white wood, and she was chained to it.

Not with iron. With something else. Fine bright chains of violet light, like the light of the stones, ran from her wrists and her ankles and her throat to the corners of the car, and to the roof, and down through the floor. They were not tight. They were loose, even, the way the chains are loose on the necks of the little

figures at the Devil's feet. But they were everywhere, and they pulsed, very slowly, in time with the heartbeat from the black car next door.

She was beautiful again. That was the horrible part. Someone had bathed her and dressed her in violet silk and bound up her hair in gold, and her face had colour in it, and her eyes were bright. They were bright and wet and shining, and they were fixed on the door of the black car in front of her. On the door to the King.

She was smiling.

"*Amara*," said Anna.

She opened the glass door.

Amara turned her head. Slowly. The shining eyes found Anna, and for a moment, Riegel saw, they did not know her. Then they did.

"Little bird," said Amara softly. "Oh. You came."

"I'm getting you out."

"Out?" Amara laughed. It was a sweet low warm laugh, the laugh of a woman in love. "Out of what, little bird? I'm *home*. He came for me. Didn't I tell you he'd come?" She lifted her wrist. The violet chain went with it, glittering. "He's given it back. Not the stone. The *feeling*. All of it. Do you know what that's like? After the hole? He gave it back, and I love him again, and it's—" She closed her eyes. "It's perfect."

"*He's going to fill you until you break.*"

"Yes," said Amara. She opened her eyes. They were full of tears. "I know. Isn't it beautiful?"

Anna stood very still in the door of the glass car.

Then she raised her curved blade and cut.

The edge went through the violet chain at Amara's right wrist. Or it should have. It went *into* the chain, and stopped, and the chain did not part. It flared. Violet light ran up the steel of Anna's blade like flame up a wick, and up her arm, and into her chest, and she screamed and dropped the blade, and staggered back against the glass wall.

Thud, said the black car.

And the door between the black car and the glass car opened.

* * *

King Aurelian of Calice stood in the doorway.

Riegel had seen him once, from a distance, on a red-silk balcony. He had not been prepared for him close. He was tall, taller than Riegel, broad in the shoulders, with a short silver-black beard and a face that had been called handsome so long that it no longer needed to try. He wore blue. He wore no crown. And on his chest, on a broken chain knotted at the back of his neck, the Lovers burned.

His eyes were violet.

He looked at the three of them for a long, pleasant moment. At the girl gasping against the glass with her blade on the floor. At the gunner with his hand pressed over his heart. At the big swordsman in the middle, with the black cleaver on his back.

"Hello," said the King. "You must be the ones my undersecretary told me about. The brother-killer, the parricide, and the boy who laughs." He smiled. "I've been looking forward to meeting you. Truly. You've caused me more trouble than all the Houses together." He stepped into the glass car. "Do sit down."

Nobody sat.

"No? Well." The King looked at Creez. "You have something of mine."

"No," said Creez. "I don't."

"You do. I can feel it. It's been calling me since the canyon. Every night. Like a child crying in another room." The King held out his hand, palm up. "Give it to me, and I'll let you go. All of you. I mean that. I have no quarrel with the lower castes. I *love* the lower castes. That has always been the point."

He was looking at Creez. And Riegel, standing beside him, felt it. The pull. The warm sweet terrible tide of it, going out from the King's violet eyes like heat from a stove. *Love him. He's so tired. He's so wise. He only wants what's his. Give it to him. Give it to him and rest.*

Creez's hand moved. Toward his coat.

"*Creez!*"

It was Anna. She had pushed herself up off the glass wall. Her right arm hung at her side, shaking, and her face was grey, but she was on her feet. "*Creez, don't—*"

"He doesn't need to," said the King gently. "Look."

He turned his head and looked at Anna.

The pull hit her like a wave. Riegel saw it. He saw her knees go. He saw her face go slack, and her eyes go wide, and the shining start to come up in them. And he saw her bite down on her own lip so hard that the blood came, and hold on. The way the masks held on. The way Riegel had held on to the lion's jaws his whole life.

For someone else. And only for someone else.

Riegel stepped between the King and Anna.

He did not lift the cleaver. He could feel it on his back, its weight, its warmth. He could feel the law in it waiting, the way a held breath waits. Not yet. Not for this. He did not know how he knew. He only knew. He stood between the King of Calice and the girl with her father's sword and did nothing at all except stand there.

The King looked up at him. The violet eyes met Riegel's. The pull came.

And it broke on him.

Riegel did not know why. He would wonder about it later, for a long time. Perhaps it was the cell, the weeks in the dark with water and bread from a masked hand and the interrogators saying *Lucia, Lucia*. Perhaps it was Lucia's letter inside his shirt, against his skin. *I don't forgive you. I don't blame you. It's both.* Perhaps it was only that he had been holding a beast's mouth shut for so long that one more weight on top of it made no difference. But the pull broke on him like a wave on a rock. It went round him. It did not get in.

The King's smile faded, very slightly.

"Interesting," he said.

Behind his violet eyes, deep down, something red moved.

* * *

The chained things came up through the floor of the glass car.

They did not come through a door. They came through the glass. It went soft under them, like ice in the sun, and they rose out of it on either side of the King, three of them, blank and horned and dripping, with their chains streaming. Riegel saw Anna snatch up her blade left-handed. He saw Creez draw his

empty gun. He saw the chained things turn their blank faces toward the three of them, and lift their chains.

And then the King said, “*Stop.*”

The chained things stopped.

Not because he had told them to. Riegel saw that. The King had not been speaking to them. He was looking past them, past Riegel, out through the glass wall of the car, at the desert. At the dry wash at the foot of the bluff, a quarter of a mile behind the train, where a lean young man in a long grey coat had broken cover with four horses and was galloping flat out along the line toward them, yelling.

“Oh,” said the King softly. “Oh, *there* you are.”

He raised one hand.

Out in the desert, the red sand opened under Fennick’s horse.

It went down in a single lurch, like a ship going down by the bow, and Fennick went over its head and into the sand, and the sand closed. Riegel saw his arm come up out of it. His hand. Grabbing at nothing. And then the chains came up out of the ground around him, a dozen of them, two dozen, iron and glittering, and wrapped him, and pulled.

“*FENNICK!*”

Creez was at the glass wall, beating on it with the butt of his gun. Anna was beside him. Riegel turned.

“*Let him GO!*”

“I’ll trade,” said the King. He was watching Fennick struggle in the sand with mild interest, the way one watches a fish on a line. “The courier for the splinter. A fair price, I think. A servant of the Tomb for a piece of my heart.” He turned back to Creez. “You have until moonrise. Bring it to me at the chapel in your

canyon, gunner, and lay it in my hand. And I'll give you back your friend with everything he came with. Fail me, and he joins the chain."

"He's nobody to you!"

"He is the Sovereign's courier," said King Aurelian. "The Page of Wands in his reading. The messenger who goes out from the Tomb. I think he is a great deal to someone." He smiled. "Moonrise."

He gestured.

The three chained things moved. Not toward Riegel. Toward the glass wall of the car, which went soft again, all at once, like a curtain, and Riegel felt the floor go out from under him, and the train, and the trestle, and he was falling.

* * *

He hit water.

Redwater Creek was not deep. It was deep enough. He went into it feet first, eighty feet down, and hit the bottom hard enough to drive the breath out of him, and came up gasping and choking in brown water to his chest among red stones, with the cleaver dragging him under and Anna surfacing beside him and Creez a few yards off, spluttering.

Above them, on the trestle, the royal train of the King of Calice went on across the timbers at a walk, unhurried, blue and gold in the sun. The glass car came last. Through its walls, as it passed above them, Riegel could see Amara in her white chair, chained in violet, her face turned up toward the door of the black car, shining.

And beside her, standing very straight in river-grey steel, with a long blade at his hip and a dozen fine scars across his face, a tall man with close-cropped silver hair.

Imre Vantress was not looking at the King. He was looking down. Through the glass floor of the car, eighty feet, at the three of them standing in the creek.

He looked for a long time. Then, very slowly, he lifted one hand and touched two fingers to his brow. A Sword clan salute. The salute one Sword Head gives another before a bout.

Then the train was across the trestle and gone.

Behind them, out on the red sand, there was no sign of Fennick at all. Only a horse, standing alone in the desert with its saddle empty, and a long smooth hollow in the ground where the sand had closed.

“Moonrise,” said Creez. He was standing in the creek with the water to his waist and his empty gun in his fist, staring at the empty desert. “He said moonrise.”

He put his hand flat over his coat. Over the splinter. Over the key, and the last bullet.

“That’s tonight,” he said.

Chapter Twenty-Two: The Price of Leaving

Fennick woke in the dark with a chain around his neck, and somebody was holding his hand.

He did not know where he was. He did not know how long he had been there. He remembered the horse going down under him, and the sand closing over his face like water, and the chains coming up out of it, cold, a great many of them, wrapping and pulling. He remembered thinking very clearly, *Well, this is stupid*, and then nothing at all.

Now there was dark. Not the grey ghost-dark of the Hollow Roads, which had a light of its own. This was the other kind. The kind with no bottom. He was lying on something that was not quite stone and not quite iron, and around his neck there was a collar, loose, and from the collar a chain went off into the dark, and from somewhere off along the chain, very faint, came a sound like a great many people breathing in their sleep.

And somebody was holding his hand.

Small fingers. Cold. Gripping hard.

“Hello?” said Fennick. His voice came out very small. “Who’s there?”

“Oh,” said a girl’s voice in the dark beside him. “Oh, you can *talk*. Nobody new can talk. Not for ages.” The fingers tightened. “Are you real? You feel real. You’re warm.”

"I'm Fennick," said Fennick. "I'm a courier. From the Tomb of Netherfiend."

There was a pause.

"The skull king?" said the girl. "From the stories?"

"That's the one."

"*Huh.*" The voice sounded so delighted, so exactly like someone else he knew, that Fennick's chest went tight. "My cousin's going to be so jealous. He always wanted to meet the skull king. He said he'd shake his hand." A pause. "Have you got a horse?"

"I did," said Fennick. "It got eaten by the desert."

The girl laughed.

It was a small, cold, frightened laugh in the bottomless dark. But it was a real one. And Fennick, lying on the not-quite-stone with the chain around his neck and his hand in a dead girl's hand, knew exactly whose laugh it was. He had been hearing a version of it for three weeks. On quays. In ruined chapels. On the deck of a freighter in a storm.

"Elara," he said.

The fingers went very still.

"How do you know my name?"

* * *

The crow from the western lands reached Netherfiend at noon, and it was not one of Nyxa's.

It was black and small and fast, and it came down the long shaft into the Letter-Hall like an arrow and dropped onto Nyxa's writing desk among the ink pots, and bound to its leg with a thread of crimson silk there was a small thick fold of paper, sealed in blank black wax.

Nyxa read it standing up. Then she ran.

* * *

“Moonrise,” said Corvinus. “He gave them until *moonrise*?”

The Hollow Hall was full again. Not with the council: there was no time for a council. Only the guardians who were in the Tomb, and the Sovereign, gathered at the head of the War-Table, where a single crow sat on the carved shape of the western badlands with its feathers slicked flat.

“Moonrise tonight,” said Nyxa. “In the western lands. That is —” she glanced at Ottoline.

“Eleven hours and twenty minutes from now, my lord,” said the Analyst, without looking at her lamps. “Allowing for the difference in longitude.”

“He has the courier,” Nyxa went on. “Fennick. He took him off the desert by the Devil’s chains. He offers to trade him for the splinter. At the chapel. At moonrise.” She lowered the paper. “The masks say: *The King will make the Devil whole tonight, whether they bring the splinter or not. He can take it from the boy’s body as easily as from his hand. He offers the trade only because it amuses him. They cannot win this alone. We cannot help them openly. Whatever is coming, it comes tonight.*”

Nobody spoke.

“Bramwell?” said Ossiran.

“On the Hollow Roads, my lord. Coming home from Calice. Two days out.” Nyxa hesitated. “The Wands are in the north. The Houses are at war. Calda Rook has her fires lit from one end of the Marches to the other, and half the Sword clans have come to her, and half are marching on her. Corvinus’s dead are holding the Roads.” She paused. “There is no one to send west, my lord.

No one who could get there in eleven hours. Not by sea. Not by any road we have.”

“There is one road,” said Thessaly.

Every head turned.

The Scribe stood at the edge of the lamplight with her hood up and a single book open in her grey hands. She did not look up from it.

“The Deep Road,” she said softly. “Under the great ocean. It drowned before the Concord. The sea came into it, and it filled, and everything in it died. Nothing living has walked it in three hundred years. Nothing living *could*.” She turned a page. “But it is a road of the dead now. A drowned road. A road where everything has ended.” Her hood turned, slowly, toward the head of the table. “And there is one Bearer in this world for whom every ending is a door.”

Silence.

“Thessaly,” said Velisande. Very quietly. It was the first word she had spoken. “*Don’t*.”

“I’m sorry, Seneschal,” said the Scribe. “He asked.”

“He did not ask.”

“He was going to,” said Thessaly.

* * *

They argued for an hour. Ossiran let them. He stood at the head of the War-Table with his bone hands flat on the carved world and listened to every word, and he did not interrupt, and when they were finished, he said only:

“I am going.”

Corvinus slammed his gauntleted fist down on the table so hard that the iron pieces jumped.

“My *lord*. The seal. The Concord bound the Thirteenth within these walls. Bramwell has declared it ended, yes. But the seal is still *here*. It is three hundred years old and it is in the stone and it is in *you*. If you cross the threshold, you break it. And you know what a breaking seal—”

“Costs,” said Ossiran. “Yes.”

“Then *what*? What does it cost? You’ve never told us. Not once. Not in three hundred years. You’ve never told any of us what they *gave* you!” The Strategist’s voice cracked. It was the first time any of them had ever heard it crack. “*What do you pay, my lord?*”

The Sovereign of Netherfiend looked at him for a long moment.

“I don’t know,” he said.

Corvinus stared at him.

“I don’t know,” Ossiran said again. Quietly. “That is the truth. I agreed to be sealed. I remember that. I remember the Hall. I remember the Houses. I remember the night.” The fires in his sockets did not move. “But every time I have worked the Ending, these three hundred years, it has taken something. A little. A face. A word. A smell of glue and rain on a window. I have been paying for so long that I no longer know what I had.” He lifted one bone hand off the table and looked at it. “Perhaps the seal will take what’s left. Perhaps it will take nothing. Perhaps it will take *me*.” He lowered the hand. “But a courier of this Tomb is lying in the Devil’s chain under the western desert because I sent him out of these walls on an errand, and three people who were broken in a single heartbeat are going to stand in a burned chapel tonight against a King who holds two laws of the world. And I will not be in my chair when that happens.”

He turned away from the table.

“Hold the Tomb,” he said. “All of you. Hold it until I come home.”

“And if you don’t?” said Ottoline. Her voice was very small. All eleven of her lenses were down.

The Sovereign of Netherfiend did not answer.

* * *

“Is he all right?”

Elara’s voice in the dark was very quiet. Fennick had told her everything. He had not meant to. It had come out of him in a rush, lying there on the not-quite-stone with her small cold hand in his, the way things come out in the dark: the canyon, the cairn, the ship, the Vault, the bridge, the Tomb. Creez on the deck of the Saint Agatha, laughing at a thing with no face until it backed away.

“I don’t know,” Fennick said honestly. “He’s better than he was. He laughs now. Sometimes.”

“He laughed at it?” A pause. “At the Devil?”

“Right in its face.”

There was a long silence. Somewhere off along the chain, the sound of sleeping breath went on and on.

“I hated him for that,” said Elara at last. “For about a minute. Right before. When it was in me. It kept saying I hated him. That I hated that he laughed while I suffered. And for a minute I believed it.” Her fingers tightened. “Then it was over. And I just wanted him to know I didn’t. That I never did. That it was the best thing about him.”

Fennick swallowed.

“I’ll tell him.”

"You can't. You're in here with me." She said it gently, the way you tell a child the truth. "Nobody gets out of the chain. Not once it's round your neck. It's loose, see? Feel it. You could lift it off, if you wanted to. Everybody could. That's the horrible part. Nobody ever wants to."

Fennick put his free hand up to the collar at his throat. It was loose. He could feel the gap between the iron and his skin. He could have lifted it over his head.

He did not want to.

He realised, with a slow cold horror, that he did not want to at all. He wanted to lie here in the dark with the chain around his neck, holding a dead girl's hand, listening to the sleeping breath, forever. It was warm, here. In a way. It was quiet. Nobody needed him to run anywhere.

"Elara," he said. "Help me."

"I can't." Her voice was very small. "I've been trying for weeks. To want to. I can't."

"Then talk to me. Tell me something. Tell me — tell me something funny. Something Creez did."

There was a pause. And then, in the dark, very faintly, the girl began to laugh.

** * **

He went down to the Black Gate alone.

Velisande followed him.

He had known she would. He did not turn around. He walked down the long violet corridors of the Tomb that he had built, past the Archive and the Letter-Hall and the Counting Lamps, past the Hall of the Thirteenth Seat with its white line and its grey chair, down the last stair to the Gate. And she walked

behind him the whole way, three paces back, in silence, the way she had walked behind him for three hundred years.

At the threshold he stopped.

The Black Gate stood open before him. Beyond it, the long stair went up toward the desert and the sun. He could see a sliver of it at the very top. Blue sky. A cloud. He had not seen a cloud in three hundred and eleven years.

Under his feet, in the stone of the threshold, he could feel the seal. It was very old. It was very tired. It felt like a held breath.

“My lord.”

He turned.

Velisande stood three paces behind him on the last step of the stair. She was not weeping. She was not frosting the floor. She stood there in her black and violet, with her hands at her sides and the bone case of the Deck at her hip and her face perfectly white and perfectly still, and she looked at him.

“Let me come with you,” she said.

“No.”

“*Let me come.*” Her voice did not rise. “You will walk the Deep Road, and come up under the western desert, and stand in front of that King, and he will have the Devil whole and the Lovers on his chest, and you will try to end him. And whatever the seal takes from you at this threshold, whatever is left of you when you get there, you will need someone beside you who knows what you were.” She took one step toward him. “I know, my lord. I am the only one who knows. I have kept it for you. Every piece. Every year. Every face and word and smell of rain the Ending ever took from you. I kept it.” Her hand went to the bodice of her gown, over her heart. “*Let me come.*”

Ossiran looked at her for a very long time.

“What did you draw,” he said, “the night the envoy came? Before you turned the Tower for me. What did you draw alone?”

Velisande did not answer.

“Every night since,” said Ossiran. “Three cards. The same three. And you keep the last one over your heart. What is it?”

She looked at him. And for one moment, standing on the last stair of the Black Gate, the Witch-Seneschal of Netherfiend looked very young. Younger than Anna. Younger than anyone.

“When it’s over,” she said. “I’ll show you. I swear it. When it’s over.”

The Sovereign of Netherfiend turned back to the threshold.

He stood there for a moment longer, looking up the long stair at the sliver of blue sky.

Then he held out his hand behind him, without looking. Bone. Finger and knuckle and wrist.

Velisande took it.

And together they stepped over the line.

* * *

The seal broke.

It did not make a sound. That was what the guardians would remember, afterward, the ones who had come down the stair behind and stood watching from the shadows. Corvinus in his winged helm. Ottoline with her lenses. Nyxa with her keys. Thessaly with her book. They had braced for thunder, for an earthquake, for the walls of Netherfiend to come down. There was nothing like that. There was only a feeling, very slight, like a breath let out after a long time.

And on the threshold, the Sovereign of Netherfiend stopped walking.

He stood there in the sunlight from the stair with his hand in Velisande's, and he did not move. The fires in his sockets had gone very dim. Almost out.

"My lord?" said Velisande.

He turned his head and looked at her. For a long moment he did not seem to know her. Then he did.

"Velisande," he said slowly.

"Yes, my lord."

"Why did I agree?"

She went still.

"The Concord," said Ossiran. His voice was very quiet, and very puzzled, like a man who has walked into a room and forgotten why. "Three hundred years ago. In the Hall in Calice. The Houses asked me to be sealed, and I agreed." He paused. "I remember agreeing. I remember the Hall. I remember the night." The dim fires turned toward her. "I don't remember why."

Behind them, in the shadow of the Gate, Thessaly made a small sound, and closed her book.

Velisande did not answer. She held his bone hand in both of hers, very tightly, and her face was like marble, and the frost did not come.

"It doesn't matter," she said at last. "I remember. I'll tell you, after." She turned him, gently, away from the sunlight, toward the deep dark at the side of the stair, where a narrow cleft in the rock went down and down toward a sound like the sea. "This way, my lord. The Deep Road. Eleven hours."

The Sovereign of Netherfiend looked at her for a moment longer.

Then he nodded, and went with her, down into the drowned dark, and the guardians stood on the stair in the sunlight and watched until they could not see them anymore.

Chapter Twenty-Three: The Burned Chapel

The sun went down over the western badlands at seven minutes past six, and the canyon turned the colour of the inside of a wound.

They waited for it on the shelf of rock above the creek, in front of the burned chapel, the three of them. Nobody had said they would wait there. Nobody had said anything much since the trestle. They had climbed out of Redwater Creek soaked and bruised and silent, and caught Fennick's riderless horse, and ridden it double and triple back to the telegraph office, and Aunt Ruth had come down from the canyon in her wagon when Dot ran to fetch her, and looked at their faces, and not asked anything. She had fed them. She had dried their clothes. She had bound up Anna's arm, where the violet light had run up it from the chain, with strips of a clean sheet. The skin under the bandage had gone the colour of a bruise, all the way from wrist to elbow, and it did not hurt, exactly. It *hummed*.

And then, at five o'clock, they had come up the canyon road on foot and climbed to the chapel, because it was where they had to be.

Now the light was going.

Riegel sat on a fallen beam with the black cleaver across his knees and watched the red walls darken, one shelf at a time, from

the bottom up, as the shadow of the far rim climbed them. Anna sat beside him with her father's great sword standing upright in the sand between her feet and both her hands, the good and the bruised, folded over its crossguard. Creez stood at the edge of the shelf, looking down the canyon toward the east, with his hat pushed back and his father's gun on his hip.

There was a bullet in it.

He had loaded it at the telegraph office, while the others were drying out. Riegel had watched him do it. He had taken the single silver-lined round out of his pocket and looked at it for a long time, turning it over in his fingers so that it caught the lamplight. Then he had opened the chamber and slid it in and snapped the gun closed and put it in its holster, and when he looked up and saw Riegel watching, he had only shrugged.

"It's the day," he said. "Isn't it?"

Riegel had not been able to answer.

* * *

"Tell me about her," said Anna.

Riegel looked at her. She was not looking at him. She was looking at the sword.

"Lucia," she said. "The one in your shirt. You keep touching it."

He had not known he did. He put his hand flat over the letter, inside his shirt, against his skin. It had dried stiff in the sun at the telegraph office and crackled now when he pressed it.

"She was a baker's daughter," he said at last. "In the lower districts. Down by the harbour. Every morning I'd go past on the way to the clan hall, and she'd be out the front of the shop with the shutters open and flour on her arms, and she'd throw a roll at

my head.” He was quiet for a moment. “Every morning. For two years. She never missed. I never caught one.”

Anna’s mouth moved, very slightly.

“Enzo caught one,” said Riegel. “The first morning he came with me. She threw it, and he just put his hand up and caught it, and grinned at her, and she went red to her hair.” He looked down at the cleaver. “He was always better at catching things than me. Swords. Girls. The Elders’ attention. He was going to be Clan Head from the time he was ten. Everybody knew it.”

“And you?”

“I was going to be the sword.” Riegel’s voice was flat. “That’s what the clan said. *Enzo’s the head, Riegel’s the sword*. I was bigger. Stronger. I was better with a blade than anybody in the districts by the time I was sixteen. They gave me this—” he touched the cleaver, “—when I was seventeen. Old Matteo forged it. Said it was the heaviest blade the clan had ever made, and I was the only one who could swing it.” He was quiet for a long moment. “And then Lucia married Enzo. And she kept looking at the door. And I knew what he’d do, sooner or later. And I knew what *I’d* do, if he did it. Because I was the sword.” He swallowed. “So I left. I put it down and I walked out of the clan hall and I didn’t go back. I thought if the sword wasn’t there, nobody could use it.”

“And he came after you anyway.”

“With a hunting knife. In the rain.” Riegel shut his eyes. “He’d left his broadsword at home. On purpose. I think he wanted me to have the bigger blade. So that whatever happened, it would be my fault.”

Anna said nothing for a long time.

"She sent me a letter," Riegel said. "It says she doesn't forgive me. And doesn't blame me. Both." He opened his eyes. "I don't know how to be both. I've been trying for three weeks."

"I think you just are," said Anna. She was still looking at her father's sword. "I think you don't get to choose. I think that's what she's telling you." She turned the great blade a little, so the last of the light ran along it. "I'm going to have to choose. Tonight. When I'm standing in front of her. And whatever I choose, it'll cost her exactly as much as it costs me." She was silent. "Justice. That's the bargain."

"What will you choose?"

"I don't know," said Anna.

* * *

The moon came up at nine minutes past eight.

It came up over the eastern rim of the canyon enormous and orange, like a coin pulled out of a fire, and as its edge cleared the rock, the canyon below them filled with light.

Not moonlight.

It came from the east. From the mouth of the canyon. It came up the creek-bed and the canyon road in a long, slow, glittering procession, and at first Riegel thought it was lanterns. Then he saw that the lanterns were walking.

Devoted. Hundreds of them. Not farmers and fishwives this time. These were men and women in wine-red and silver, in the robes of the Cups and the Pentacles, clerks and senators and Magicians, and their faces were slack and shining, and at every throat a violet stone glowed. They came up the canyon in perfect silence, in step, carrying torches. Between them, on either side of

the road, the chained things walked, blank-faced, horned, their chains dragging in the sand.

And in the middle of the procession, on the shoulders of twelve men in black and gold, there was a litter.

It was white wood. Its curtains were violet silk, drawn back. On it, chained by fine bright threads of violet light to its four posts, sat the Lady Amara, upright, smiling, her face turned up toward the moon.

Behind the litter, walking, came thirteen figures in masks.

Riegel saw them pass under a torch. Wine-dark lacquer. Pale silver. Grey steel. Red leather. The High Table of Calice, all thirteen, walking up the canyon road behind the litter in a long solemn line like mourners at a funeral. Somewhere among them, he knew, were the two who had brought him bread.

He could not tell which.

And behind them, alone, walking a little apart from everything else, came a tall man in blue with no crown on his head and the Lovers burning violet on his chest, leading on a chain behind him a lean young man in a long grey coat.

"Fennick," whispered Creez.

The courier was walking. That was something. He was walking on his own feet with an iron collar round his neck and a chain going from it to the King's fist, and his face was grey and his coat was torn, but he was walking. As the procession came closer, Riegel saw his head come up, and turn, and look straight at the shelf of rock where the three of them stood in front of the burned chapel.

He grinned. It was a terrible, exhausted, crooked grin. But it was his.

* * *

At the foot of the shelf, the procession stopped.

The devoted spread out in a wide silent ring around the base of the rock, their torches lifted, so that the whole throat of the canyon was lit violet and gold. The chained things stood among them like rocks in a stream. The bearers set down Amara's litter at the foot of the path that climbed to the chapel. The thirteen masks stood behind it in a half-ring, motionless.

And the King came up the path alone, leading Fennick on the chain.

He stopped ten paces from the top. He looked up at the three of them in the moonlight in front of the burned chapel. The broken tower. The fallen bells. The black gap of the door.

"Ah," he said softly. "There it is."

From inside the chapel, through the open door, came a sound.

Thud.

The King closed his eyes. A long shiver ran through him, from his shoulders to his feet, as if someone had drawn a hand down his spine. When he opened his eyes they were violet, and the violet was deeper than it had been. And behind it, very close to the surface now, something red was moving. It was not banked anymore. It was not a coal. It was a flame, licking up.

"Two hundred years," he said. "Two hundred years in the dark under a floor, with priests pressing silver into the stone around it. Every day. Every bullet. Every word." He smiled. "They thought they were keeping it in. They were only keeping it *safe*. For me."

"It was never yours," said Creez.

The King turned his violet eyes on him.

“It was always mine,” said King Aurelian. “Before the Concord. Before the Houses. Before the Crown of Calice had a name. My family has carried the Fifteenth for nine hundred years. From father to son. Every King of Calice. It is why we are Kings.” His smile widened. “The chain that is chosen and then forgotten. Every House in the realm wears it. They chose it so long ago that none of them remember. They think they love the Crown because the Crown is good. They love it because it *holds the chain.*”

He lifted his fist. The chain that ran to Fennick’s collar went taut, and Fennick staggered forward a step.

“And then one of my ancestors,” said the King, “was careless. Two hundred years ago. He brought it west, to this miserable country, to bind the clans here too. And some priests took it from him. Buried it. Broke off a little piece of it to keep an eye on, in their mission up the canyon. And sat on top of it for two hundred years, pressing silver into the floor.” He looked down at Creez’s hip. At the silver-plated gun. “With *those.*”

“And the priests burned the chapel,” said Riegel. “With themselves inside. To seal it better.”

“And it worked,” said the King. “For a while. Until a pretty girl went up to the old mission and found the little piece they’d left there. And picked it up.” He looked at Creez. “And put it on. For her wedding.”

Creez did not move.

“I felt her,” said the King softly. “All the way across the ocean, in my palace in Calice, I felt her pick it up. The first touch on that piece in two hundred years. I felt it wake up, and reach out, and go into her.” He tilted his head. “And then I felt *you* fire.”

"You felt it," said Creez. His voice was very quiet. "Because it was yours. That thing. That wore her. It was a piece of *you*."

"Yes."

"You killed her. Not me. You."

"I suppose," said the King of Calice, "that is one way to see it." He held out his free hand, palm up. "The splinter, gunner. Now. And your friend goes free."

* * *

Nobody moved.

Thud, said the floor of the chapel.

Creez looked at the King's open hand. Then at Fennick, standing on the path with the iron collar round his neck and the chain going taut to the King's fist. Fennick was shaking his head. Very slightly. No. His lips were moving. Riegel could not hear what he said.

"Don't," said Anna. "Creez. The masks said. *Whatever it costs*."

"I know what they said." Creez's hand had gone to his coat. It was resting flat over the pocket. Over the splinter, the key, the place where the last bullet had been before he loaded it. "I know."

"He'll take it anyway," said Riegel. "He'll take it off your body."

"I know that too."

"*Then why—*"

"Because Fennick's holding her hand," said Creez.

They stared at him.

He did not take his eyes off the courier. "Look at him. Look at his face. He's been in the chain. He's been down there, in the dark, with all of them. With everybody it ever wore." His voice

was shaking now. “And he’s *grinning*. Look at him, Riegel. He’s grinning like a fool, like somebody just told him the best joke in the world.” He swallowed. “Elara used to tell the worst jokes in the world. Every single one. And you’d laugh anyway. You’d laugh till you fell over.”

On the path, Fennick’s grin went wider. His lips moved again. This time, in the silence, Riegel heard it.

She says hello.

Creez made a sound that was half a sob and half a laugh.

Then he took his hand off his coat. He reached inside it, slowly, and drew out the splinter, wrapped in its stained strip of shirt. He unwrapped it. In the moonlight and the torchlight it was black and glossy and the size of a thumbnail, and the red line around its edge was pulsing, fast now, like a heart that has been running.

“Creez,” said Anna. “No.”

He walked down the path.

He walked ten paces down the path from the burned chapel to where the King of Calice stood waiting with his hand out, and he stopped in front of him, and he looked up into the violet eyes with the red flame burning behind them.

“Let him go first,” said Creez.

The King smiled. He opened his fist. The chain fell from it and lay in the dust.

Fennick did not run. He stood very still on the path with the iron collar round his neck and the chain hanging loose from it, and he looked at Creez, and Creez looked at him.

“Go on,” said Creez. “Get up there.”

“Creez—”

“Go on.”

Fennick went. Past him, up the path, stumbling, to where Riegel caught him at the top and Anna caught them both.

And Creez turned back to the King and laid the splinter of the Fifteenth Arcanum in his open palm.

* * *

It happened very fast.

The King's fingers closed on the splinter. Inside the chapel, under the black iron lid, the heartbeat stopped. Just stopped. As if something had been listening, and heard what it was waiting for.

Then the iron lid blew off.

It went straight up through the roofless chapel in a column of red light, the black iron slab tumbling end over end like a playing card flicked into the air, and it came down a hundred yards away in the creek with a sound like the world's largest bell. The ring of little silver dents in the floor around the hole blazed white, all at once, every one of them, two hundred years of blessings going up in a single flash. And then went dark.

From the hole in the floor, something came up.

It was not a shape. Not at first. It was a darkness, red at its edges, rising out of the ground like smoke from a well. It filled the chapel. It came out through the black gap of the door and the empty windows and the place where the roof had been. It came down the path. It came *toward the King*.

And the King of Calice threw back his head and opened his arms, with the splinter burning in his fist and the Lovers burning on his chest, and let it in.

Riegel saw it go into him. Into his mouth. His eyes. His open hands. The red darkness poured into King Aurelian of Calice like

water into a pitcher, and he did not stagger, and he did not scream. He *grew*. Not taller. Not wider. Something else. He grew the way a shadow grows when the lamp is moved away. He filled the canyon. Riegel looked at him standing on the path in the moonlight and could not see the edges of him anymore.

Below, at the foot of the path, in her white litter, Amara began to scream.

The violet threads that chained her to its posts blazed. Something was going down them. Riegel could see it. Light. Violet and red, twisted together, going down the threads from the King into her, pouring, the way the darkness had poured into him. Her body arched. Her mouth opened. Her eyes went wide and white.

"It's too much!" she shrieked. *"It's too much! It's too much, my love, my love, it's too MUCH—"*

Among the thirteen masks behind the litter, one of them moved.

Grey steel. Tall. A long blade at its hip. It stepped forward out of the half-ring, one step, two, and stopped, and stood looking up the path at the thing the King had become. And then, very slowly, it reached up with one gauntleted hand and took off its mask.

It was Imre Vantress.

Riegel saw his face in the torchlight. The fine half-healed scars. The cliff of it. And he saw, on that face, an expression he had seen once before: in the yard of the Vault of the Chalice, on the face of a fair-braided boy of nineteen running at a horned thing with his blade raised, screaming *not in our yard*.

"Abomination," said the Sword Head of the Vantress clan quietly.

And he drew.

Chapter Twenty-Four: Perfect Devotion

Imre Vantress had been the finest swordsman in the realm of Calice for twenty years, and he crossed the forty feet of the path in four strides, and his blade came up and over and down in a single stroke, the stroke the Vantress clan had taught its sons for six hundred years, the one that went through a man's guard and his armour and the man. It was perfect. Riegel, watching from the top of the path, had never seen anything so perfect in his life.

It went into the King's shoulder a hand's breadth deep.

And stopped.

Not against bone. Not against armour. It stopped the way a spoon stops in cold honey. The King looked down at the long straight blade buried in his shoulder with an expression of mild surprise. No blood came. Something came out around the steel, slow and dark and red, like smoke from a banked fire, and curled up the blade toward the hilt.

"Imre," said King Aurelian. He sounded almost hurt. "You of all people."

"*Thirty years,*" said the Sword Head through his teeth. He was leaning on the blade with his whole weight. It would not go in further. "Thirty years I served you. I took the heads you told me to. I told myself the things in your cellars were the Crown's business. I told my sons." The red smoke had reached his hands.

He did not let go. "Torvald didn't tell himself anything. He saw it and he *went*."

"And he died," said the King. "Do you want to die, Imre?"

"No," said Imre Vantress. "I want to have *gone*."

The King lifted his hand.

He did not strike. He did not need to. He only lifted it, palm out, the way a man lifts a hand to say *enough*, and the Sword Head of the Vantress clan was thrown backward off the path as if a horse had kicked him. He went twenty feet through the air and hit the red rock wall of the canyon and slid down it and lay at the bottom, among the devoted, very still. His blade was still in the King's shoulder. The King reached up, pulled it out like a man pulling a splinter, looked at it, and dropped it in the dust.

"Pity," he said. "He was the best of them."

* * *

He turned back to the top of the path.

Riegel had never been looked at like that. Not by Velisande at the Black Gate, not by the Sovereign on his throne. The King of Calice looked up at the four of them in front of the burned chapel, and it was not a man looking. It was not even a law. It was a hole in the shape of a man, red at its edges, with a burning violet stone at its heart, and it was *hungry*.

And then the pull came.

It was not like the glass car. On the train it had been a tide, warm and sweet, going out from the violet eyes like heat from a stove. This was not a tide. It was the sea. It came up the path like a wall of black water and hit the four of them and went over their heads, and Riegel went under.

Love him.

It was not a voice. It was the shape of everything. It was the moon over the canyon and the torches below and the red rock walls and the cold night air. It was the weight of the cleaver on his knees and the letter in his shirt and the blood in his veins. *Love him. Love him. He is so old and so tired. He has carried the chain for nine hundred years so that you would not have to. He only wants what is his. He only wants you to rest. Love him. Kneel. Rest.*

Riegel's knees were bending.

He did not tell them to. They were doing it on their own, slowly, the way an old building goes down. Beside him, Anna was already on hers, her father's sword fallen in the sand, her bruised arm pressed to her chest, her face slack and wet and shining. Fennick was down. Creez was standing, swaying, with his hand on his gun and his eyes rolled up white.

Kneel. Rest. Love him.

Riegel's knee touched the rock.

Below them, on the path, the King smiled, and began to climb.

* * *

Elara was laughing.

Fennick could hear her. Far away, deep in the dark, at the bottom of everything. He had come up out of the chain on the King's leash and walked up the canyon with the iron collar round his neck, and the whole way he had been able to hear her, very faintly, the way you can hear a song from another room. She had told him eleven jokes in the dark. They were all terrible. He had laughed at every one.

Now the pull was on him like the sea, and he was going under, and through it all, at the very bottom, she was still laughing.

It was a joke about a rooster. He could not remember how it went. It did not matter. She was laughing so hard she could not finish it, and the sound of it came up through the black water like a bubble rising, and Fennick, kneeling on the rock in front of the burned chapel with his face slack and his mouth open and the King of Calice climbing toward him, heard it, and felt the corner of his own mouth twitch.

And twitch.

And go.

He laughed. It came out of him like a cough, like something stuck in his throat. It was not much. It was enough. And he put his hand up, while he was laughing, to the iron collar around his neck. It was loose. It had always been loose. He could feel the gap between the iron and his skin.

He lifted it off.

* * *

Riegel heard it fall. A small sound. Iron on rock.

He turned his head. It took everything he had. It was like turning his head under a mountain.

Fennick was on his knees beside him with the iron collar lying in the sand in front of him, and he was laughing. Tears were running down his face. He looked up at Riegel, and his eyes were his own.

“*She says,*” Fennick gasped, “*the rooster—the rooster says —*” and could not finish, and fell over sideways laughing.

The King stopped climbing.

He stood on the path five paces from the top, looking down at the courier rolling in the sand. And for the first time, Riegel saw something on that vast red-edged face that was not hunger and was not pleasure. It was very small. It was gone almost before it came.

It was doubt.

“Now,” said a voice.

It was dry and careful, with something under it like the edge of a coin. It came from below. From the half-ring of masks behind the litter. Riegel saw the silver one step forward. Its gloved hand came up, palm down, fingers spread.

It spoke the word.

The same word. The one from the armoury of the Vault. Short and hard and cold, like a coin struck flat on a stone counter. The air in the canyon went tight. Every chain on every chained thing among the devoted, every iron link, went taut at once and snapped flat to the ground, pinned, as if some vast weight had been laid across them. The chained things went down on their faces in the sand.

And the wine-dark mask stepped forward beside the silver one, and lifted its head, and spoke too. Not a word. A voice. The voice the First Cup had spent thirty years training not to sound like anyone. It sounded like someone now. It rang off the red walls of the canyon, and every devoted face in the ring of torches turned toward it.

“*Look down,*” said the First Cup. “*Look down. Look at your hands. Look at where you are standing. Look down.*”

Here and there in the ring of torches, a clerk in wine-red looked down. A Magician in white. A senator. They looked at their own hands holding torches, at the sand under their feet, at

the chained things lying pinned among them. And their shining faces flickered. Only a little. Only for a breath.

Only enough.

The pull on Riegel lifted. Not much. A hand's breadth. Like the sea drawing back off a beach before the next wave.

He got up off his knee.

* * *

From inside the chapel, from the hole in the floor where the heart of the Fifteenth had lain for two hundred years, there came a sound like the sea.

It was the sea. Riegel smelled it. Salt and cold and rot, rising out of the black hole in the floor of a chapel in a desert canyon a thousand miles from any ocean. Water came up out of the hole. A gout of it, black, splashing across the cracked red tiles and the ring of dark silver dents. And then, out of the water, out of the hole, climbing, came a hand.

Bone. Finger and knuckle and wrist.

It took hold of the edge of the hole. And the Sovereign of Netherfiend came up out of the Deep Road into the burned chapel, dripping, his black robe streaming seawater, the iron crown on his skull crusted white with salt. Behind him, holding his other hand, her black and violet soaked and clinging, her dark hair fallen loose out of its silver pins, came Velisande.

He walked out of the chapel through the black gap of the door into the moonlight and stood at the top of the path, beside Riegel, and looked down at the King.

His fires were very dim. Riegel saw that. They were barely there. Two small violet sparks in the dark of the sockets, like the last coals of a fire that has burned all night.

“Aurelian,” said Ossiran.

The King of Calice looked up at him. And smiled. And the doubt went out of his face as if it had never been there.

“Bone Lord,” he said softly. “You came.”

“I came.”

“Out of your Tomb. Over your threshold. Through the drowned road.” The King’s smile widened. “Do you know what that cost you?”

“No,” said Ossiran. “I’ve forgotten.”

“I can see it,” said the King. He tilted his vast red-edged head. “I can see the hole where it was. You don’t even remember why you agreed to be sealed, do you? You stood in my ancestor’s Hall three hundred years ago and gave up the world, and you can’t remember *why*.” He laughed. “Oh, that’s beautiful. That’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.”

“Is it,” said the Sovereign of Netherfiend.

He came down the path.

* * *

Riegel would never be able to describe what happened next. He tried, later. To Lucia. To Old Matteo. To a great many people, in a great many taverns, for the rest of his life. He never got it right.

The Ending went down the path toward the Devil, and the world went cold.

It was the cold from the Table of Reading. The cold of a door closing, of the last page of a book, of the moment after the last breath. It went out from Ossiran like ripples from a stone dropped in still water, and where it touched, things *ended*. The torches in the hands of the nearest devoted went out. Not blown

out; ended, their flames simply finishing. The pinned chains of the chained things went grey and dry and crumbled into rust. The fallen bells in the chapel tower behind them gave one last soft note each, all together, and were silent forever.

And it reached the King.

And stopped.

It did not stop the way the Vantress blade had stopped. It stopped the way the sea stops at a cliff. Riegel saw it hit the King and go round him. Around the edges of the red dark. It could not get in.

“No,” said King Aurelian gently. “Not me.”

He put out one hand and laid it on the Sovereign’s chest.

“You end things,” he said. “That’s your law. Everything finishes so that something else can begin. But the chain doesn’t finish, Bone Lord. Not ever. Because it’s *chosen*.” The red in his eyes flared. “Every devoted in this canyon chose their stone. Every House in the realm chose the Crown. They chose me, nine hundred years ago, and they forgot, and they’re still choosing. Every day. Every breath. You can’t end what someone is still choosing. Not even you.”

His fingers closed on the black robe.

“But I can tear what isn’t,” he said.

And he pulled.

* * *

Ossiran did not scream. He had no voice to scream with. But Riegel, standing at the top of the path, felt the Ending begin to come out of him.

It came out the way the Lovers had come out of Amara at the High Table. Slowly. Unwillingly. It clung. Cold grey light came

out of the Sovereign's chest between the King's red fingers like water out of a cracked jar, and went into the King's hand, up his arm, into the red dark, and the King of Calice threw back his head and *drank*.

The two violet sparks in Ossiran's sockets went dimmer. Dimmer.

"NO!"

Velisande came down the path like a winter storm.

The frost came with her. It came off her in a white river down the path, thorns and roses, and it hit the King's legs and went up them, up his chest, up the arm that held her lord. Up his face. The King's skin went white with it. Riegel heard ice crack.

The King turned his head and looked at her.

The pull hit her full in the face. Riegel saw it. He saw it hit her like a wave hits a rock. *Love him. Kneel. Rest.* All that terrible sweet tide of the Lovers and the Devil together, turned on her alone.

And it did nothing.

Velisande stood on the path with the frost pouring off her and the King's eyes on her, and her face did not change. Not at all. It did not go slack. It did not shine. It stayed exactly as it was: white and furious and absolutely, perfectly, terrifyingly clear.

The King frowned.

"Ah," he said. "I see. You already love someone." He tilted his head. "*Perfectly*. No stone. No chain. Just *chosen*." He sounded almost admiring. "There's no room in you for me at all, is there, witch?"

"*Let. Him. Go.*"

"No," said the King, and lifted his free hand, and she was thrown back up the path like Imre Vantress had been thrown,

and hit the doorframe of the burned chapel and fell, and did not get up.

The frost on the King's body cracked and fell away.

He turned back to Ossiran, and pulled harder.

* * *

At the foot of the path, in her white litter, Amara was breaking.

Riegel could see it from the top. The violet threads that chained her to the posts were blazing, and the light was still going down them, from the King into her, more of it now, much more, because the King was drinking the Ending and there was too much and it had to go somewhere. Her body was arched like a drawn bow. Cracks were opening in her skin. Fine bright cracks, violet and red, the way cracks open in a glass when it is filled with boiling water. Her mouth was open. No sound was coming out of it anymore.

Anna was standing.

Riegel did not know when she had got up. He had not seen. She was standing at the top of the path with her father's great sword in her hands, the good hand and the bruised one, and she was looking down at the woman in the litter, and her face was white.

"Anna," said Riegel.

She did not answer. She started walking down the path.

Past the King, who did not look at her. Past the Sovereign of Netherfiend with the cold grey light pouring out of his chest. Down toward the litter. Toward the woman who had destroyed her father and her house and her whole life, who was breaking now into pieces in a white chair under the moon.

Creez was standing too. He had the gun out. His father's gun, silver-plated, with the single blessed bullet in the chamber. He was looking at the King. His face was the colour of chalk, and his hands were shaking so hard that the long silver barrel wavered in the moonlight like a reed in a stream.

"*I can't,*" he whispered. "Riegel. I can't. I can't laugh. I can't find it. It's gone. *I can't find it.*"

And at the very top of the path, beside the black gap of the chapel door, where Velisande lay fallen against the frame, Riegel stood alone with the black cleaver hanging from his hand.

He looked down at it.

On the day you lift that blade, you will lift it for someone else. Not for yourself. Not for vengeance. For someone else, and only for someone else.

Below him, Anna reached the litter.

Above him, the moon stood over the canyon like a coin.

And between them, on the path, the King of Calice laughed with the Ending pouring into his hand, and the whole canyon held its breath, waiting for one heartbeat.

Chapter Twenty-Five: Three Sounds

Amara looked up at her stepdaughter out of the breaking light and smiled.

“Little bird,” she whispered. The cracks in her face were glowing, violet and red, running from her temples to her jaw like the lead between the panes of a church window. “You came all this way.”

Anna stood over the white litter with her father’s great sword raised in both hands. The good hand and the bruised one. The blade caught the moon.

“Do it,” said Amara. “Please. Oh, please. It’s too much. He’s pouring the Ending into me, little bird, and it’s so cold, and the love’s so hot, and I’m *breaking*.” Tears ran out of her eyes and down the glowing cracks. “Make the scales come level. You’re your father’s daughter. *Do it*.”

Justice, thought Anna. *Every act weighs something. The scales will always come level. It doesn’t say how.*

She looked down at the woman in the litter.

She saw the cracks. She saw the violet threads blazing at her wrists and throat. She saw the bright wet eyes, shining with a love that had been forced into them like water into a cracked jar. She saw her father’s face coming out of the golden dust. She saw Sefu at the edge of the well, smiling his own smile, saying *I know*

how now. She saw a soft pale man on a balcony with his hands shaking, and a bus driver's daughter sitting by a door like a dog, and dockhands getting up and getting up and getting up.

And she saw, very clearly, that this woman had chosen. Three years ago, in a trader's cart at the southern ports, she had chosen. And every day since, something had been choosing for her.

I don't forgive you, Lucia had written. I don't blame you. It's both.

Anna lowered the sword.

She did it slowly. She brought the great blade down, past Amara's face, past her throat, until its point rested in the sand at the foot of the litter. And she knelt. On the canyon floor, in the torchlight, in front of the woman who had destroyed her house. She put her bruised hand, the one the violet light had climbed, over Amara's hand on the arm of the white chair.

"No," said Anna.

Amara stared at her.

"I don't forgive you," said Anna. Her voice shook. It did not break. "I never will. You killed my father. You killed my house. I'm going to carry that for the rest of my life." She held on to Amara's hand. "But I'm not going to let him finish you. I'm not going to let anyone finish you. Not him. Not me." She swallowed. "You chose once. You can choose again. I'm choosing for me. Not for him. Not for the stone. *Me.*" Her fingers tightened. "Run, Amara. *Run.*"

It was her father's word. She had not known she was going to say it until it was out of her mouth.

And the Lovers heard it.

* * *

Riegel saw it from the top of the path. He would never forget it.

The violet threads that chained Amara to her litter went dark.

All at once. Every one. As if a hand had closed over a lamp. And on the King's chest, on its broken chain, the relic flickered. It went from violet to something else. Something Riegel had never seen in it before. For one breath it was clear. Pale. The colour of morning. As though something inside it had turned over in its sleep, from upside down, and was for one moment the right way up.

The Lovers is the law of choice, Velisande had said. *Love freely given. Love that could have been refused.*

Anna had refused. And chosen anyway.

And for the length of one breath, the law was the right way up.

Amara stood.

She stood up out of the white litter with the dark threads falling off her like cut string. The cracks in her face were still glowing. She was still breaking. Riegel could see it. But her eyes were clear. For the first time since the courtyard, they were her own.

She looked down at Anna, kneeling in the sand.

"*Little bird*," she said. Her own voice. Hoarse. Astonished. Then she looked at the great sword standing point-down in the sand beside Anna. Tariq's sword. The sword of the Sword Head of the southern clans. "Give me his sword."

Anna looked up at her.

"*Give me his sword*," said Amara. "Please. I owe him. *Let me pay.*"

Anna let go of the hilt.

* * *

Up on the path, the King of Calice was drinking the Ending, and he did not see her coming.

He was looking at Ossiran. His vast red-edged face was full of joy. The cold grey light came out of the Sovereign's chest into his hand in a steady stream now, and the two violet sparks in Ossiran's sockets were almost out, and the King was laughing.

"Almost," he said. "Almost. Almost. Three laws of the world, Bone Lord. In one pair of hands. Do you know how long my family has dreamed of—"

The Lovers on his chest went dark.

He stopped. He looked down at it.

"What—"

And Amara came up the path with Tariq's sword.

She did not run. She could not have run; she was breaking. She came up the path one step at a time, through the moonlight, with the great blade dragging behind her in the dust, and every step another crack opened in her, and she did not stop. Riegel saw her pass him. He saw her face. It was the face of someone walking toward a door they had been afraid of all their life, who has decided at last to open it.

The King turned his head.

"Amara?"

She reached up with her free hand and took hold of the relic on his chest.

* * *

At the top of the path, Creez stood with his father's gun in both shaking hands and the last blessed bullet in its chamber and could not find it.

Laughing, Velisande had said. *On the day you fire that last bullet, you will have to fire it laughing.*

He was crying. He could not stop. He could not see. The long silver barrel wavered in the moonlight between the King's chest and the King's head and the dark beyond, and he could not hold it still, and he could not find the thing. It was gone. It had come back to him on the deck of the *Saint Agatha* and on the porch and on the path when Fennick grinned, and now, now, at the one moment in his whole life that he needed it, it was gone, and there was only the King, and the dark, and his cousin's voice in his head saying *it's cold*.

"Creez."

Fennick. On his knees beside him in the sand. Still holding his ribs. Still half laughing, half sobbing, with the iron collar lying in front of him.

"Creez. *She says—*" He was gasping. "*She says the rooster—*"

"*I don't want the rooster!*" Creez screamed. "*I can't — Fennick, I can't, I can't find it—*"

"*She says the rooster crossed the road,*" Fennick choked, "*to get away from YOU. Because you were too soft to shoot it. Because you never could. Because you'd just laugh at it till it ran.*" He was crying openly now, laughing and crying, the tears cutting tracks through the dust on his face. "*She says you're the worst shot in the badlands and the best thing in the world. She says she was never cold. Not really. She says she's not cold now. She says you finally get to shoot the rooster.*"

Creez stared at him.

And something came up out of him from very deep. Deeper than the canyon. Deeper than the chain.

It was not brave. It was not bitter. It was the stupidest, most helpless, most ridiculous laugh of his whole life. It came out of him in a great wet whoop at the top of a path in a burned canyon under the moon, with tears running down his face and his father's gun in his hands and the King of Calice ten paces below him drinking a law of the world, and it would not stop. He was laughing at the rooster. At Elara. At himself. At the whole terrible, stupid, beautiful world.

His hands went still.

* * *

At the top of the path, beside the fallen Seneschal and the black gap of the chapel door, Riegel lifted the cleaver.

He did not decide to. He would say that later, to Lucia, and to Old Matteo, and in a great many taverns for the rest of his life, and it would always be true. He did not decide. He saw.

He saw the King feel Amara's hand close on the relic. He saw the vast red-edged face turn toward her. He saw the red dark inside the King gather itself the way a cornered animal gathers itself: everything at once, all nine hundred years of it, drawing back to strike. And he saw where it would go. Not at Amara. Not at Creez. *Out.* In every direction. Up the path. At the Sovereign with the light pouring out of his chest, and the Seneschal fallen in the doorway, and the courier on his knees, and the gunner laughing, and the girl kneeling at the foot of the path with her empty hands.

For someone else. And only for someone else.

The black cleaver came up off the rock.

It was the first time in two years. It was the first time since the clan hall. It was the first time since a night of rain and iron in a lower-city alley, when he had held it down in the mud with all his strength and let his brother come at him with a knife. It came up now in both his hands, enormous and black and warm as if it remembered him, and he did not swing it. He would never swing it again. He brought it up in front of him, broad flat outward, the way Anna had in the Vault and he had on the dune and the deck: not a blade but a wall. And he stepped forward with it, between the King of Calice and everyone he had ever, in three weeks, come to love.

And the canyon held its breath.

* * *

The climax of their bargains arrived in a single heartbeat.

On the path, Amara tore the Lovers off the King's chest. The broken chain parted. The relic came away in her fist, blazing, and with her other hand, with the last of her strength, with every crack in her body glowing, she drove Tariq's sword up under the King's ribs to the hilt.

"For my husband," she said.

At the top of the path, Creez, laughing, pulled the trigger.

And the red dark exploded out of the King of Calice in every direction at once, and Riegel took it on the black steel.

* * *

The wet, heavy thrust of a Sword Head's blade going home.

The cathedral-bell of the last holy bullet, ringing down the canyon between the red walls.

The great clang of the black cleaver, taking the blow.

Three sounds that echoed across the western badlands, and across the sea, and down into the deep drowned road and the chain beneath the world.

Three sounds, in a single heartbeat.

Not the death of innocence, this time.

Its rescue.

* * *

The holy bullet went into the King's chest an inch from where the relic had hung.

It did not wound him. It went *through* him, and as it went the silver lining blazed white, two hundred years of blessings in a single spark, and it took the red dark with it. Riegel saw it go. It tore out of the King's back like a sheet torn off a line in a gale, all of it, the whole of the Fifteenth, nine hundred years of the chain chosen and forgotten, ripped out of him in one long red shriek and flung out over the canyon.

It hit the cleaver.

Riegel felt it in his teeth, his spine, the soles of his feet. It hit the black flat of the blade like the sea hitting a cliff and broke on it, and went round it, and went out on either side of him in two great red wings, past the chapel, past the Seneschal and the courier and the gunner, past the Sovereign of Netherfiend, up into the night sky and away. Behind the cleaver nothing touched them. Nothing at all. Riegel stood with his feet braced on the rock and the black steel shuddering in his hands and roared into it, roared without words, the way he had roared on the dune and the deck. And he did not move one inch.

Then it was gone.

High above the canyon, under the moon, the red dark went up and up, thinning, like smoke from a chimney on a still night. And as it thinned, something came out of it. Lights. Small and pale and many. Hundreds of them. Thousands. They drifted out of the dissolving red like sparks from a fire, and rose, slowly, and went out one by one among the stars.

“Look,” whispered Fennick. *“Oh, look.”*

Every soul the chain had ever held. Going home.

* * *

The King of Calice fell to his knees on the path.

He was only a man now. Riegel saw that. A tall man of fifty with a short silver-black beard and a blue coat with a hole burned in the chest, and a Sword Head’s blade through his ribs. His eyes were brown. They were wide and wet and astonished, like the eyes of a child who has woken in a strange room. He looked down at the sword. Then up, at the woman holding it.

“Amara,” he said. Wonderingly. *“I don’t — I can’t feel—”*

“No,” said Amara. *“Neither could I.”*

The King of Calice looked at her for a moment longer. Then he fell sideways in the dust of the path and did not move again.

And the Lovers, in Amara’s fist, blazed.

Everything it had drunk. Everything the King had poured into it. Everything Amara had fed it for three years: husband and household and a Sword Head’s blood. All of it came back up through the relic at once, the way water comes back up a pipe when the tap is turned off too fast, and it had nowhere to go but the hand that held it. The hand that had chosen it.

Amara did not let go.

The cracks in her face went from violet to white. Riegel saw her stand there on the path over the body of the King with the relic in her fist and the light pouring up her arm, and she did not scream. She turned her head. She looked down the path, at the girl kneeling in the sand at the foot of it with her empty hands.

“Little bird,” she said.

Then the light went out of her, the way light goes out of a broken lamp, and she folded down onto the path beside the King.

* * *

Anna got to her first.

She came up the path on her hands and knees, the last ten paces, and gathered her stepmother into her lap, and the cracks in Amara’s face were dark now. Only cracks. Only a woman’s face, thin and tired and very still. The relic lay in her open palm. It was not burning. It was not violet. It lay there pale and clear as a drop of water, the colour of morning, and when Anna touched it, it was cool.

“I didn’t forgive you,” Anna whispered. “I said I wouldn’t.”

Amara’s eyes were open. There was nothing in them now. But her face, in the moonlight, did not look broken. It looked, Riegel thought, like the face of someone who has finished something.

Anna closed her eyes for her. Then she took the clear stone out of her stepmother’s hand, very gently, and held it in her own.

* * *

The Sovereign of Netherfiend was lying on the path.

Velisande was beside him. Riegel did not know when she had woken. She was kneeling in the dust with his skull in her lap,

her dark hair hanging loose around them both, and she was not weeping and she was not frosting the ground. She was holding him. And in the sockets of his skull, very slowly, like coals breathed on, two small violet sparks were coming back.

The cold grey light that had poured out of him into the King's hand was coming back too. Riegel could see it. It came out of the King's body in thin grey threads, the way mist comes off a river at dawn, and crept across the dust of the path, and went back into the Sovereign's chest. Not all of it. Riegel thought, watching, that perhaps not all of it would ever come back.

Enough.

The fires in Ossiran's sockets brightened. The skull turned, very slightly, in Velisande's lap.

"Velisande," he said. His voice was very faint.

"My lord."

"Did it work?"

"Yes, my lord." Her voice did not shake. Riegel would always admire that. "It worked."

* * *

At the foot of the path, Creez was on his knees in the sand with his father's empty gun in his lap, still laughing, very quietly, with tears running down his face.

In front of him, in the sand, lay a small black thing.

It had fallen out of the sky when the red dark went up. Riegel had seen it fall. It lay where it had landed, glossy and dark and the length of a man's hand, and it was whole. A little horned figure on a pedestal, hugging itself. At its feet, two tiny chained figures. Its blank face was turned up toward the moon. And

around its edge, very thin, like a crack, like a vein, there was a line of red, quite still.

It was not humming. It was not burning. It was asleep.

Creez stopped laughing. He looked at it for a long time.

Then he reached into his coat and took out the iron key his aunt had given him, his father's key, the key to the chapel the priests had burned. He looked at that for a long time too.

Footsteps on the path behind him. Two sets. Slow.

He looked up.

The silver mask and the wine-dark mask stood at the foot of the path in the moonlight, side by side, hooded, among the scattered torches and the fallen devoted who were beginning, here and there across the canyon floor, to sit up and look around them with wide wet astonished eyes, like sleepers waking in a strange room.

"Is it over?" Creez said.

"No," said the wine-dark mask gently. "But this part is."

* * *

They stood together at the foot of the path under the moon, in the ruins of the burned chapel: five of them.

A swordsman from the lower districts, with a black cleaver in his hands that he had lifted at last, for someone else. A blade-daughter of the southern sands, holding a stone the colour of morning. A gunner from the western badlands, laughing and weeping, with his father's empty gun on his hip and a small sleeping idol in his palm.

And two in masks, silver and wine-dark, whose faces no one in the canyon had ever seen.

“Not to the Crown,” said the silver mask. Its voice was dry and careful, with something under it like the edge of a coin. “There is no Crown tonight. Not to the Houses. Not to the Spires.”

“Not to Netherfiend,” said the wine-dark mask. It looked up the path, to where the Seneschal knelt with her lord’s skull in her lap. “With respect.”

“Then who?” said Anna.

The masks looked at each other. Some silent thing passed between them. Then they looked back at the three.

“To us,” said the wine-dark mask. “To the five who got out.”

Creez looked down at the sleeping idol in his hand. Then at the clear stone in Anna’s. Then at Riegel, standing with the cleaver.

“Every bargain costs blood,” he said quietly.

“Yes,” said the silver mask.

“And the dark remembers.”

“Yes.”

Creez closed his hand around the Devil. Anna closed hers around the Lovers. And the five of them stood there in the burned canyon under the moon, with both laws of the world held between them, while far above, the last pale lights of the chain went out one by one among the stars.

Chapter Twenty-Six: What the Dark Remembers

Dawn came up the canyon slowly, the way it always had, one red shelf at a time, from the top down.

Nobody had slept. There had been too much to do. The devoted were waking all across the canyon floor, hundreds of them, clerks and senators and Magicians in wine-red and silver who sat up in the sand with the dead stones lying in their laps and looked around them at the red walls and the burned chapel and the scattered torches as though they had been dropped there from the sky. Most of them did not remember the ship. Many did not remember the Conclave. A few, the ones who had worn their stones longest, did not remember their own names, and sat in the sand with their hands folded and waited.

Aunt Ruth came up the canyon road at first light in her wagon, with Dot beside her on the seat and the back full of water barrels. She took one look at the canyon and said nothing at all and began to hand out water.

Riegel helped her. He did not know what else to do with his hands. He went among the waking devoted with a ladle and a tin cup, and gave them water, and when they asked him where they were, he told them. *The western badlands. A long way from home. You're safe now.* He did not know if that was true. He said it anyway.

Near the canyon wall, where he had fallen, Imre Vantress was sitting up.

His left arm hung at a bad angle. There was blood in his silver hair. He was looking at the long straight blade lying in the dust of the path where the King had dropped it, and when Riegel came and crouched beside him with the ladle, he did not look away from it.

"He was nineteen," said the Sword Head. "Torvald."

"I know," said Riegel.

"I went," said Imre Vantress. "In the end. I went." He turned his head and looked at Riegel at last. His eyes were grey and very tired. "And you lifted it."

"Yes."

"For whom?"

Riegel thought about it.

"Everyone," he said.

The Sword Head of the Vantress clan looked at him for a long moment. Then he held out his good hand, palm up, and Riegel gave him the cup of water, and he drank it.

* * *

They buried Amara in the canyon at noon, beside the creek, under a cottonwood.

It was Anna's choice. Nobody argued. She dug the grave herself, with a shovel from Aunt Ruth's wagon, and she would not let anyone help, and when it was done she laid her stepmother in it wrapped in a clean sheet and stood looking down for a long time. Tariq's sword lay across her shoulders. She had cleaned it in the creek at dawn. There was no stain on it now near the hilt.

"I don't forgive her," she said, to no one. "I never will."

"I know," said Riegel, beside her.

"But she paid." Anna's voice was quite steady. "She came up that path and she paid. For him. For my father." She looked down at the wrapped shape in the grave. "The scales came level. Justice doesn't say how. It just says they will."

She bent and picked up a handful of red earth and dropped it in.

Then she took the clear stone out of her pocket, the stone the colour of morning, and looked at it for a long moment in the shade of the cottonwood. It lay cool in her bruised palm. The bruise had begun to fade overnight; it was yellow now at the edges, and it did not hum anymore.

"It feels different," she said. "Doesn't it? It feels like—"

"A choice," said Riegel.

Anna closed her hand on it.

* * *

Creez went up to the cairn alone.

He did not tell anyone he was going. They all knew anyway. He walked out along the canyon road to the place where the overturned stagecoach still lay on its side by the trail with the dust drifted against its wheels, and the little cairn of red stones stood beside it, small and careful, exactly as he had left it.

He sat down beside it in the dirt.

For a long time he did not say anything. He took the small black idol out of his coat and turned it over in his fingers in the sun. The horned figure on its pedestal, hugging itself. The two tiny chained figures at its feet. The thin red line round its edge, quite still. Asleep.

"I've got it," he said at last, to the cairn. "The whole thing. The piece you found and all the rest. Turns out it was a King's all along." He shook his head. "A King, Ellie. Can you believe it? You picked up a King's heart in a ruin because it was pretty."

The wind moved the dust along the trail.

"Fennick says you told him eleven jokes," said Creez. "In the dark. He says they were all terrible." His voice cracked. "He says he laughed at every one."

He sat there a while longer. Then he took his father's empty gun off his hip and set it down on top of the cairn, carefully, so it would not slide. The silver-plated barrel caught the sun.

"I don't need it anymore," he said. "There aren't any bullets. And there aren't any priests." He touched the cairn, once, very lightly, with two fingers. "And you're not cold."

He got up and walked back down the canyon road toward the others, with the Devil asleep in his pocket, and somewhere about halfway he started, very quietly, to whistle.

* * *

The masks left at sunset.

They had stayed all day. They had worked with the rest of them, quietly, hooded, never once taking off their faces: carrying water, binding wounds, sitting with the devoted who could not remember their names. Toward evening Riegel saw them standing together at the edge of the creek, talking low, and when he came near they stopped.

"The High Table must sit," said the wine-dark mask. "There is no King of Calice tonight. There is no heir. There is no Concord." It looked down the canyon toward the east, toward the railroad and the sea and the canal city beyond it. "The Houses

are at war on the Marches. The Senate does not know what it is. The Spires have lost their purse. Someone must go back and sit at the Table, and try to make something out of what is left."

"And it has to be you," said Riegel.

"It has to be us," said the silver mask. "That is the whole point of us."

Riegel looked at them for a long time. The pale silver, with its star-shaped eyes. The dark lacquer, with its chalices on their sides.

"Will I ever know?" he said. "Who you are?"

The masks looked at each other.

"Perhaps," said the wine-dark one. "When it's safe."

"When's that?"

"Not yet," said the silver mask.

They turned to go. Then the wine-dark one stopped, and turned back, and reached into its robe, and held something out to him. A small round thing. Silver. It caught the last of the sun.

A coin. Old. Stamped on one side with a five-pointed star. On the other, scratched with the point of a knife, a single word.

Tonight.

"We used to pass it back and forth," said the wine-dark mask. "Across the Table. When it was time to do something." It put the coin in Riegel's palm and closed his fingers over it. "Keep it. When it's time again, you'll know."

"Time for what?"

But they were already walking away down the canyon road, two hooded figures in the red evening, and they did not look back.

* * *

"Friends you haven't met," said Fennick, watching them go. He was sitting on the tailboard of Aunt Ruth's wagon with his ribs strapped up and a tin cup of coffee in his hands. "Five escaped. Two you haven't met." He shook his head. "My lord's going to love that."

"Is he all right?" said Anna. "Your lord?"

Fennick did not answer at once.

* * *

The Sovereign of Netherfiend sat on a rock above the burned chapel in the last of the light and looked at the sky.

He had been there all day. He had not moved. Velisande had brought a cloak from Aunt Ruth's wagon and put it round his shoulders, and he had let her, and he had gone on sitting there, with the fires in his sockets small and steady, looking up. At the clouds. At the hawks going round on the warm air above the canyon. At the sun crossing over. At the blue going slowly to gold, and then to red.

"Three hundred and eleven years," he said, when Riegel came up the rocks. "I had forgotten what a sky looked like."

Riegel sat down on the rock beside him. He did not know what to say. They sat together for a while in silence.

"You lifted it," said Ossiran at last.

"Yes."

"For everyone."

"That's what I told the Sword Head." Riegel looked down at his hands. "I don't know if it's true. I didn't decide. I just saw where it was going to go, and I was there."

"That is usually how it works," said the Sovereign of Netherfiend. "With Strength. People think it is a decision. It is

not. It is only the moment you stop holding the lion's mouth shut and find that it would rather be holding something up." He turned his skull, slightly, toward Riegel. "Go home, swordsman. Your clan is waiting. Your baker is waiting. And I expect somewhere in the lower districts there is an old smith who would very much like to see that blade again."

Riegel's throat closed.

"And you?" he said. "Will you go back? Under the sand?"

The fires did not move.

"I don't know," said Ossiran. "The seal is broken. The Concord is ended. I could go anywhere." He was quiet for a long time. "I find that I don't know where I would want to go. I think, once, I would have known." He looked at his own bone hands, resting on his knees. "I think I had somewhere."

Below them, at the foot of the rocks, Velisande stood alone by the black gap of the chapel door, with her hands folded at her waist, watching him.

* * *

She came up to him after Riegel had gone, when the sun was down and the first stars were out over the canyon, and stood beside the rock.

"You promised," said Ossiran, without looking at her. "When it was over."

"It isn't over," said Velisande. "The masks said so."

"It is over enough."

She was quiet for a long moment. Then she reached into the bodice of her gown, over her heart, and drew out a single card. Thin, polished, cut from something that had once been alive. A leaf of the Bone Deck.

She held it out to him face down.

He took it. He turned it over. He looked at it for a long time in the starlight.

Velisande did not breathe.

“Ah,” said the Sovereign of Netherfiend at last, very softly. “I see.”

He did not say anything else. He did not tell her what he saw. He only looked at the card for a while longer, and then turned it face down again, and held it out to her. She took it. Her fingers were shaking. She put it back where it had been, against her heart.

“Will you tell me?” said Ossiran. “Why I agreed? Three hundred years ago?”

Velisande looked at him.

“When we’re home,” she said.

“And where is home, Velisande?”

The Witch-Seneschal of Netherfiend knelt beside him on the warm red rock, and took his bone hand in both of hers, and pressed it to her cold cheek, and looked up with him at the stars.

“Wherever you are, my lord,” she said. “It has always been wherever you are.”

* * *

They parted at Redwater Crossing on a Thursday, when the regular train came.

Riegel went east. Home, across the ocean, to the lower districts, with the black cleaver on his back and Lucia’s letter in his shirt and a silver coin in his pocket scratched with the word *Tonight*. Imre Vantress went with him as far as the coast, his arm in a sling, carrying the body of the King of Calice in a plain pine

box, to bring home to a city that did not yet know what it had lost or whether it should grieve.

Anna went with Riegel too. She said it was because she had nowhere else to go. She said it to Riegel's face on the platform with her father's sword on her shoulder and the clear stone in her pocket, and he looked at her, and she looked back, and neither of them believed it.

Creez stayed.

Not for long. A month, he said. To help his aunt with the geraniums. To sit on the porch. To teach Dot how to whistle properly, because she was doing it all wrong. And then he would come east too, he said, and find them, wherever they were, with the Devil asleep in his pocket and a joke ready, a terrible one.

Fennick went back down under the sand. Somebody had to take the news home. He went the long way, by ship, complaining the whole time, and when he reached the Black Gate at last, a month later, Nyxa was waiting on the threshold with a crow on her shoulder and a letter in her hand, sealed in blank black wax.

It had arrived that morning. From the north. Unsigned.

She had not opened it. That was the first letter, in forty years, that the Warden of the Letter-Hall had not opened.

"It's for him," she said, when Fennick asked. "It says so on the front. *For the Bearer of the Thirteenth, when he comes home.*" She turned it over in her ink-stained fingers. "I'll keep it until then."

"And if he doesn't come home?"

Nyxa looked up the long stair toward the desert and the sun.

"Then I'll keep it," she said, "until he does."

* * *

Far away, at the Table of Reading in the Tomb of Netherfiend, the black candle that had burned for ninety-four years was still burning.

No one was there. The little round room behind the empty throne was silent. The pale stone table was bare except for the Bone Deck, lying in its open case where Velisande had left it on the night she went down into the drowned dark with her lord's hand in hers.

And then, though no one was there to see it, three cards slid out of the Deck, one after another, and lay face down on the stone in a row.

Past. Present. Path.

The first turned over on its own. *The Tower*: the spire struck by lightning, the crown blown off, the figures falling. What was built falsely, fallen.

The second turned. *The Star*: a woman kneeling by a pool under a sky full of light, pouring water from two jugs, one onto the land and one back into the water. Hope, after the Tower. Healing. The long work of putting things back.

The third card did not turn.

It lay there on the pale stone face down, in the light of the black candle. Waiting. It might have been any card in the Deck. It might have been the Fool, setting out with a light heart toward a cliff. It might have been Judgement, and the dead rising. It might have been the World, the whole circle, the dance that completes, still reversed, still unfinished, still waiting for someone who had been left out.

It might have been the card a Seneschal kept over her heart.

It might have been yours.

Because that is the oldest truth of the world, the one the fortune-sellers forgot and the Houses pretended to forget. The cards are not pictures. They are laws. And somewhere, in a city or a desert or a room with rain on the window and the smell of glue, someone is always shuffling. Someone is always reaching for the next one.

The Tower has fallen. The Star is pouring out her water.

The third card is yours to draw.

The dark remembers.

* * *

END OF BOOK ONE

Draw Your Own Card

Thank you for reading *Netherfiend*.

The Tower has fallen, and the Star is pouring out her water.
The third card is still face down.

Join the readers beyond the veil. Get Izno's letters, early chapters, and the news when the five return: [SIGN UP LINK]

Draw your own card. If you have ever wondered which law your own life is bent around, the Shining Tarot app is waiting with a deck of its own: [SHINING TAROT LINK]

More from Izno. *Resurgence: The Veil of Darkness* and more books from the world of the Arcana: [MORE BOOKS LINK]

Five escaped. Two you haven't met.

* * *

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