

A U R E F O L D — B o o k O n e

The Bell of Silence

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Chapter One

The Trial of the Goatherd

By the time Sela arrived, Tomas had failed the lamp twice.

The first wick had drowned. He pinched it out, drew it up with the point of his char knife, and cut it shorter than he meant to. The second flame burned blue at the root and smoked whenever the valley wind found the arch. Soot gathered beneath the little copper hood.

He moved the lamp half a handspan to the left.

The flame leaned harder.

"Leave it," Mother Alaine said.

She had entered while he was trimming the wick and taken the chair furthest inside, where the back wall met the long row of griffes. The dead faced the valley. Alaine faced the room. She sat with both hands resting on the head of her walking stick and her shoulders clear of the stone, though Tomas knew the cold would reach them before the hour was done. Age had pared her face without softening it. Her hair, once dark brown, had gone iron-white and was braided flat against the back of her head. Her eyes remained large and indecently expressive for a woman who had spent half a century teaching other people the holiness of restraint.

"It will smoke in her eyes," he said.

"Then she will move."

"I would rather know what she does before she has reason."

Alaine looked at the black crescent forming under the hood.

"The lamp has given her reason."

Tomas wiped his thumb on the rag at his belt. It left a dark mark beside three older ones. He had meant to begin with clean hands. At forty-five he had gone narrow rather than heavy: long fingers, a long face, dark hair retreating unevenly at the temples and giving way to grey as if even age had failed to proceed symmetrically. He kept his beard clipped close because loose whiskers caught charcoal dust. The left side was always a fraction shorter. He knew this. Nobody else needed to.

He put the lamp back where it had been.

The listening room had no raised chair and no place from which a judgment could be pronounced without being heard by the dead. People called the arrangement humble. Tomas cared that a speaker could not face the griffes without also facing the door. The bodies occupied the inner wall in open niches, wrapped and seated toward the arch. The living sat below them on stools that rocked unless their feet found the worn places in the floor.

Tomas tested the stool he had set for Sela. One leg clicked against the stone.

He folded a scrap of waste paper twice and wedged it beneath the short leg. The stool held. The scrap had been part of a ration tally. A red half-number showed at the edge, cut neatly in two.

Alaine watched him do it.

"What?" he asked.

"Nothing."

He could not tell whether she meant the lamp or the room.

The arch admitted a rush of colder air and the smell of goat hair. Sela came in with a coil of narrow cloth over one shoulder and something pale caught in her braid. Straw, Tomas thought. No—burdock. She was lean without being delicate, built in the compact way of people who carried feed uphill and did not count it as exercise. Wind had browned the bridge of her nose and left the skin beneath her grey-green eyes lighter by comparison. A thin white notch broke her left eyebrow, old enough that she had forgotten which goat had earned it. Her brown hair had been cut with practical indifference and braided before it could argue. She had left her work knife by the door; its sheath hung empty at her belt.

She stopped just inside.

"How long?"

Not *good evening*. Not *Mother*. She looked first at Tomas, then at the smoking lamp, then back through the arch toward the yard.

"As long as it takes," he said.

"The brown yearling has split the inside of her hoof. Ivet is holding her for me."

"Will ten minutes matter?"

"To Ivet, yes. The goat has opinions."

Alaine lowered her eyes. Tomas could not tell whether she hid amusement or disapproval. With Alaine, the two often wore the same mouth.

"Then we will not waste them," he said.

He indicated the stool.

Sela did not take it. She crossed to the mouth of the room instead and sat on the low stone ledge beneath the arch, facing the black valley. The wind struck her cheek, pushed loose hair across her mouth, and carried the lamp smoke away from her.

Tomas looked at the steadied flame, then at the carefully wedged stool.

"You said I could sit."

"I did."

"You looked as if you meant somewhere else."

"I often do."

That brought the smallest sound from her nose. Not quite a laugh. Enough that he knew she had heard the joke and had not decided whether to grant it.

She set the coil of cloth across her knees. Her fingers began rolling one end tighter.

Tomas took his own place. He had chosen it so he could see her hands, Alaine, the arch, and the nearest three griffes without moving his head. Sela had spoiled that arrangement by four feet. He let the inconvenience remain.

On his knee lay one sheet of thin paper and a stick of char. Nothing written there would enter the Ledger. The trial note

existed only to keep his memory from improving itself during the night. It would burn before the lamp went out.

He asked, "How many goats are in your care?"

"Thirty-eight this morning."

"I was told thirty-seven."

"Lark came back."

"Where had she been?"

"She is a goat. Her account was poor."

This time Alaine's mouth did change. Sela saw it in the edge of the dark and smiled before she remembered why she was there.

Tomas asked which pasture they had used, how long the snow had held on the north shelf, who had treated the yearling's hoof, which animals she would cull before deep winter, and why. She answered without trying to guess the purpose behind each question. That did not mean she lacked caution. When he asked who had first called her Called, she said, "Someone who wanted the others to say it," and would not give the name.

Her hands told him less than he had hoped. The cloth turned and tightened between them. When she was irritated, her right thumb worked faster. When he returned to the goats, it slowed.

"You have not said *Not I*," he said.

The thumb stopped.

"Should I?"

"I asked whether you had."

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because I am the one answering." She looked at him. "If I say it, you ask why. If I do not, you ask why. This saves us one question."

She looked back toward the yard. The brown yearling would be feeling the cold through its split hoof. Ivet would be sitting on it by now if holding had failed. Tomas pictured this too readily and set the picture aside.

"Tell me about the winter of the pass," he said.

The cloth went still in Sela's hands.

"You know it."

"I know what other people say happened."

"That is what people say when they want you to tell it differently."

"Tell it as you remember it."

She pulled once at the cloth and tested the roll with her thumb.

"The sickness began in the low pasture. Two old goats went down the first day. Then six. The villagers said moving would finish the weak ones, and they were probably right. The high path had ice under new snow."

"Who was with you?"

"Harl for part of it. Bryn's eldest until his hands went white. A woman from the lower fold. She had come to pray over the herd and became ill herself."

He waited.

"I sat with her," Sela said. "She had the proper words. I did not. Near morning I thought—"

She stopped.

Her head turned toward the arch.

Not quickly. Not as if startled. Her chin lifted a little and her body remained folded over the cloth, but all her attention went outward into the dark.

Tomas heard the lamp tick as the heated hood shifted.

He turned before he had decided to.

The arch showed nothing except the first step, the yard wall beyond it, and a strip of night above the eastern rim. No one stood there. No animal crossed. The wind had fallen, or seemed to have fallen. He became aware of Alaine's sleeve moving at the edge of his sight.

She had turned too.

For one breath the three of them attended to the same empty place.

Then a gust moved through the room. The lamp smoked. Somewhere beyond the arch, wood touched stone with a single dull knock.

Sela looked down at the cloth again.

"I thought we should go north," she said.

Tomas waited for the rest.

"That is all."

"A thought?"

"Not like the others."

"A voice?"

"Nothing I could honestly call one."

"Words?"

"No. A direction. North and upward. I knew the ice was there. I knew the woman could not walk it. I knew what moving would do to the weakest animals." She rubbed the tightened cloth between finger and thumb. "I woke Harl anyway. We took the high path. The herd lived. She lived until spring."

"And that is why you believe you are Called?"

Sela's face closed in annoyance. "I did not say that."

"No."

"Everyone keeps making it cleaner than I said."

Tomas looked at the blank paper. Then he wrote, slowly enough that the char would not break:

She stops mid-account and turns toward the arch. Both observers turn also.

He did not write *hears*. He did not write *the room follows*. Both observers concealed that he was one of them. He left the sentence anyway.

"Do it again," he said.

Sela stared at him.

"Turn to the same place."

"I can turn anywhere you like."

"Listen there."

"For what?"

"What you heard before."

The irritation left her. What replaced it was younger.

"I told you. It was not—" She stopped, took a breath, and began again. "It does not come because I want it. If it came because I wanted it, I would know something useful about it. I do not. I never said I did. It was a direction. Not words. I have only ever said direction."

Her right thumb drove hard over the roll of cloth. Once. Again.

"You are repeating yourself," Tomas said.

"I noticed."

"Good."

Sela stared at him. "Was there a risk you would charge me for the information?"

"No." Tomas considered it. "There was a risk you would repeat it a fourth time."

"Because you keep asking the same thing with different mouths."

It was unfair. It was also close enough to the truth that he felt it.

"I am asking whether the experience can be distinguished from fear, memory, or chance."

"Can yours?"

"My what?"

"Turning."

The char rested against the paper. Tomas could feel a grain in it beginning to crumble.

Sela looked past him to Alaine.

The change in her was immediate and ordinary. Her shoulders drew inward. Her fingers loosened from the cloth. She was no longer answering the Tester. She was asking the woman who had taught her the first prayers she had ever managed to remember all the way through.

"Mother," she said. "How do you know?"

Alaine did not move.

"When it is real," Sela said. "How do you know it is not only the thing you most fear, wearing the right shape?"

The listening room held the question. Tomas became aware of the griffes behind Alaine, each dead face directed past her toward the valley. She had sat among them for longer than he had been in Whitehart. She had guided the dying, corrected the hearing, refused easy wonders, and carried the house through years when other people had wanted certainty more than food.

He had heard her answer doubt in beds, yards, and this room.

He had never heard anyone ask her this one so plainly.

Alaine's fingers tightened once on the head of her stick. Then her voice came level and low.

"Keep your hands useful," she said. "Keep your account exact. When there is nothing, say nothing. If something comes, do not improve it because you are afraid."

Sela waited.

"That is how?"

"That is how you leave room to learn you were wrong."

The answer did not tell Sela whether she was Called. It gave her something to do with the brown yearling, the cloth in her lap, and the next uncertain morning. Tomas watched the relief move through her—not peace, exactly, but the return of weight to the body.

"I can do that," she said.

"You already have," Alaine replied.

The comfort reached Sela. It also gave the house a way to keep her while refusing a verdict. Tomas could find no false sentence in what Alaine had said.

He also could not find Alaine's answer to the question.

For years he had taken her precision as the proof beneath her authority. Now, because Sela had asked badly and directly, he saw the gap between the two. It was not suspicion. He would not call it that. Only an unexamined place.

He set down the char before the grain broke beneath his fingers.

"That is enough for tonight."

Sela looked at him. "You have not judged me."

"No."

"Do you mean not yet, or no?"

"Not tonight."

"Those are different answers."

"Yes."

She waited for him to choose one. He did not.

At last she stood and slung the cloth over her shoulder. Her leg had stiffened on the stone ledge; the first step made her wince, and she tried to hide it by pulling the burdock from her braid.

"May I go before Ivet teaches the goat to hate both of us?"

"Go."

At the arch she stopped. A faint scrape came from the passage beyond, too soft to distinguish from a shoe, a tray, or wood settling in the cold.

Sela looked into the dark.

"Who else heard?" she asked.

"No one else was invited."

She turned her head toward him. "That is not the same answer."

Then she left.

The coil of cloth brushed the stone as she passed. A moment later someone in the yard swore softly, Ivet or Sela, and a goat answered with such force that Alaine closed her eyes.

This time Tomas knew she was hiding amusement.

They sat until the yard quieted.

"You were kind," Tomas said.

Alaine shifted her stick beneath one hand. "She required an instruction."

"She asked how you knew."

"She asked what she could do."

Had she? Tomas tried to recover Sela's exact words. The note on his knee gave him only the turn toward the arch. He had written nothing of the later exchange.

Alaine rose. Her left hand went to the nearest griffe, not the face but the stone below the niche. She touched it as she passed, two fingers resting there for less than a breath.

"Burn the paper," she said.

"I always do."

"Yes."

She went out through the arch without looking toward the yard.

Tomas remained with the lamp, the empty stool, and the single line.

The flame had grown smaller. He held the lower corner of the paper to it. The edge browned but did not catch. He tried again, cursed the wick under his breath, and reached for the flint.

The sound beyond the arch might have been a listener. Their turning might have been imitation. Sela's direction might have been memory reorganized by survival. Alaine's answer might have been the practiced wisdom of a woman who had spent a life doing exactly what she advised.

All of that fit.

The flint sparked on the third strike. Tomas fed the paper to the new flame and watched his one sentence blacken from the

middle outward.

Before the ash broke, he admitted the fact he could enter nowhere: he had tested Sela's uncertainty and never once tested Elaine's certainty.

Chapter Two

The Woman Against the Stone

Alaine's left foot had gone numb before Sela entered the room. She let it.

The chair was too narrow and the stone behind it held the day's cold. Both facts had been true for years. If she shifted now, Tomas would notice. Then he would ask.

She had chosen the chair fifty years earlier, when she was still young enough to believe a single good decision might remain good if repeated. Furthest in. Back to the griffes. Face to the living.

The novices had made a teaching of it before she was old enough to stop them. Mother Alaine gave the Called the open room. Mother Alaine needed no sight of the dead to hear them. Mother Alaine sat where humility placed her.

No.

She sat there because anyone who faced the griffes could be watched facing them.

A lifted chin. A pause. An eye moving beneath a lid. Sooner or later someone would ask what had been heard. With her back to the niches, stillness looked like depth. The house supplied the rest.

There had been things.

A pressure in the room before a death. Dreams containing names she later discovered she had heard during the day. A certainty about a child's fever that proved correct and another, equally strong, that did not. Once, at the eastern wall, the sense that someone stood just beyond her shoulder. When she turned, a novice was there with a basin.

Nothing she could separate cleanly from memory, training, fear, hope, the smell of a body failing, or the ordinary competence of having watched people for a long time.

Nothing she could offer the house without making it smaller or making herself larger.

So she had learned the accounts of those who said they heard. The words they reached for. The places their bodies tightened before speech. Which questions frightened them into ornament. Which forms of doubt made them more exact and which made them perform certainty for the examiner. She remembered everything. Whitehart praised her hearing. She did not correct them.

Tomas set his lamp. Drowned the wick. Cut the second badly.

For one mean instant, Alaine was pleased.

He had conducted trials for sixteen years and been the Tester for sixteen. He could still lose a room to a cheap length of fiber. Whitehart had entrusted him with the uncertainty of souls and had apparently overestimated him against lamp wick. It made him human. It made him less dangerous.

Then Sela came in carrying hoof cloth and cold air and sat at the arch with her back to the dead.

Alaine felt envy before she knew what it was.

Not admiration. Not fear. Envy—clean and ugly.

To sit like that. Shoulder blades open to the niches. Not checking whether anyone watched her fail to hear.

For a moment Alaine wanted the girl to fail.

Not to be cast out. Not harmed. Only to fail enough that the posture would stop looking like freedom.

The wish passed. Shame remained. Her foot began to prickle inside her shoe.

Tomas asked about goats, pasture, snow. Sela answered him as if answers were objects that should be handed over in the size requested. Alaine heard Tomas adjust. He wanted evidence of performance; Sela gave him inconvenience. The corner of his mouth moved once before he hid it. Alaine wished she had not noticed.

When Sela stopped in the account of the pass, Alaine saw the change in her shoulders.

Then the room—

No.

Sela turned. The room went still.

Or the room went still and Sela turned.

Alaine had known the order while it happened. By the time the wind returned, she could no longer recover it. She had

turned toward the arch with the others. That fact sat in her body without interpretation.

Tomas asked Sela to do it again.

Cruel. Necessary, perhaps. Cruel first.

Sela's thumb worried the cloth. She repeated herself. Tomas noticed. Of course he noticed. He had built a life from changes people believed too small to guard.

Then Sela looked at Alaine.

Not at Mother Whitehart. Not at the keeper of the Bell. At Alaine.

"How do you know?" she asked.

The inside of Alaine's mouth went dry.

There were answers for this. She had heard them over beds and washbasins, at first snow, in the pauses after prayer. A dying woman had once said, *keep my hands busy or I will make the fear important*. Tomas told every frightened witness to keep the account exact. An old herder, ashamed of a warning that came to nothing, had said she should have left the nothing alone.

Alaine gathered the pieces.

"Keep your hands useful," she said. "Keep your account exact. When there is nothing, say nothing. If something comes, do not improve it because you are afraid."

The words steadied Sela.

They were good words. Alaine believed each of them.

Sela asked whether that was how. Alaine gave her a discipline in place of an answer. Then, because the girl still looked frightened and Alaine loved her, she said, "You already have." She heard the sentence become doctrine before it had crossed the room and disliked, not for the first time, how efficiently Whitehart could turn tenderness into administration.

Too much.

She knew it as soon as the relief entered Sela's face. By morning someone would remember the sentence as recognition. By winter it might have acquired a witness who had not been in the room.

Alaine did not take it back. Taking it back would hurt Sela now and expose the house later. Or that was what she told herself. The two reasons arrived together. She could not pull them apart while Tomas watched.

He ended the trial without judgment.

Sela left for the injured goat. Her leg had stiffened; she hid it badly. Alaine felt a small, shameful relief at seeing her clumsy.

In the yard the goat shouted. Alaine nearly laughed and closed her eyes instead.

Tomas said she had been kind.

She told him Sela had required an instruction. The answer came in the clean Whitehart shape she had used for years. Only after Tomas looked away did she hear what he had actually asked.

When she stood, blood returned to her foot in hot needles. She put two fingers to the stone beneath the nearest griffe until the pain passed. Tomas had always read the gesture as devotion. She had never told him otherwise.

Nothing came from the dead above her.

At the arch she looked back.

Tomas was not watching the paper he meant to burn. He was watching the chair she had left.

For the first time in thirty years, it looked chosen.

Chapter Three

The Morning After

Sela woke before the first kitchen knock because the brown yearling would need her binding changed.

For several breaths that was the whole day.

The dormitory was dark. Someone breathed through a blocked nose two pallets away. Ash and wet wool held the night's smell close to the floor. Sela found her stockings by touch, pulled on yesterday's skirt, and reached beneath the pallet for the wooden bowl she had brought from home. Her father had bound a split in its rim with wire. The repair caught at her thumb in the same place every morning.

The yearling would put its bad foot down if the swelling had eased. If it had not, Sela would soak the hoof again and trim less than Harl had told her to. Harl always wanted more horn taken. Goats had never once thanked him for this confidence.

The morning meant east byre, then breakfast, then the lower ash pits before the bread cart came. Someone would complain that Bryn's loaves had got smaller. Bryn would say people's hands had got larger. By noon the argument would be forgotten.

Sela tucked the bowl under her arm and went to find the day waiting for her.

The east-byre door was barred from inside.

She lifted the latch and pushed. Something heavy resisted, followed by a muffled oath.

"Wait," Ivet said.

The door opened a hand's width. Ivet's face appeared in the gap, hair coming loose from its novice's knot and a smear of dung across one cheek.

"What are you doing?" Sela asked.

"Nothing."

The yearling cried behind her.

"It sounds difficult."

Ivet looked down. "I changed the binding."

"With what?"

"The cloth you left."

"You were holding her."

"And now I have bound her."

"You have put the knot against the split."

Ivet's expression changed. "Have I?"

"Probably. She dislikes you in a very particular voice."

For an instant Ivet looked like the girl who had spent half the night sitting on an angry goat and knew she had done the next part badly. Then the solemnity returned.

"You should not have to do this today," she said.

"The hoof does not know what day it is." Sela pushed at the door again. "If the goat has developed theology overnight, Ivet,

it has chosen a poor time."

"I mean after the trial."

"There was no judgment."

"I know."

The words came too quickly. Ivet had not slept much. Her eyes were bright at the rims and the hand on the door shook from effort.

Sela put her shoulder against the wood. "Let me in."

Ivet held it.

"I can fix the knot," Sela said.

"I can fix it."

"Then why are we both freezing in a doorway?"

Ivet almost smiled. She did not move.

From behind her came the thump of a hoof against a stall board.

"She'll break the other leg while you protect me," Sela said.

That worked. Ivet opened the door, but only far enough to slip out. The bar dropped back into place behind her.

"I'll do it," she said. "Go and eat. Please."

The last word made refusal feel like striking something held out in both hands.

Sela went to breakfast.

The long hall had filled early. Steam from the grain pots clouded the upper beams; wet cloaks hung along the wall. People talked until she entered.

They did not all stop. That would have been easier. A conversation near the hearth continued too loudly. Spoons touched bowls with care. A child laughed and was hushed by a hand before the laugh had finished becoming a sound.

Her place on the third bench was empty.

Yesterday a novice had sat on either side of her, and an old man across the board had chewed with his mouth open. This morning both novices had moved inward. The old man had found room at the next table. An arm's length of bare bench waited beside Sela's bowl place.

She could sit there and confirm that it was hers. She could sit somewhere else and make the room move again.

Sela crossed to the bench and sat.

The board was sticky beneath her wrist. Someone had wiped around her place and missed the edge.

That helped.

Steward Ansel came from the kitchen with his sleeves pinned above his elbows and a tally-stick behind one ear. He usually served the oldest first, unless the grain had caught at the bottom, in which case he served the people he disliked and called it thrift.

Today he began with Sela.

The ladle filled her bowl. Then half filled it again.

"That is too much," she said.

"You have gone thin."

"I was thin yesterday."

"Yesterday I had not counted it."

He moved on, already arguing with the next bowl about salt.

Across the table, Ivet came in smelling of straw and sat with her hands hidden beneath the board.

"The knot?" Sela asked.

"Moved. She put weight on it."

"Good."

Ivet's shoulders loosened. "I knew it would."

"You did not."

"No."

They ate two spoons in something close to ordinary peace.

Then Ivet said, "Yesterday, on the upper stair."

Sela kept eating.

"You said the wind had gone round."

"It had."

"You knew before the rain."

"Everyone with a left knee knew before the rain. Ask Ansel. His has been forecasting longer than I have, and nobody has built him a shrine."

Ivet smiled, but not because the answer had changed anything.

"It came off the ice after you said it," she continued. "And then the house was different by night."

Sela set down her spoon.

"The wind came off the ice because winds do that. The house was different because Tomas tested me. Those are two things."

"They can be two things and still belong together."

Ivet said it with such hopeful care that anger rose in Sela faster than she could place it.

"Stop making work out of me," she said.

Ivet flinched.

The people nearest them heard. Sela felt their attention without looking up.

"I was only—"

"I know." The apology arrived after the harm and sounded like instruction. "I know what you meant."

Ivet withdrew her hands farther beneath the board. "*Not I*," she murmured.

Two voices down the bench answered her.

They did not say it to Sela. They said it around her, fitting the proper words to the place she had failed to fill.

Sela lifted her bowl and drank from it because using the spoon had become impossible. The grain was too hot. She burned her tongue and was perversely grateful for an injury nobody could interpret.

At the Testers' table, Tomas looked up.

Their eyes met. His face changed—only at the mouth, only for a moment—and then he lowered his gaze to his own bowl.

Sela did not know the rule that kept him from comforting a person he had not judged. She knew only that he had looked away.

The hall doors opened on Bryn Corr's shoulder.

Bryn came in backward, dragging the morning bread sledge over the sill. Mud covered her boots to the ankle and one runner had been mended with green cord. She swore at the sledge, the sill, and whoever had built both. Conversation returned to the room simply because Bryn did not leave space for quiet.

"Ansel," she called. "I want tomorrow's flour at last week's measure."

"Then go back to last week and buy it."

"Nine beds pay better than your memory."

Ansel stopped with the ladle halfway into a bowl.

"Nine what?"

"Visitors. Came up behind me yesterday. Paid before they saw the barn, which shows you what sort of people they are. I've got four in the hay loft, three in my sister's old room, and two who think a roof should not leak because they have put down coin."

She stamped mud from one heel and looked directly at Sela.

"They asked whether they could see you."

Every sound near Sela thinned.

"What did you tell them?"

"That seeing costs nothing and shelter does. I'm not a thief."

"Bryn."

"I told them you were in the house and the house was not mine to sell." She put a hand on the bread sledge. "The barn is. They'll need supper."

Ansel removed the tally-stick from behind his ear.

They bargained across two tables until nine strangers became a problem of beds, fuel, flour, and firewood. They did not mention holiness. Sela sat between them as the reason for the arithmetic and was not asked for a number.

Sela carried her bowl toward the wash tubs.

A girl she did not know took it from her hands.

"I'll wash that."

"It is my bowl."

"I know."

The girl held it carefully by the unbroken side of the rim.

Sela tightened her grip. The girl tightened hers. Wire pressed into Sela's thumb.

"Please," the girl said.

Sela let go. The girl smiled with relief and carried the bowl away as though she had been entrusted with something.

Sela went to the east byre.

The yearling stood on all four feet. Ivet had retied the cloth correctly. The waste fork was gone from its hook.

"Ansel moved you to indoor work," said the byre keeper without turning. "Until Tomas finishes."

"What indoor work?"

"He did not say."

"Then I will take the ash pits."

"Wilda sent two novices."

"The north troughs."

"Done at dawn."

"They are never done at dawn."

The keeper shrugged. "Today they were."

Outside, the first visitors reached the yard.

They did not arrive as a procession. One had a blister and limped. One argued with Bryn about the last bend. A woman carried her own boots in one hand because the mud had pulled them off twice. They were cold, tired, and cross. Then someone pointed out Sela.

The group quieted.

Sela picked up a broom from beside the byre door.

"Don't," the keeper said.

"The yard needs sweeping."

"It will be mud again before noon."

"That has never stopped anyone before."

He looked at the visitors. "Not today."

Sela followed his glance. "If reverence swept mud, I would reconsider it."

Sela swept three strokes anyway. Wet straw collected against the broom head. The woman holding her boots began to cry.

Not loudly. She pressed the boots to her chest and cried as if Sela had done something for her.

The byre keeper took the broom.

"For your own good," he said, miserable now.

Sela nearly told him that the broom had no opinion about her good. She saw Ivet at the byre door, still hurt, still ready to help, and kept the sentence.

She walked past the visitors. They moved aside before she reached them, making a clear dry path through the yard.

Ansel was in the lower store changing the morning assignments. He had propped the work board against a meal bin and was wiping names with the damp heel of his hand.

"Put me back," Sela said.

"Where?"

"Somewhere that leaves dirt on me."

He glanced at the board. "East byre has hands. Ash has six novices. One of them is thirteen and has never been chosen for anything. Wilda chose her this morning because she volunteered after hearing you had no assignment. She has been happy for three hours."

Sela looked at the little ash mark beside the novice's name.

"That is not fair."

"Work rarely is when there are too many hands and not enough winter."

"Yesterday there were enough hands."

"Yesterday there were no strangers crying at a broom."

Through the wall came bread being stacked and Bryn arguing about flour weight.

Ansel tapped the north-store line. "Lamp cups. Visitors do not go there."

"So you found me work nobody can watch."

"I found work visitors do not know is work. This is a difference I am prepared to defend until second meal."

Sela looked again at the thirteen-year-old's ash mark. Reclaiming the job would put dirt on her hands and take it from someone who had spent three hours being pleased to matter.

"Fine. The cups."

Ansel nodded.

"And the extra ladle?"

"You have gone thin."

"That is all?"

"It is enough to fill a bowl."

She believed him. That did not make the half-ladle smaller in everyone else's eyes.

Outside the store, Ivet waited with Sela's wooden bowl. It had been washed and dried. The old wire repair shone where someone had scrubbed it with sand.

"I took it back from Lysa," Ivet said. "She was going to put it on the upper shelf."

"Why?"

"She thought nobody else should use it."

"Nobody else ever uses it. It is mine."

"I told her."

Sela ran her thumb over the polished wire. "Thank you."

Ivet looked toward the yard.

"I shouldn't have said you were making work out of me," Sela said.

"I was."

"You were trying to help."

"Both can be true."

It was a better answer than Sela had expected, which made the apology harder.

"I was angry at the hall," she said. "You were close."

"I know."

"That does not make it better."

"No."

They stood with the bowl between them. From the barn, the yearling gave a short complaining bleat.

Ivet said, "The binding is slipping again."

"You tied it too high."

"I tied it where you showed me."

"Then I showed you badly."

They waited until the visitors followed Bryn toward the lower gate. The byre keeper went to fetch feed. Sela and Ivet slipped into the stall, shut the half-door, and crouched in the straw.

Sela held the yearling's leg while Ivet untied the cloth. The hoof was warm but less swollen. Ivet's first turn went loose. Sela made her pull it again. On the second, the pressure lay flat and the knot rested above the split.

"There," Sela said.

The yearling kicked her in the thigh.

Ivet bit down on a laugh and failed.

Sela laughed too, quietly, with her forehead against the goat's flank. For several minutes they smelled of dung and worked with both hands, unwatched.

When they came out, the visitors had returned to the yard.

Sela took the covered passage to the north store and did the work she had agreed to do.

The lamp cups stood on three shelves beside jars of old wax and bundled wick. Ansel had claimed six were missing. Sela counted eighty-one, then eighty-four, then eighty-two. Several cups had nested inside larger ones, and one contained three stone weights and a dead beetle.

She emptied the weights onto the shelf and began again.

"If you count the cracked ones, he'll ask why you plan to use them," Fen said from the doorway.

He carried his candle box against one hip. Wax marked the backs of his hands in pale scales. Fen was narrow through the chest, with a permanent stoop earned from doorways built for loads rather than men. His hair was almost black and had a habit of falling over one eye; he cut it himself when wax began

catching in it. The mouth beneath it looked amused more often than he was.

"Ansel said six were missing."

"Ansel says that every winter. There have always been six missing. He likes the number."

"Why six?"

"Five sounds careless. Seven sounds like theft."

"And six?"

"Administration."

Sela looked at the shelves. "How many are there?"

"Seventy-eight sound. Three that leak. One Bryn uses as a salt cup and denies."

"That is eighty-two."

"Yes."

"You knew without counting."

Fen shifted the box. "I use them."

She found the three cracked cups by running a thumbnail around the rims. One split had been rubbed with ash to make it visible. Fen selected twelve sound cups and packed them into the box with twists of rag.

"Ansel gave me this work because nobody could see me doing it," Sela said.

"Nobody sees cup work regardless. That's one of its charms."

"Does it bother you?"

"The cups don't."

He lifted the box and left before she could ask the rest.

Sela marked *78* on a scrap tally with store chalk, added three angled crosses for the cracked cups, and carried it to Ansel. He checked the figures, grunted, and put the scrap in his sleeve.

"Useful?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Will you put it on the board?"

"No."

At least he did not pretend to misunderstand.

The yard had emptied while she counted. Bryn had taken the visitors to inspect the barn loft, and the byre keeper was inside measuring feed. The broom still lay where he had put it.

Sela picked it up.

She swept the wet straw from the gate to the drain Harl had cut the previous year. The mud returned beneath each stroke, but the straw moved. Ivet came out with a second broom and began at the opposite wall. Neither asked permission. They met near the trough, pushed the two dirty piles together, and carried them to the midden in a broken grain basket.

It took less than ten minutes. No one cried. No visitor kept a piece.

When the byre keeper returned, he looked at the cleared yard, then at Sela. He chose not to tell her it had been for her own good.

At midday the work board was chalked again. Sela found the place where her name had stood beside *east byre* and *lower ash*. No line crossed it. The old chalk had been washed away, and nothing had been written over the clean patch.

The formal page remained open in Tomas's room.

In the yard, nobody left chalk beside the clean patch where her name had been.

Interlude

The Question in the Margin

Crown-watch had a room for disputed records and a smaller room for the people who disputed them. Wren had been in the smaller room since noon. She was taller seated than some people seemed to expect standing, all straight back and spare limbs, with black hair cut at the jaw because anything longer fell into measurements. A pale old burn crossed two knuckles of her right hand. She never concealed it and never volunteered the story. People usually invented one by the second meeting.

The record on the table was from House Whitehart. It was forty-three pages long, copied in a hand so even that the letters looked less written than agreed upon. Every page had been witnessed. Every witness had been witnessed. The cord had three seals in white wax and one in black, and the black one was Crown-watch's, put there when the packet arrived so that everyone would know no one had opened it before the people who were now opening it.

Wren had always thought this was the sort of reassurance that creates a new question without answering the old one.

She turned the last page back and read the final sentence again.

No supporting matter survives outside the entered judgment.

Across from her, Aldous aligned the packet's lower edge with the edge of the table. He had done this each time she moved it. He had not complained. She had not apologized. Their acquaintance had lasted three hours and had achieved a stable form.

"Is it complete?" he asked.

"Yes."

The third man in the room looked up from the window.

He had introduced himself as Perrin, of Blackcrest, and had then spent most of the afternoon behaving as though introductions were something other people required. He was neither handsome enough to make charm effortless nor plain enough to disappear: dark hair already thinning at the crown, brown eyes that warmed before his mouth did, a nose broken once and allowed to remain slightly wrong. He wore a traveling coat indoors and had found out the copying clerk's name before Wren had. The clerk had brought him tea without being asked and had brought Wren none, which she did not hold against either of them and noticed about both.

"That sounded ominous," Perrin said.

"It was an answer."

"Those are often the same thing here."

Wren said, "Only when the listener prefers atmosphere to nouns."

Perrin smiled. "I am beginning to see why they sent me instead."

Aldous did not look at him. "Complete in what sense?"

Wren put one finger on the final sentence.

"In theirs."

The room was very quiet. Crown-watch was built to keep paper dry and voices from traveling. The walls were lined with felt behind the boards; Wren had checked when she came in, because rooms explain institutions more honestly than mottos do. There were no windows except the narrow one behind Perrin, and that looked onto another wall.

Aldous said, "Explain."

"The packet contains every judgment Whitehart chose to enter for the period requested. Names where names are permitted. Dates where dates survive. The name of the tester. The conclusion. Corrections witnessed and sealed."

"And the trials?"

"Burned."

"The notes of the trials."

"If you burn the only observation from which a judgment was made, the distinction becomes devotional."

Perrin said, "Blackcrest has a less elegant name for evidence destroyed by the people who benefited from the conclusion."

"I assume it is longer."

"Naturally. We charge by the page."

Perrin's mouth twitched. He rubbed the side of his thumb over a stain on the table and said nothing.

"Whitehart's answer," Aldous said, "is that the notes are destroyed to prevent a tester's uncertainty becoming doctrine."

"That may be true."

"You don't sound persuaded."

"I am persuaded that it may be true."

This time Perrin did laugh. It was a warm, unembarrassed sound, and it improved the room despite Wren's intentions.

Aldous slid a second paper across the table. It was not part of the return. The hand was Blackcrest and hurried; the margin had been ruled after the writing rather than before it, which meant someone had wanted the page to look finished after discovering it was not.

At the Four-Hundred-Year Jubilee, the paper said, the Chronicle would present the precedents by which House judgments were recognized beyond their own ground. Succession, boundary, oath, inheritance, office, religious standing. Not every entry would become law. Every claim anyone meant to make law would arrive with an entry.

Wren read it twice.

One phrase halfway down had been copied in darker ink.

the Houses recognized at settlement

She looked at the preceding line. Its script was older in form, though written by the same copying hand. The sentence from which the phrase supposedly came used *parties entered at settlement* instead.

Wren touched neither line.

"Which wording is in the older exemplar?"

Aldous looked. "The summary is the later wording."

"I can see that."

"The older exemplar is incomplete."

"So somebody regularized it."

"Somebody clarified it."

"That is a different verb."

Perrin came away from the window. "What changed?"

"Possibly nothing."

"That is not what I asked."

Wren looked at him.

Perrin smiled. Not mockery. Pleasure. He liked finding doors even when he had no intention of opening them yet.

"The earlier language says parties," Wren said. "The later summary says Houses."

"How many parties?"

"It doesn't say."

"How many Houses?"

"You know how many Houses."

"I know how many Houses there are now."

Aldous's mouth hardened.

Wren closed the second paper over the first. "There is no inference to make from it."

Perrin's expression did not change. "Then I won't."

She believed he meant it. She also believed he would remember every word.

"You want to cite the Whitehart judgments."

"We may have to."

"You cannot examine them."

"Hence the room," said Perrin.

Wren ignored him. "You can establish that Whitehart entered a conclusion. You can establish that its procedure recognizes the entry. You cannot establish that the conclusion follows from what occurred."

"Can you establish that it does not?" Aldous asked.

"No."

"Then what should the Chronicle say?"

Wren marked the question before she answered it.

Blackcrest kept four questions that other people liked to collapse into one: what happened, what could be proved, what could be cited, and what could be made to stand in a hall where land depended on the answer. Trouble began when the record pretended those were the same question.

"Say that Whitehart recognizes the judgment," she said. "Do not say the Chronicle confirms it."

Aldous looked down at the forty-three pages.

"That leaves every Whitehart standing open outside Whitehart."

"It leaves it where the evidence leaves it."

"There are four years."

"Time does not improve destroyed evidence."

"No," said Perrin. "But it does improve access. People grow frightened of being left out of anniversaries."

He came away from the window at last. There was nothing hurried about him. Wren had watched men pretend not to want a document before. They looked away from it too carefully. Perrin looked straight at the packet and put one hand on the table beside it, not touching the pages.

"Who carried this?" he asked.

Aldous frowned. "A bonded courier."

"Name?"

"It will be in receipt."

"Who copied it?"

"The witnesses are entered."

"The witnesses witnessed the copy. Who held the old book open?"

"Why does that matter?"

Perrin looked pleased, which Wren had already learned was when he was most dangerous.

"Because somebody sat with the book for however many days this took, and somebody chose where a damaged word became a blank, and somebody knew which names the house no longer says aloud, and none of those people is one of your seals. If you want to know what a record leaves out, ask the person who had to lift it."

It was a good question. Wren disliked that he had made it sound kind.

Aldous studied him for a moment, then drew a clean sheet from beneath the second paper.

At its head someone had written:

By what means does House Whitehart distinguish a true voice from a false one?

Wren read it and felt the old pressure behind her ribs, the place where a badly built question always seemed to arrive before the rest of her understood why.

"No."

Aldous had taken up his pen. "No?"

"That question concedes the thing it claims to examine."

"It asks for a procedure."

"It assumes there is a true voice and a false voice, and that the procedure distinguishes them. Whitehart may answer with perfect honesty and you will have learned nothing except the grammar of the belief."

Perrin leaned over the page.

"What would you ask?"

Wren did not answer at once.

She looked again at the return. Forty-three pages. Names, dates, judgments, witnesses. A complete record, in its own sense. The dead notes were not a gap in the system. The burning was the system. Whitehart had not failed to preserve

the road to its conclusions. It had decided that the road was the dangerous part.

And somewhere outside these pages were all the people for whom no conclusion had held.

She said, "What happens when they cannot distinguish one?"

No one moved.

Aldous's pen remained above the paper.

"There will be no entry," he said.

"Yes."

"Then there will be nothing to collect."

Perrin was no longer smiling.

"There will be a person," he said.

Wren looked at him.

For one moment she saw what made him good at the work. It was not that he cared more than other men. Many men cared. It was that he could make care and use occupy the same chair and never require either of them to stand.

Aldous set down the pen.

"Whitehart is not obliged to open its surviving trial records to us."

"They say none survive," Wren said.

"Its house."

"No."

"Its Ledger."

"Perhaps not."

"Then what precisely are you proposing we send him to collect?"

Wren should have said *effects*. She should have said *testimony concerning procedure, social standing, correction, omission, and external recognition*. All of those would fit in a commission. All of them would survive copying.

Instead she heard herself say, "Find out who pays for the blank space."

The sentence sat in the room.

It was too elegant. Wren distrusted elegant sentences on principle and her own most of all. They traveled without their qualifications.

"Not that wording," she said immediately.

Perrin had already taken out a small book.

"Of course not."

He wrote it down.

Aldous watched him do it. Then he turned the clean sheet over and began again on the other side.

The commission he wrote was narrower and uglier and therefore, Wren thought, more honest. It authorized Perrin to collect Whitehart testing practice, surviving testimony, the material consequences of judgments and unfinished trials, and the limits of access. He could compel no witness, open no sealed book, remove no page, or call a House judgment false. Provenance was required where it could be known.

It was a good commission.

It would not remain one.

Aldous sanded the page and passed it to Perrin.

"The Light Heights," he said. "Before the deep winter, if the roads permit. Return what can be defended."

Perrin read the commission all the way through. He did not skim the limits. Wren noticed that too.

"And what will Crown-watch do with what cannot?" he asked.

Aldous gathered the Whitehart packet and aligned its lower edge once more.

"Keep it," he said.

Perrin looked at Wren.

The expression supported four readings: amusement, warning, invitation, professional appetite. Wren could not exclude any of them. Faces were poor exhibits.

He tore one clean page from the back of his little book. At the top he copied the question she had told him not to use.

Who pays for the blank space?

Then he closed the book on the empty page and put it inside his coat.

Wren watched the unanswered question disappear inside Perrin's coat.

She entered no finding.

Chapter Four

Harl's Road

The next morning Tomas gave Sela the valley.

He found her outside the lower store, where she had spent ten minutes trying to persuade Ansel that sacks were not devotional objects and could still be carried by a person under testing.

"Go down," Tomas said. "See your family. Be back before the last light."

Two months earlier she would have taken the road without telling him. He had meant the words as kindness. They reached her as permission.

"Tomorrow as well?" she asked.

He paused. "If you return tonight."

"I know the road."

"I know you do."

Neither of them found a better shape for the exchange.

Sela went down with no sack on her back and no work knife at her belt. The empty sheath from the trial had become ridiculous, so she had left that too. Her hands swung without purpose. She put them in her sleeves.

Below the first bend, the house disappeared behind the shoulder and the road became familiar enough to use without thinking. Stone rose through the mud at the same places. An alder felled in the ice year still grew leaves from one side. The gap goats always tried was stopped with a new thorn branch, badly placed.

Sela moved it before she remembered she had no herd with her.

She sang for part of the descent. Not a hymn. A counting song with six verses and only four animals because whoever made it had valued rhyme over husbandry. She sang badly and stopped when the village roofs came into view.

A man pushing a barrow met her in the upper lane.

He had carried her home at seven when she broke her ankle. She remembered being sick down the back of his coat and his promise never to tell her mother. He had kept it until the next feast.

Now he set the barrow down and bent over one wheel as Sela approached. The pin was sound. He examined it closely until she had passed.

"Morning," she said.

"Morning."

He did not look up.

Farther on, a woman called her dog back from Sela's hand. Two roofers stopped talking and watched their own feet. No one bowed. No one said *Called*. They simply made enough room that she touched nobody by accident.

By the time she reached Bryn Corr's yard, she wanted someone to order her about.

Harl was on the roof of Bryn's barn with a slate in one hand and three nails in his mouth.

He saw her through the gap where the north corner should have been, spat the nails into his palm, and shouted, "Don't stand there looking holy. Catch this."

He dropped a coil of rope.

Sela caught it against her chest and nearly went over backward. Harl laughed. The sound ran across the yard, large enough to make three strangers turn.

"You could have warned me."

"I said catch. That's what warning is for."

Bryn came out of the barn carrying a sleeping board with one end dragging.

"Do not encourage him," she told Sela. "He's had nine paying witnesses to his competence and become unmanageable."

The nine visitors had changed the yard overnight. Fresh straw stood under the eaves in tied bundles. Two doors had been lifted off their hinges and laid across trestles to make beds. Someone had chalked prices on a roof slate: floor, board, loft, fire, supper. The loft cost less if the guest helped carry wood and more if Bryn had to ask.

At the yard wall, Harl's son Tam sorted sound slates from broken ones. He was seventeen, long in the wrists and

shoulders not yet finished growing, with Harl's heavy brows on a face that had not earned them. His hair never stayed tied through a morning. He was careful not to look eager about anything within his father's hearing and usually betrayed himself by moving first.

"Morning," Sela said.

"Sela."

He did not leave a holy pause around her name. He held up two pieces of slate.

"Which?"

"Left."

"Why?"

"You can see daylight through the right."

Tam turned it. "That would do it."

"She hears roofs," Harl called down.

"She hears you avoiding work," Bryn said.

The strangers looked from Harl to Sela, uncertain whether they had been permitted to laugh. Tam did it first. The others followed.

Sela took off her cloak.

"Where do you need me?"

Bryn said, "You came to visit."

"I have seen you."

"Have you? I was carrying a bed."

"You looked the same behind it."

Bryn considered this and pointed to the lower edge of the yard. "Harl has decided the water has been running wrong for forty years. Help him correct history."

Harl came down the ladder, taking it two rungs at a time. He had the heavy brows Tam had inherited, which made him look sterner at rest than he usually bothered to be. His small knife rode at the front of his belt. At the bottom he used it to shave a wedge from a length of alder, tested the wedge against the ladder foot, shaved again, and slid it home. The ladder stopped rocking.

"Mattock," he told Sela.

The yard sloped toward the lane. Every hard rain cut a shallow brown line from the barn corner to the gate, carrying straw, dung, and the top layer of Bryn's temper into the road. Harl wanted a water bar across it before the roof came open.

Sela marked a diagonal with the mattock blade.

"Other way," Harl said.

"This way reaches the ditch faster."

"And takes the yard with it."

"It has less ground to cross."

"Water isn't late for supper. It doesn't care."

Sela set the blade again. "The fall is here."

"Yes. Too much of it."

"You've said both ways are wrong."

"Now you're learning roads."

He took a bucket from beside the wall, filled it at the trough, and poured half where she had marked. The water ran cleanly toward the gate. It gathered speed, bit into the soft edge, and pulled a strip of mud loose before spilling into the lane.

Then he poured the rest along his shallower line. It spread, slowed against the stone, and found the side ditch without carrying anything larger than straw.

"Oh," Sela said.

Harl handed her the bucket. "A useful word."

He did not make her watch while he cut the bar correctly. He gave her back the mattock.

They worked until noon. The first cut was too deep. Harl made Sela fill it. Tam brought flat stones and set them badly, then less badly. Bryn crossed the trench six times to complain that it was in her way and twice to bring them food. The visitors carried roof slate because the loft price made idleness expensive.

For most of an hour, Sela was allowed to be poor at something.

Her palms blistered where the mattock handle had dried rough. Mud went through one shoe. Harl told her to stop swinging from the shoulder, then showed her with his hands on the haft, close enough that she could smell onions on his breath. Nothing in his manner said she might hear the dead. He wanted the water bar finished before the roof was opened and believed she was delaying it.

The relief made her nearly fond of him.

At the meal board Bryn set out bread, cheese ends, and a pot of onions cooked dark. The visitors paid separately for the onions. Sela reached for a piece of cheese and the nearest woman offered her the largest.

"Take the small one," Harl said around bread. "She hasn't done the work for the large."

The woman looked appalled.

Sela took the small piece.

"Thank you," she told Harl.

"Don't start."

Bryn sat on the sleeping board and counted the coins from the roof slate. "Nine in two days. If they keep coming, I can close the north corner before deep winter. If they come in spring, I can put a stove in the loft."

"You'll burn the barn down," Tam said.

"Then I'll charge to watch."

Harl reached for the slate on which she had written the prices. "How many asked for the house road?"

"All nine."

"How many made it?"

"Seven. One turned back at the wet stair. One has a knee that bends sideways and more faith than sense."

"The low road is wrong for foot parties."

"The low road is the road."

"The low road is two days with a pack cart because it goes west to avoid the shoulder. The high road is one day if they can

walk and someone keeps them off the slide."

Bryn stopped counting.

Tam did not. He had begun arranging the coins into stacks of three without appearing to listen.

Harl drew lines in spilled flour with one finger: valley, west turn, low pasture, house; then a shorter line over the east shoulder.

"No carts," Bryn said.

"Pack animals. Meat on the hoof. People. Summer only."

"And when one of them steps off?"

"I bring the rest back and charge for the lesson."

"You are the reason contracts require witnesses."

Harl grinned. "You have nine upstairs."

He spent the rest of the meal making the high road pay: guide fees, Bryn's share, road hands, rope, oats, repairs.

"And the horse," Sela said.

Tam's hands stopped over the coin stacks.

Harl looked innocent. It sat badly on him.

"What horse?" Bryn asked.

"There is no horse," Tam said.

"Grey hill mare at the lower fold," Harl said. "White left ear. Strong hocks. Eighteen marks if the owner remains a thief and sixteen if he gets honest before winter."

"She's too small for your weight," Bryn said.

"Not for mine," Tam said, then looked furious with himself.

Harl tore his bread in half to hide a smile. "Boy doesn't want her."

"I said she's too small for you."

"Hear that? No want in it."

Tam swept the coin stacks together. "I want to haul on my own account. Not walk strangers up to stare at a house."

The sentence quieted Harl more effectively than anger would have.

"Then haul," he said. "A horse doesn't ask why the load is moving."

Tam glanced at him. "You'd buy her?"

"If the road pays."

"The road doesn't exist."

Harl tapped the flour line. "It exists. It wants work."

Sela reached her mother's house before the light turned. Her mother had heard she was coming and prepared nothing special, which required more discipline than a feast would have. The low table held onion broth, yesterday's bread soaked at one end, and the last soft cheese from the autumn milk.

Brem sat opposite Sela and stared at her blistered hands. At twelve, he had not yet grown into his hands; they looked too large around the bread while the rest of him still folded easily under the low table. One lock of hair at the crown refused every wet palm their mother had ever put to it.

"Harl says you cut the water bar backward," he said.

"Harl says many things while other people work."

"He poured a bucket on it."

"Whose brother are you?"

"Yours, which is why it was painful."

Their mother hid a smile in the broth pot. Sela tore bread and felt the day settle into the old places.

She told them about Bryn's roof and Tam's mare. Brem interrupted twice. On the third time, he stopped with his mouth open.

"Sorry," he said. "Go on."

Sela looked at him.

He was twelve. He had never apologized for interrupting in his life. Their mother continued ladling broth with careful attention.

"What were you going to say?" Sela asked.

"Nothing."

"It was loud nothing."

"Harl said the horse has one white ear, not a white left ear."

"Those are the same thing."

"Not if you're looking from behind."

Sela threw a piece of bread at him.

Brem caught it and threw it back. It landed in her broth. Their mother struck the table once with the ladle and told them both that holy girls and ordinary idiots cleaned their own messes. Brem laughed so hard he choked.

For the rest of the meal he interrupted whenever he pleased. Each time, there was a fraction of a breath before he did it.

Their mother reached across once and tucked a loose strand of Sela's hair behind her ear. Sela slapped the hand away from habit, then caught two of her mother's fingers before they could retreat and squeezed them. Neither mentioned it.

Sela left before last light. Her mother touched the blisters in her palm, then her hair, and said only, "Come tomorrow if he lets you."

Sela did not ask which man she meant.

The next morning he took Sela and Tam up it.

The high road began as a shepherd track above Bryn's last field, climbed through dwarf alder, and crossed the east shoulder on old stone. It was not faster because it was gentle. It was faster because it refused every mercy of the lower route.

Harl made them stop at each water place. He counted grazing for pack animals, measured a narrow ledge with his boots, and pushed his knife into the turf above a seep to judge how far the wet had spread. Tam carried a coil of new rope borrowed from Bryn and pretended not to notice when Harl tested every ten paces whether the weight sat well on him.

Sela knew the ground. Harl knew people on ground.

"They'll bunch here," he said at a turn wide enough for six goats and only two frightened pilgrims. "You can tell them one at a time and they'll hear together. Put a man at the outer stone."

"The outer stone is loose."

"Then you found tomorrow's work."

They levered the loose stone out before going farther. Its underside had cracked and would not take weight. Sela suggested turning it. Tam found a flatter piece uphill and wanted to use that instead. Harl made them carry both to the turn, set each dry, and stand on them.

Tam's stone held. Sela's rocked.

"You could have told me," she said.

"Then Tam wouldn't have been right in front of you," Harl replied.

Tam looked down to hide his satisfaction.

They bedded his stone with gravel and used Sela's as the outer marker, where no foot had to trust it. Harl cut a shallow H into the turf beside the repair with the point of his small knife.

"For Harl?" Sela asked.

"For hazard."

"Convenient."

At the next rest Tam sat apart and looked at the valley tracks. Sela handed him the water skin.

"What would you haul?" she asked.

"Salt up. Wool down. Lamp oil if the jars can be packed. Letters when people pay enough to pretend letters weigh something." He drank and wiped the mouth of the skin. "I don't want to guide pilgrims."

"I heard."

"He didn't."

Harl was ten paces away testing a rope around a stunted pine. His hands stopped for a moment, then continued with the knot.

"He heard," Sela said.

Tam followed her gaze. "That's worse."

At the shoulder, the valley opened behind them. The Bell stood above, cut into the mountain. Below, Bryn's patched roof showed one square of new slate among the old brown. Smoke came from the barn chimney for people who had paid to be cold near Sela.

Tam shaded his eyes and looked toward the lower fold where the grey mare was kept. From this height no horse could be distinguished from a stone.

Harl saw him looking and said nothing.

On the way down they met two of Bryn's visitors climbing without a guide. One had brought a city shoe with a smooth sole and was bleeding through the heel. Harl turned them around, rebuckled the better shoe with a strip cut from his own spare leather, and charged them nothing because they had not yet learned enough to be customers.

The woman with the bleeding heel recognized Sela after Harl had her sitting on a stone.

"Is it true?" she asked.

Sela crouched to examine the shoe. "That the leather is cutting you? Yes."

"I mean the voice."

"Keep your foot still."

The heel was raw but not deep. Harl drew his small knife, wiped the blade on his sleeve, and handed it to Sela with the handle first. She cut a crescent from the inner leather where it rubbed, then trimmed a strip from the visitor's spare stocking to pad the edge.

"Will I reach the house?" the woman asked.

"Not in those shoes today."

"But if you say—"

"She said not today," Harl interrupted. "That's a road answer. Take it or keep bleeding."

The woman looked at him as if he had spoken during prayer.

Sela finished the knot and returned the knife. Harl checked the blade before sheathing it. He checked every tool anyone returned to him, including people.

"Bryn has dry wool," he told the visitors. "Tell her I sent you and she'll charge one mark less than she first says."

"How much will she first say?"

"Depends how frightened you look when you ask."

They went down slowly. The woman tested the altered shoe twice and thanked Sela with tears close to her eyes. Sela pretended to be occupied with the used cloth.

"You could have done that," she told Harl when they were out of hearing.

"I wanted to see how you held my knife."

"Why?"

"Because you've been walking about without one."

Sela waited for him to offer it. Harl tightened the sheath thong instead.

"Get your own," he said. "You cut toward your thumb."

By late afternoon Bryn had put a second slate beside the bed prices. On it she marked three summer inquiries, one meat delivery, and the name of a family who wanted a guide after thaw. Harl hung the borrowed rope beneath it to show what the first deposits would buy. Tam wrote *sixteen marks* in a lower corner and rubbed the words out with his sleeve when his father came near.

Sela saw the grey smear remain.

The family sent their deposit before Sela left.

An older woman came up from the mill lane with two silver marks knotted into the corner of a handkerchief. Her daughter and three children meant to visit after thaw. She wanted the loft for one night, a guide for the high road, and Sela to walk with them.

"The road can be booked," Harl said. "Sela can't."

The woman looked to Sela as if Harl had priced the wrong animal.

"I don't guide," Sela said.

"You know the way."

"So does the goat. She has never invoiced anyone for it."

"So does Harl. He charges for knowing it."

Bryn untied the handkerchief, tested both coins on the table, and pushed one back. "One mark holds four loft places and the guide day. Supper is paid when eaten. If the shoulder is closed, you get half back."

"Half?"

"The other half buys rope and repairs before you arrive. You can have all of it back and sleep under the hedge."

The woman studied the roof, where one unfinished corner still showed sky. "Half, then."

Harl did not touch the coin. "We have not walked the shoulder in thaw."

"Then walk it before you spend this," Bryn said.

"You said repairs."

"I said what she was buying. I did not say when I would let you waste it."

Tam found a clean piece of slate and wrote the woman's household mark, four beds, one guide, and the first week after the meltwater dropped. Bryn made him add *weather decides*. Harl made him add *pack loads separate*. The woman pressed her thumb into a smear of flour beside the entry because she could not write her name.

When she had gone, Bryn put the coin into an empty spice jar and stoppered it.

"That's not yours," she told Harl.

"I know what a deposit is."

"You know what money is. Deposits are money that can come back angry."

Tam tied the jar beneath the slate with a piece of cord. The first mark toward the road hung where all three of them could see it and none could spend it alone.

She wanted to see him get the horse. She wanted to watch Harl pretend the gift meant nothing and Tam fail to look pleased. The wanting was small, almost foolish, and had nothing to do with the trial.

She carried it back up the mountain with mud in one shoe and two new blisters in her hands.

Chapter Five

The Ledger

Sela asked Tomas what he had written about her while he was carrying the Ledger key in his hand.

They met on the north stair the evening she returned from the valley. Mud had dried white along the edge of her skirt. She held both hands half closed against the sting of new blisters.

"Nothing," he said.

She looked at the key. "Show me."

The sensible answer was no. The Ledger was not secret, exactly. It was protected from casual looking, which was a more useful condition. A sealed mystery attracted hands. A cold room, an inconvenient key, and a rule spoken without drama kept most people away.

Tomas said, "Tomorrow after the morning work."

"I have no morning work."

He had seen the clean place on the work board.

"After breakfast, then."

The Ledger room stood off the north passage where the mountain never quite dried. It contained a table, two stools, a narrow shutter, an iron ash dish, and a chest banded in dark metal. No prayer cloth covered the chest. No lamp burned when

nobody needed light. Tomas valued the plainness of the room and distrusted how often he congratulated Whitehart for it.

He arrived first. The key turned badly in cold weather. He warmed it in his palm, tried again, and lifted the lid.

The Ledger lay inside wrapped in undyed wool.

It took both hands to move. Four centuries of pages had bowed the lower board, and the leather over the spine had been replaced so many times that none of it could be called original. The corners shone where generations of Testers had lifted it. The center of each board remained dull.

Tomas set the book on the table with the dull center beneath his palms.

Sela came without Ivet, which meant she had either escaped attention or asked for solitude and been obeyed. She closed the door behind her and stood rather than take the second stool.

"Is my name in there?" she asked.

"Not yet."

"Was it written before the trial?"

"No."

"Then it is not waiting for an answer."

"No."

"People keep saying my page is open."

"People like rooms for things. There is no page until I begin an entry."

Some tension left her face. Not much.

Tomas opened the book near its working end. The newest pages smelled faintly of hide glue. Earlier ones carried iron-gall ink gone brown at the edges; the oldest readable hand had faded to the color of dried tea.

"The name at the head," he said. "The date of testing. Who conducted it and before whom. Then the judgment."

He turned the book so she could see.

Sela knew the figures and work marks used in the stores. The Ledger hand was cramped and full of letters she could not follow. She placed one finger above the page without touching it.

"Black?"

"A completed finding that the voice was true."

Sela followed the little run of ink. "Where does it say why? Or what they heard? Or whether the person was frightened, angry, guessing?"

"It does not. Only what entered the judgment survives here."

"And that is enough?"

"Enough for the house to act. A black finding makes the person Called in hearing and rite. A warning attributed to them is received as a Called warning rather than a report from someone under testing."

"All that from this?"

"From the judgment."

Sela studied the line again. "Then it is short in the wrong place."

Tomas had no useful defense that made it longer.

"Can it be changed?" she asked.

Tomas turned back three courses and found a narrow margin crowded by two hands. The original entry gave the tested woman's age as twenty-eight. A later correction struck no word away. It marked the error, supplied twenty-nine, named the person who brought the family tally, and carried two witness signs beneath.

"A material error can be corrected," he said. "The first wording remains visible."

"And the judgment?"

"Not by a later hand. If the person lives and another Tester has cause, he may begin a new testing. He does not amend the old one."

"If the person is dead?"

"Then the judgment remains the judgment that was entered. Later testimony can be kept elsewhere. It cannot be made into the Tester's conclusion after his death."

Sela traced the air above the correction. "So the book can admit a wrong year."

"Yes."

"Can it admit it was wrong before somebody important notices?"

Tomas looked at the page. "Less reliably."

"But not a wrong person."

Tomas looked at the two witness signs. "A living witness can correct the year. No one can make a dead Tester give another judgment."

The answer dissatisfied her. It also dissatisfied him, which did not make it false.

Tomas reached into the satchel at his feet and took out one sheet of thin trial paper. It was blank. Beside it he laid a stick of char.

"This is where observation goes. A hand shaking. A repeated answer. The order of questions. The place someone looks before speaking."

"The lamp."

"The lamp."

"And when you finish?"

"I burn it."

She glanced at the iron dish.

"Why keep the answer and destroy how you found it?"

"Because another Tester could read my uncertainty as instruction. Or a novice could take a frightened gesture for a sign because I once marked it. Or I could return ten years later and make my old note more certain than I was when I wrote it."

"So nobody can check you."

Tomas put the char down. "That is also true."

The shutter moved in its frame. Sela waited for him to defend the rule. He could have. The reasons remained good. No

one should inherit a dead Tester's doubt and use it to condemn the living. No candidate should have to perform against an archive of everyone who came before. Notes built methods; methods learned to see themselves.

The absence of notes also left only his authority.

"The judgment is all the house may use," he said. "Only the entered judgment remains in this room."

"Unless you remember."

"Yes."

"Do you?"

"Some. More than I want. Less than I claim."

She looked back at the black entry.

Tomas turned several pages, then stopped at one he had chosen before she arrived.

The hand was his own, sixteen years younger and harder pressed. The name at the head did not face Sela. The short finding below it had been written in red.

She did not ask the name.

"False?" she said.

"Found false and Given Back."

"Say what that means."

His hands remained on the edge of the book.

"At first snow the person is given a good cloak and bread for one day. The house walks with them above the Bell to the high line. No bonds. No blows. The full rite is spoken. Then the house returns."

"And they do not."

"They do not."

"Could they come down another way?"

"There are eastern routes. In that weather, with one day's bread, no one here has seen a return."

"So you do not know."

"No."

She bent closer to the page. The red had dried to a dark rust. It had not spread or clawed through the paper. The same hand that entered stores, dates, and black judgments had made this line.

"How many?"

"Twenty-six since the first course of the book."

"In four hundred years?"

"Yes."

"That is not many."

"No."

He heard the defense inside the number. Rare. Deliberate. Witnessed. Not a system hungry for bodies. A rule used less than once in a generation and surrounded by grief.

"Who chooses the cloak?" Sela asked.

The question caught him.

"The keeper of the rite."

"A warm one?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because we do not send anyone into the first snow poorly clothed."

She straightened and rubbed one blistered palm with the other thumb.

"That makes sense," she said.

It did. Tomas wished she had argued.

"Who writes the red?" she asked.

"Only the Tester who conducted the trial."

"Could Alaine order you?"

"She may order a trial. She may witness. She cannot enter my judgment."

"Osric?"

"He would have to test you himself from the beginning."

"Even if he had your notes?"

"Even then. The notes are not custody. They are one man's temporary attention."

"And that is why they burn."

"Partly."

Sela turned toward the ash dish. A grey curl from some earlier page clung to its rim. She did not touch it.

"What happens if no conclusion comes?"

Tomas closed the red entry beneath his hand.

He had known the question would arrive. He had brought her here because it had already arrived in him.

"Roche was the Tester two hundred and twelve years ago," he said. "He conducted a trial over three nights and could not honestly enter either color. Before him, a trial did not remain unfinished. Delay was permitted. Doubt was not."

"What did he do?"

"He stopped."

Tomas opened the book farther back. The page bore a name and date. Beneath them a line began in black and stopped midway across the first ruling, the final word unfinished. No later hand completed the sentence.

"He would not write false because he was uncertain," Tomas said. "He would not write true merely to save a life. Only he could enter the judgment. He died with the page open."

"What happened to the person?"

"She lived."

"Here?"

"For another forty years. She worked in the drying rooms."

"Was she Called?"

"No judgment said so."

"Was she false?"

"No judgment said that either."

"Then what was she?"

"Unwritten."

Sela looked at the four words and the ruled space after them.

"Roche's restraint became the third course," Tomas said. "A Tester who cannot conclude may leave the page open. No one dies for his doubt."

"That is better."

Relief entered him before he could prevent it. "Yes."

"Show me a new one."

The relief left.

Tomas turned forward. He did not need to search, but he made himself use the small paper markers at the page edge rather than let his hand reveal how well it knew the place.

The page was five years old.

At its head stood Fen's name. The date beneath it put him at nineteen. Tomas's hand began the entry and stopped after four words. The fifth had never received even its first stroke.

"Whose page?" Sela asked.

"Fen's."

A wooden box knocked against the passage wall outside.

Tomas knew the sound. One corner of Fen's candle box had split and been pegged rather than replaced. It caught every third doorway if he carried it on his right hip.

Footsteps passed the Ledger room.

Sela looked toward the door. "Was that him?"

"Yes."

"Why didn't you say good morning?"

"Because I am the Tester."

"You were the Tester five years ago."

"Yes."

"And you could not decide."

"No."

"What was the fifth word?"

Tomas looked at the unfinished line. "I do not remember."

That was almost true. He remembered several possibilities and no longer knew which one had been in his hand.

"What is done to him?" Sela asked.

"Nothing. He was not Given Back. He eats from the stores. He has a pallet. He keeps the griffes and makes the candle rounds."

"That is a great deal of nothing."

Tomas did not answer quickly. "Yes."

"Can he inherit?"

"Not through a Whitehart claim."

"Testify?"

"Not in the house's hearing."

"Marry?"

Tomas said nothing.

"Do people say his name?"

"People do. The house does not address him in rite, judgment, inheritance, office, or entered testimony."

"Is that why Ansel moves him at meals?"

Tomas had not been in the hall when it happened, but he could picture the motion. Two friendly fingers. A practical

correction.

"Probably."

"Is that a rule?"

"No."

"Then why?"

"Because people learn the shape of a rule and use it where no rule was written."

Sela's fingers opened and closed at her sides.

"Did Roche ask the woman from the drying room whether this was better?"

"I don't know."

"Did you ask Fen?"

"No."

The answer stood between them without any language large enough to hide it.

"Could you finish his page now?" she asked.

"Only after a new testing."

"Would he have to agree?"

"He would have to stand for it."

"That is not what I asked."

"No."

Sela turned back to the page. She did not accuse Tomas. She seemed to be looking for a practical repair: a moved knot, a shallower water bar, some way the page could be made to bear weight without cutting the person beneath it.

There was no repair he could offer without placing Fen once more beneath his judgment.

"If you never conclude about me," she said, "is this what happens?"

Tomas looked at her mud-marked hem and blistered hands. Yesterday the work board had already begun the answer.

"The page would remain open," he said.

"And if you never begin it?"

He had no rule prepared for that.

"I don't know."

Sela nodded once. "You should."

She left him with the book.

Her steps crossed Fen's farther down the passage. She said his name in greeting. Fen answered something Tomas could not hear. Their footsteps separated: hers toward the yard, his toward the wall of the dead.

Tomas remained at the open page.

He had spared Fen the first snow. The fact did not shrink because Sela had seen the rest. Fen had lived five more years. He had eaten, slept under a roof, learned every name in the griffes, and made himself necessary to work the Ledger did not recognize.

Tomas still believed Roche had been right to stop.

He no longer knew why they had believed stopping was the same as finishing mercy.

The trial sheet lay blank beside the Ledger. Tomas returned it to his satchel. A thread of char had marked the table where the paper rested. He rubbed it with his thumb until it became a grey blur.

Then he closed the book over Fen's four words, wrapped it, and returned it to the chest. The key resisted again. He had to lean his shoulder against the lid before the lock caught.

Fen was in the listening room.

He worked from a low stool at the wall of the dead, one foot braced on the rung and the candle box open beside him. The nearest niche held an old woman in winter wrapping. Fen had removed the spent taper and was scraping its stone cup clean with a bone blade.

"The north cup cracked," he said without turning. "If you came to tell me, the cup was first."

"I didn't."

"Then it remains ahead of you."

Tomas stopped at the end of the row. Fen's right boot had split across the toe and been sewn with two kinds of cord. The flat scuff in the passage belonged to the loose sole, not his gait.

"Sela saw the page," Tomas said.

Fen pushed old wax from the cup into his palm. "I know."

"She told you?"

"She looked at me. Then she said my name as if she had just read it somewhere."

He tipped the wax into a scrap bowl and selected a new taper. The tapers were sorted by thickness, not length. Tomas had never noticed.

"Was that unwelcome?" he asked.

Fen looked over his shoulder. His face held no anger Tomas could use.

"It was my name."

Footsteps came through the arch. A novice entered carrying a tray of clean cups. She saw Tomas and stopped.

"Brother, the west niche is short one taper."

Fen's open box contained six.

Tomas waited.

The novice waited too. Her gaze moved to the box, then back to him.

"Take one," Tomas said.

She crossed the room, lifted a taper from beside Fen's knee, and murmured her thanks to Tomas. Fen shifted his leg to give her room. She left.

"She knows you keep the candles," Tomas said.

"Yes."

"She could have asked you."

Fen fitted the new taper into the scraped cup. "She got the candle."

"That is not an answer."

"It was not your question."

The echo of Sela's voice in the Ledger room made Tomas wince.

Fen saw. "You've had a difficult morning."

"I am sorry."

"Don't be sorry over the cups. It gets into the wax."

"Fen—"

The name left Tomas before he could decide whether he had the right to use it. Fen's hand stopped against the stone.

Tomas had known the name in his mouth for five years. He had spoken it during the trial. He had written it at the head of the unfinished page. Since then he had addressed Fen by task, direction, or nothing.

Fen turned fully.

Neither of them knew what Tomas meant to put after the name.

At last Fen said, "The light."

Tomas looked toward the arch.

"You're standing in it," Fen said.

Tomas stepped aside.

Fen returned to the niche. He lit the taper from a working candle and held one hand around the flame until it took. Then he moved his stool to the next dead name.

"Hold this," he said.

Tomas took the scrap bowl of old wax. It was warm from Fen's palm and heavier than it looked.

Fen loosened a cup that had wedged in its stone bed. He worked the bone blade around it by feel, stopped when the edge caught, and changed angle. Tomas had watched him maintain the wall for five years without learning the order. The upper cups first while daylight reached them; cracked stone marked with ash; old wax kept separate from wick ends because Ansel remelted one and discarded the other.

"The woman in this niche was Eren Vale," Fen said. "She died at seventy-one. Her daughter still sends oil after lambing."

Tomas knew the entered name. He had not known about the oil.

Fen freed the cup and held it to the arch light. A hairline split ran beneath the rim.

"North cup," he said. "Now you know."

Tomas gave back the wax bowl.

Fen replaced the cracked cup with a sound one and continued along the wall, carrying facts no page had asked him to enter.

Chapter Six

Col

The first snow arrived after midday, falling straight out of a white sky.

No wind drove it. Flakes settled on the yard wall, the wood stacks, and the sleeves of people who kept working. Steward Ansel ordered the upper shutters closed and complained that the west hinge had not been greased. Novices brought drying racks inside. Someone in the kitchen dropped a pot and swore.

Nobody named the day.

Tomas had once believed the silence required effort. Sixteen winters had taught him otherwise. Whitehart did not have to conspire. The first snow entered the yard, and every person old enough to know the rite found a useful object to carry.

At the bake-room door, Ansel measured a day's bread into a small sack, weighed it, then emptied it back into the common bin. He did this at every first snow. The sack was checked for rot, the cord for fraying, the weight for what a person could carry while cold. No one had been found false that year. The measure still had to be ready.

Wilda crossed the upper yard with three winter cloaks over one arm. She inspected each clasp beneath the covered walk. One went to the guest store, one to a novice who had outgrown

her old wool, and one returned to the rite chest. She did not hurry past Tomas. She did not meet his eyes.

Near the wood stack, Ivet held out both hands and watched flakes vanish against her skin. Sela stood beside her with a split log braced on one hip. Somebody had given her work again, or she had taken it and made refusal tiring.

"Too wet," Sela said.

Ivet looked disappointed. "For what?"

"For lying. This snow will show every footprint."

She shifted the log and carried it inside. Ivet followed, still looking at her empty palms.

Tomas had heard something like it at first snow before. The flakes covered tracks slowly enough to make everyone notice what they were leaving.

In the lower passage, two young novices stopped talking when he passed. One hid a question badly. The other took her hand and pulled her toward the kitchens before she could ask it.

Tomas went to the Ledger room. He unlocked the chest, opened the book at the working pages, and confirmed that no red line had been entered since the last first snow. He knew this already. His hand still made the check.

Fen's unfinished page lay four markers away.

Tomas closed the Ledger without opening it.

There was no one to walk to the high line this year.

That did not make the day empty.

By dusk the snow had covered the upper path. Tomas put on his cloak, left by the store passage, and told no one where he was going. At the first turn he passed two novices carrying split wood. Both greeted him. Neither asked why the Tester was walking down alone after dark.

The house path descended to a shoulder of rock and bent sharply toward the valley. The shepherds called the turn the elbow. A boundary stone stood on its outer edge, waist-high and older than the repaired path around it. One face carried three shallow cuts. In the grant kept below the Ledger room, those cuts began Whitehart ground.

Merta stood on the valley side.

She was already there when Tomas reached the last rise above the elbow. She always came before the light failed. She always stopped below the stone. In sixteen years she had not given the house cause to move her.

Tomas stepped behind the shoulder where its shadow deepened and watched.

Merta was fifty-two. Snow gathered on her uncovered hair. Under one arm she carried a folded coat.

She opened it with a practiced shake. The coat had been made for a boy not yet grown into his shoulders. Its sleeves had been lengthened once in darker cloth, and one elbow bore a patch sewn in blue thread that had faded grey. Merta laid it across both forearms and faced the path as if waiting for someone to come down cold.

She did not pray. She did not call. She stood.

Tomas had been twenty-nine when he wrote the red line. His first winter as a Tester. He had believed that refusing to soften the judgment made him honest. Wilda had selected the cloak. The full house had spoken the rite while the snow collected in the boy's hair.

The prayers had been beautiful.

Tomas remained behind the rock until his toes lost warmth.

Sister Wilda came down before full dark. Her steps were unhurried and even. She had the contained look of someone who spent expression carefully; only her mouth tightened when she saw the folded coat. She stopped on the house side of the boundary stone and folded her hands.

"Merta."

"Sister."

"You may stand below the line. No one will trouble you."

"I have noticed."

"And you may not speak the name onto Whitehart ground."

Merta adjusted one sleeve of the coat so the cuff lay flat. "I know the words."

"Then let me say only what changes. There are young novices this year. If any one of them mocks you, stares, or tries to make a lesson of you, tell me."

"So you can teach them the proper way not to say him?"

Wilda received the sentence without movement.

"So I can stop cruelty that is not required by the rule."

"You think that matters."

"Yes."

Merta looked up at her. "You walked him."

"Yes."

"Did you choose this?"

She lifted the coat a little.

"I chose the warmest that fit," Wilda said.

"It did not fit. He was growing."

"I know."

For several breaths only the snow moved.

"You may not say his name," Wilda said again. Her voice had roughened at the bottom, barely. "I am sorry for what that does to you. I will still keep the rule."

"I know," Merta said. "That is why you come yourself."

Wilda inclined her head. She turned back up the path and passed close to the rock where Tomas stood. Her eyes moved once toward the shadow.

He could not tell whether she saw him.

She continued without speaking.

Merta remained below the stone with the coat.

The light thinned. Snow softened the edges of the path but not yet its stones. Tomas considered leaving. He performed this consideration every year and had never used it.

Footsteps came down from the house too quickly for caution.

Sela appeared above the elbow with her hood loose and no cloak pin. She slowed when she saw Merta. Her gaze moved

from the woman to the coat, then to the boundary stone between them.

Tomas nearly stepped out. The impulse carried his weight forward before he stopped it.

Sela came to the stone and stayed on the Whitehart side.

"Are you Merta?" she asked.

"Who told you?"

"No one. I heard Wilda say it from the upper turn."

Merta looked past her. "Then you heard the rest."

"Some."

"You're the new one."

"I'm Sela."

"I know what they call you."

Sela glanced down at the three cuts in the stone. The path was narrow there. She could not move closer without crossing onto valley ground, so she sat on the upper edge of the boundary stone instead. Snow darkened her skirt beneath her. Her boots remained on the house side.

The movement placed her face level with Merta's.

"Is that his coat?" Sela asked.

"Yes."

"He'll be cold if he's out."

Merta's hands closed on the cloth.

The sound she made was small and sharp. Tomas thought at first she had laughed. Then she put the coat against her mouth and breathed through it.

"Sixteen years," she said. "They come down to tell me what may be said. They call him an entry, a finding, one of the Given Back. Not one has spoken as if he might be somewhere in weather."

Sela rubbed snow from one blistered palm with the heel of the other. "I don't know where he is."

"Neither do I."

"What was he like?"

Merta lowered the coat.

She began with his sleeping.

He could not be got out of bed without having his heel struck three times through the blanket. He sang the responses wrong to make his sister laugh and then denied knowing the correct words. At fourteen he was afraid of goats. Not wary—afraid. He crossed a lane rather than pass Bryn's old wether and once climbed a fence so quickly he left one shoe behind.

"Did he stop being afraid?" Sela asked.

"No."

"Good."

Merta looked offended. "Why good?"

"People always improve the dead. It sounded as if you might."

For the first time that evening, Merta laughed. It came badly and ended with her eyes shut.

"He stole honey," she said. "Not once. Constantly."

"Better."

"And blamed his sister."

"Worse again."

"He wanted a blue coat," Merta said.

Sela looked at the brown wool across her arms.

"Blue costs. I told him brown kept out the same cold. He said that was what people with brown coats always said."

"Was he right?"

"About blue being better? Yes. About getting one? No."

Merta turned the coat so Sela could see the elbow patch.

"He tore it climbing Bryn's wall after the honey. I had no brown thread. He complained about the blue patch for a month, then started wearing the coat with that arm forward so people would see it."

Sela reached toward the patch and stopped at the boundary.

"My brother would have claimed he tore it on purpose."

"He did. By spring he believed himself."

Merta's mouth moved again behind the coat collar. The snow and distance took whatever breath went with it. Tomas could not tell whether she had formed a name or swallowed it. Sela's eyes flicked to her lips.

"Did he have work?" Sela asked.

"Everywhere and nowhere. He could mend panniers if someone began them for him. He could find a lost sheep and lose the crook he used to bring it back. He wanted to go west with a wool train. He wanted to stay because his sister was

going to have a child. He wanted both until wanting either required a choice."

"That sounds ordinary."

"He was."

Merta said it with satisfaction.

They spoke until the last grey left the valley. Sela asked about the sister, the wool train, and the work he hated and did anyway. Merta answered without looking up the path. Snow gathered in the folds of the coat. Once Sela reached toward the sleeve, then stopped before her hand crossed the line.

Tomas heard the person return in pieces.

He also heard the trial.

Col had worn the brown coat. The blue patch at the elbow was new then, bright enough to catch the lamp whenever he moved his arm. He had rubbed it with two fingers through most of the first hour.

His answers came quickly. Too quickly, Tomas had thought. When asked the same question in another form, Col gave the same words in the same order. He watched the lamp rather than the Tester. He described what he claimed to hear without one of the hesitations Tomas had learned to trust.

There were other facts. Col had been seventeen. The room was cold. Wilda had told him before the trial that his mother waited outside. Tomas had been in his first year of office and determined not to mistake pity for evidence.

He had written all of it on trial paper.

Then he had entered the red finding and burned the notes.

Sixteen years later he retained the speed of Col's answers, the blue patch moving at the lamp edge, and the certainty he had felt when the red line was complete. He could no longer recover the exact question that produced the repeated words. The rule had protected Col from Tomas's uncertainty becoming precedent. It had also protected Tomas from ever having to see how uncertain he had been.

He remembered the red ink dragging on the first letter. He remembered thinking that hesitation after judgment would be cowardice.

Merta refolded the coat.

"They will put you in that book," she said.

"Tomas hasn't begun the page."

"He will. Black or red."

"There is another kind."

"There is always another kind when a house needs to live with itself."

Sela looked toward the upper path. Tomas could not see her expression, only the white settling on her hair.

Merta said, "Say his name."

Sela turned back.

"They will not let me say it where the house can hear. I have stood here sixteen winters. Wilda tells me I may hold the coat, and she means it as mercy."

"What is his name?"

Merta did not answer.

"If I tell you from below the line, they will call it a claim. If you are what they think you are, you do not need me to tell you."

Sela's shoulders tightened.

"I don't know if I hear anything," she said.

"I did not ask you to hear him."

"Then tell me."

"You heard Wilda. I may not speak it onto their ground."

"You can whisper."

"And let them say you caught it from my mouth? No. You saw the book. Ask the man who wrote him red."

Above them, Tomas could not move.

Sela looked up the path. For one terrible second he thought she had seen the shape of him in the rock shadow. Her gaze passed over it.

"Col," she said.

The name did not come from nowhere. Tomas understood that at once. It lived in a dozen avoided sentences, in a coat preserved sixteen years, in the gap left whenever Merta entered a room. Sela might have heard it in the yard before anyone knew she listened. She might have read the shape of it on the red page without knowing she had. Wilda might have spoken it once in sleep. Tomas himself might have formed it under his breath during the trial.

Or none of those things.

Sela sat on the Whitehart side of the stone and said it again in the voice she had used for the injured yearling.

"Col. Merta's son."

Nothing answered.

Farther up the path, a split log struck stone. Footsteps that had been descending stopped, turned, and went back toward the house. Tomas saw no face between the falling snow and the bend.

No wind rose. The Bell above them remained a dark shape in the mountain, its clapperless mouth open toward the valley. Snow touched the coat, Sela's hair, and the stone between them.

Merta shook once from shoulders to knees.

She did not kneel. She did not thank Sela. She pressed the folded coat against her ribs until her hands steadied.

"Go up," she said. "Your skirt is wet."

Sela stood. Meltwater had darkened the back of her skirt where she sat.

"Will you come next year?" she asked.

"If I can walk."

"I'll sit again."

Merta looked at her for a long time. "You don't know what they'll make of that."

"No."

"Good night, Sela."

"Good night, Merta."

Sela climbed toward the house. She passed the rock shadow without seeing Tomas. Her face held no revelation. She looked cold, angry, and uncertain whether she had helped.

Merta remained until the path swallowed the sound of Sela's steps. Then she tucked the coat under her arm and went down.

Tomas watched until the snowfall hid her.

He came out from behind the rock and walked to the boundary stone.

Sela's wet mark remained on the upper edge. Her boot prints stopped on Whitehart ground. Merta's prints began below. Between them the three cuts in the stone held new snow.

Tomas stood where Sela had stood.

"Col," he said.

The first attempt caught in his throat. He waited, ashamed of needing practice.

"Col. Merta's son."

He had not said the name aloud since the red entry. Not to Wilda after the walk, not at the winter rite, not alone when the page returned in dreams. He had thought the prohibition held the house together. It had kept Merta below the line, Wilda returning each winter, and Tomas silent in the snow. That was a kind of holding.

"I'm sorry," he said.

Snow entered his mouth. He closed it.

When he returned to supper, meltwater ran from his cloak onto the passage flags. A novice brought a rag without asking

where he had been.

The meal was barley, turnip, and a strip of salt meat for each bench. Sela sat in the place beside Ivet, her wet skirt changed but her hair still damp. No one had moved her bowl. No one needed to. The empty space around the two girls had returned.

The novice who had been carrying wood on the upper path entered late. A white scrape marked one side of the log in his arms where it had struck stone. He put it by the kitchen door and chose a seat from which he could not see Sela.

Ansel served Tomas without comment. When he reached Sela, his ladle hovered over her bowl.

"Did you go below the elbow?" he asked.

"No."

The answer was plain. Tomas had seen the prints.

Ansel filled her bowl. "Good."

"I sat on the stone."

The ladle touched the pot rim.

At the next bench, someone stopped chewing. Ivet's hand moved under the table and found Sela's wrist.

Ansel said, "The stone is house ground."

"I know."

"And Merta remained below it?"

"Yes."

He nodded as if they had settled a stores count. Then he went on serving. The room began to breathe again, but the rhythm was wrong. Questions passed in glances. A novice at

the far end whispered one word and was hushed before Tomas could tell whether it was a name.

Sela ate three spoonfuls. She set the spoon down.

"I said it," she told Ivet in an ordinary voice.

Ivet did not ask what. She tightened her fingers once around Sela's wrist, then released her so she could eat.

Across the hall, the wood carrier rose before finishing and went toward the novice quarters. He left the salt meat on his board.

Tomas kept his eyes on his own bowl. The barley had gone thick as it cooled. By the time the evening washing began, the account would have crossed the upper passage. By first kitchen knock, it would reach the byres, the stores, and the road below.

By morning Whitehart would know that Sela had spoken Col's name.

It would not know that Tomas had repeated it.

Chapter Seven

The East Shoulder

The grave opened on the fourth morning after the first snow.

It did not open widely. A shelf of turf slipped from the east shoulder where meltwater had found a seam beneath the frozen top. The drop was no higher than a man's knee. Brown soil showed under the white, then a row of flat stones, then the edge of one stone that had broken under the weight above it.

A hand lay in the break.

Sela saw it before she understood it. Four pale bones resting together in the dirt, the fingers bent slightly inward as if the earth had been holding something that had now been taken away.

Tam found it.

He and Harl had come up before breakfast to inspect the repair at the turn. The first deposit in Bryn's spice jar had made the high road everybody's work. Harl wanted the water places measured after snow. Tam wanted to prove that a man who meant to own a horse could judge ground without his father stepping on every mark after him.

Sela had come because the work board gave her north store again and she had decided she would rather be useful where someone might object.

Tam was levering a loose stone from the path when the turf below him folded. He jumped back. The stone struck the new edge, broke through the cover beneath, and rolled out of sight.

Harl caught Tam by the back of his coat and pulled him flat.

"Don't move," he said.

Tam swore into the snow.

"Good. Keep doing that. Means you're breathing."

Sela dropped to one knee beyond the crack. The new face of earth ran across the slope for six paces. Most of it was roots and dark soil. In the middle, where the flat cover had failed, the hand showed beneath a thin fall of dirt.

No flesh. No cloth. Nothing wet or recent. Bone the color of old flour.

Harl followed her gaze.

"Down," he told Tam.

"I can help."

"You can run. House first. Bryn after. Tell her nobody comes up the east track. Tell her it isn't Sela's doing before somebody decides it is."

Tam looked at Sela.

She said, "Go."

He went.

Harl unwound the rope from his shoulder and made a line between two alders above the break. He did not cross it. Sela stood beside him in the light snow and watched the hand become less like a hand as the earth dried around it.

"How old?" she asked.

"Old enough that I don't know," Harl said. "Which is different from old enough not to matter."

The first people came within half an hour. Brother Osríc arrived with three novices and a writing board held close enough to make it part of his posture. His mouth had already tightened before anyone called the thing in the earth a grave. Wilda came behind them carrying two poles for a barrier and asked no question until the upper track was closed. Tomas brought a lamp, though it was daylight, and a coil of thin cord. Ansel sent two men with planks and then came himself to complain that they had carried the wrong planks.

By the time the sun rose above the shoulder, twenty people stood behind Harl's rope.

Nobody had yet touched the hand.

Tomas lay on his stomach at the edge and looked through the broken cover. He asked for the lamp. Sela held it down while he turned the light against the interior. When her wrist began to shake from the angle, Tam took the handle without being asked.

The space beneath the stones was larger than the opening suggested. Its roof had been made from flat slabs resting on uprights. One had split. Beyond it lay the curve of a skull, then another shape that might have been a shoulder, then a darkness the lamp could not enter.

"A grave," Osríc said.

"A covered place containing human remains," Tomas replied.

"That is a grave."

"Probably."

Osric's mouth tightened. He wrote the words anyway.

They opened no more than the slip had opened. Wilda made them clear loose earth from above so no one would be carried into the hole. Harl set a second rope. The two old men who kept the house ropes brought a sling and argued over the knot until Ansel told them both to use the one they had used for forty years.

People counted. A novice found twenty-seven skulls before the lamp went out. Osric called twenty-nine while Tam still held the lamp; after daylight reached farther under the shifted cover, he marked thirty-one shapes. Ivet said thirty-three hands, then admitted two might have been ribs. Harl said anyone giving one number was counting the part he wanted.

Sela saw the open hand, three skulls, a line of knees drawn toward chests, and one narrow wrist with a green stain around it. Later she would remember five skulls. She never found the moment when three became five.

The bones had been arranged. That much no one disputed. The bodies lay on their sides under the stone cover. The nearest faced east. Whether the others did was hidden by soil and one another. No sign lay with them that Sela could see. No letter. No House mark. No token of an erased name. Only worked stone, bone, and the care of hands long dead.

"The Forgotten," someone whispered behind the rope.

Wilda turned. "You have seen no such thing."

"But the way they're laid—"

"You have seen bones in a hole. Keep the account that size."

The rebuke was clean. It did not stop the word. Sela heard it pass to the next group coming up the track before noon.

Tomas climbed down when the sling was set. He went only as far as the broken cover and placed one boot on a sound upright. Harl held the line around his waist. Tomas brushed dirt from the nearest skull without lifting it.

"Don't," Sela said.

He stopped.

She had not meant to speak. Every face turned toward her.

"The earth by the wrist," she said. "It's carrying the small bones. If you clear the head, the hand will shift."

Tomas looked. He moved his fingers to the far side and left the wrist alone.

"Thank you," he said.

The word traveled behind her as if she had told him where the dead wished to be touched.

Sela backed away from the rope.

Near midday Tomas said the office.

No one had ordered it. The workers were cold, the crowd had grown, and the open place made silence feel like neglect. Wilda asked what name he meant to use. Tomas said none.

The common office began easily. It had been built for beds, battlefields, winter paths, and bodies brought from water. Tomas spoke the first lines. The house answered.

Then he reached the naming.

We remember thee, and thy name is—

The old sentence stopped in his mouth.

The open hand lay below him. Behind the rope, forty people waited for the Tester to supply what the earth had withheld.

Tomas looked down at the nearest face.

"We remember you," he said, "though your names are not ours to speak. We witness that you were laid here by human hands. We will not name you for our need."

The response did not fit the changed line. Half the house began the old words and fell quiet. Wilda answered alone on the second attempt. The rest followed her.

Osric wrote the amendment on his board.

Sela watched him do it. Before Tomas finished, someone at the back was repeating the new line to a person who had arrived too late to hear it.

By afternoon there were sixty people on the shoulder and more below the turn. Bryn kept the visitors at her yard until they stopped paying attention to her. Then they came by the low pasture and climbed through the alder. Harl swore when he saw them and charged two marks to the man who stepped over the first rope.

"For what?"

"For teaching me the first rope was too low."

Ivet stayed close to Sela. She brought water, then forgot to drink her own. Every time a newcomer looked from the grave to Sela, Ivet set her feet as if preparing to defend a door.

A man from the lower fold said, "She told you east."

"No," Sela said.

"At the trial. They say she turned east before—"

"She said north," Ivet cut in.

The man looked delighted. "So she knew the dead weren't where the ground opened."

Sela shut her eyes.

Ivet's voice rose. "She doesn't know."

The words carried farther than the argument had.

Several people turned.

Ivet went pale but did not take them back.

"She doesn't," she said again. "That is what she told us. She did not know this was here."

The man from the lower fold nodded slowly. His shoulders dropped. Ivet's correction had comforted him without making Sela any less holy, which irritated Sela more than if he had argued.

"Of course," he said.

Ivet stared at him.

Sela touched her elbow. "Come away."

They went to the upper side of the barrier where Harl had left a stack of turf. Ivet began sorting the pieces into sizes

without being asked.

"I made it worse," she said.

"Yes."

"I only said the truth."

"Yes."

Ivet put a small piece on the large pile and moved it back.

"I'm sorry."

Sela handed her the water cup. "Drink before you apologize again."

Near sunset Osric climbed out of the cut and removed his gloves with his teeth. Soil had worked through the knees of his robe.

By then the first pieces had already lost their places.

A visitor picked up a green-stained chip of stone so its color would not be forgotten. Harl took it and asked which side had faced the grave.

The visitor did not know.

Ivet remembered it lying beside the wrist. Tam said it came from the upper break. Sela had not seen it before the man's hand closed around it.

Harl placed the chip with three displaced stones and marked the bowl *loose after opening*. They wrapped the pieces in bread papers whose grease later resembled soil stains. By dusk, one stone had passed through five hands and acquired two places in memory.

"Nothing in that place died in my lifetime," he said. "Or my father's. The stone work may be older than the current house wall."

Wilda looked at him.

For two breaths she was afraid.

Sela saw it because Wilda's hands stopped. Not at the dead. At Osric, when he said no one there had died in his lifetime. Wilda closed her eyes once. When she opened them, her hands moved again.

"Then they are not ours to claim," she said. "And we are standing on them. Move everyone back from the edge before the light goes."

She cleared the shoulder in twenty minutes. Visitors protested. Novices obeyed. Harl took the names of three men who had crossed the rope and told them they would be paying for the damaged turf. Ansel counted lamps. The old rope keepers lowered a plank over the break to keep night frost from widening it.

Merta arrived while they were fastening the plank.

No one had sent for her. No one admitted later to telling her. She came up the closed path in a brown coat with snow melted black across the shoulders. The novices at the elbow had let her pass.

She walked through the workers without asking permission. Wilda saw her and stepped aside.

Merta stopped at the rope.

Tomas went to her, not close enough to touch.

"They are old," he said.

"I can see that."

"It isn't Col."

Merta looked into the break for a long time. Dusk had taken the depth. Only the hand remained pale beneath the plank edge.

"No," she said. "It isn't."

She turned and walked down.

Sela followed as far as the elbow. She caught Merta at the boundary stone, where the older woman had stopped with one hand on its valley face.

"Merta."

"Go back. They'll be counting who stands where."

"I know it wasn't him."

Merta's shoulders moved once.

"I wanted it to be," she said.

Sela did not answer.

"I looked at those people," Merta said, "and wanted one of them to be my son. Then I could put the coat away. I could stop wondering whether he found the eastern descent, whether he broke a leg, whether someone gave him water, whether he lived long enough to hate me for not following."

Her fingers pressed into the old cuts on the stone.

"The worst thing that happened to me today was that it wasn't him."

She went down before Sela found a sentence small enough to offer.

Mother Alaine reached the shoulder at last light.

She came with one novice and her stick. The workers opened a path. Alaine looked into the break, at the stone cover, the hand, the dirt Tomas had moved and not moved, and the marks on Osric's board.

"Close it," she said.

Osric held the board against his chest. "Mother, the arrangement may tell us—"

"It may tell us how people we cannot name laid down people we cannot name. It will not tell us what we want from Sela. Close it."

"Tonight?"

"Properly. Stone first. Turf above. If that takes two days, take two days. No bone is lifted. No token is sought beneath a body. Record what has already been exposed, then stop exposing it."

Tomas said, "The office was amended."

"I heard."

"Was it wrong?"

Alaine looked at the plank over the hand. "It was needed. That is not the same question."

She turned back toward the house.

They worked for two days.

The first morning Harl built a timber brace beneath the broken slab. Sela and Tam carried stone from the old fall. Ivet cut turf in squares and marked each underside with a short chalk line so the roots would face the right way when replaced. Ansel measured the food sent to the shoulder and accused the workers of becoming hungrier in the presence of ancient dead.

Nobody laughed the first time. He repeated it until they did.

Osric made three drawings. None agreed with the others. His first showed the open hand inside the line of the cover. His second put it beneath the break. The third omitted it because the plank hid it by then. Ivet remembered thirty-three. Tam remembered twenty-nine because that was the number Osric had said while Tam held the lamp. Harl refused every number except *more than we saw*.

On the second day Sela lowered the last flat stone beside Tomas. They tried it one way. It rocked. They turned it. The edge met the old slab but left a finger-width gap.

"Was the gap there?" Tomas asked.

Sela looked at the soil, the brace, the displaced pieces, and the open place now dark beneath them.

"I don't know."

He nodded. "Then we don't fill it because we remember it filled. We fill it because the cover must hold."

They packed the gap with smaller stone.

By dusk the turf lay back over the grave. The squares did not meet cleanly. Ivet's chalk marks disappeared into the earth.

Snow began in the seams and made the whole repair look older than it was.

Sela stood above it with mud to her knees and pain across both shoulders. She knew the grave was below her. She could no longer point to the place where the open hand had been without using the new stones as reference.

The people who had seen it carried away their counts, their lines, their fear, and Tomas's amended words.

By full dark, snow had filled the seams between the replaced squares of turf.

Chapter Eight

Nothing Happened

By the end of the week there were fires on the road.

Sela could see them from the upper gallery after dark: orange points beside the valley track, some steady beneath tarred cloth, some guttering in the wet. Bryn's barn was full. Both sleeping rooms at the mill were full. Families had begun charging for space in byres and apologizing only when they named the price.

People had heard that the ground opened after the first snow. They had heard a hand came out of it. They had heard Sela turned toward the east in the listening room before anyone knew the grave existed.

The last part had never happened.

She stopped counting the fires at sixty-two.

"If you count them, you'll start believing they're yours," Fen said.

He sat on the gallery floor with the candle box between his knees, sorting wick ends from reusable wax. The split corner had caught his sleeve and opened a new tear at the cuff.

Sela sat beside him. "Give me that."

"The box?"

"Your sleeve."

She had brought needle and thread to mend her own cuff. Fen held out his arm with grave reluctance.

"I charge for this," she said.

"I've no standing to enter a debt."

"Then I'll sew you to the box."

He watched her make three short stitches. "You mend like a person pursued."

"I am pursued."

Below them another fire caught. A small cheer rose from the road.

Fen turned his wrist so she could reach the underside. "Osric is going to ask what the grave means."

"It means somebody buried people."

"Good. Keep that answer somewhere private."

"Why?"

"Because he will ask in the hall."

Sela pulled the thread tight. Fen winced.

"You're doing that on purpose."

"Yes."

"Fair."

She tied the knot. "I'll tell them I didn't know."

Fen examined the stitches. "Truth is dressed stone."

"What?"

"A lie has a bad edge. Someone can get under it and lift. Truth comes square. People build with it before you notice they've taken it."

"If I say nothing happened, what can they build?"

Fen put the wick ends into a separate cup. "A girl with every reason to claim a miracle refuses one. She refuses it while the ground itself lies open. She refuses it before witnesses."

"Because it didn't happen."

"I know."

"Then they will know too."

"Yes," Fen said. "That's the part you keep missing."

During the three days before the hall, Sela watched the grave become a schedule.

Visitors were admitted to the upper yard in groups of twelve. Ansel issued colored cord at the gate so the same person could not join twice, then discovered people exchanging cord below the wall. Bryn began selling hot onions at the elbow. Harl charged for guided looks at the reclosed turf and spent half his fee replacing the path people damaged while looking.

Sela was kept inside for the first two groups. On the third, she climbed to the roof walk to fetch a drying cloth and found twenty-four faces turned upward. Someone had counted wrong or bribed well.

A woman called, "Which one was the hand?"

Sela looked over the parapet. "There is no hand now."

The woman pressed both palms together. "She won't point."

The people around her murmured approval.

Sela went back down without the cloth.

Ivet found her in the laundry passage and asked what she should say when visitors questioned her.

"Say you counted badly."

"I did."

"Say I didn't know."

"I did that too."

"Then stop answering."

Ivet leaned against the damp wall. "If I stop, someone else answers for me."

"They answer for you while you're speaking."

Neither of them knew whether silence or correction gave away more. They stood beside a basket of wet linen until Lysa came through and told them to move because other people still required the passage.

The hall was opened three nights later.

Ansel put extra benches against the north wall. Valley people stood at the rear with road mud on their boots. The outer doors remained unbarred despite the cold, and the draft moved through the room in long breaths that made every lamp lean at once.

Sela had planned to go down to her mother's that day. Brem had sent word that the lower goat had stopped eating, and Sela wanted to see whether its teeth had gone bad or it had

swallowed cord. Ansel told her the hall could not be held on another night because the road fires were increasing.

"The goat will still be ill tomorrow," he said.

"That is not usually an argument for waiting."

He looked at her, understood, and had the decency to look sorry.

They seated her near the front.

Brother Osric stood after the evening office. He spoke without ornament. The dead were human. They had been laid with care. Tomas had said an amended office. Alaine had ordered the grave reclosed. No House mark had been found. No honest witness possessed a single count.

Every statement was true.

"A house without teaching will make one in kitchens," Osric said. "The road has already made three. We may refuse to claim the dead and still ask what their discovery requires of us."

He turned toward Sela.

"You spoke of direction before the ground opened. You stood at the grave and prevented a hand from being disturbed. What does it mean?"

The room turned with him.

Sela stood.

For one moment she understood how little she would have to give them. She could say that the room had changed. That was true. She could say she had felt fear on the shoulder. True.

She could stop before explaining the fear and let the house finish.

The sentences waited like tools laid out by someone who knew exactly which hand she used.

"Nothing happened," she said.

The outer lamps hissed in the draft.

"I didn't know the grave was there. At my trial I turned north. Not east. What happened two years ago happened north of the pass and had to do with goats. On the shoulder I saw a hand because the ground had opened and everyone saw it. I told Tomas not to move the earth because the small bones would shift. That was ground, not a voice."

Ivet sat three benches behind her with both hands closed in her skirt.

"I don't hear the dead," Sela said. "I don't know who those people were. I don't know what the grave means. I was frightened and cold, and I wanted Merta's son to be somewhere he could be found, and none of that is a message."

She looked toward Osric.

"I'm sorry. I know it isn't useful."

She sat down.

No one spoke at first.

Then Ivet began to cry.

It was quiet crying. She pressed both hands to her mouth as if ashamed of making sound. The woman beside her put an arm

around her. A murmur moved from the back benches to the front.

"She could have claimed it," someone said.

"With all of us there."

"She told against herself."

An old woman from the low pasture stood in the open doorway. Snowmelt darkened her hem. She looked at Sela with an expression of exhausted relief.

"That's how you know," she said.

Nobody cheered. That would have been easier.

Heads bowed. People wept. A man at the wall repeated the words to the woman beside him because she had not heard. The woman repeated them again, slightly changed: *That is how the true ones know.*

Osric sat slowly. He had asked for meaning and received a rule he had not proposed.

Wilda remained against the side wall. Sela watched her search the hall for a lie she could correct. There was none. Osric had described the grave exactly. Sela had denied knowledge exactly. The old woman had described what the denial meant to her. Each person had kept the account as they understood it.

Together they made something no one had said.

The questions began before Sela could leave her bench. Had the hand opened toward her? Was the green wrist Whitehart's color? Had she heard pain when Tomas touched the earth? Why

had Merta come that day? Sela answered each one. The stain might have been copper. The earth was loose. Merta had seen the crowd or heard the news. Each answer made a smaller question.

Tomas finally stood between Sela and the nearest questioner.

"The hall asked what she knows," he said. "She answered. It did not grant each person a private trial afterward."

The man bowed to him and thanked Sela for enduring examination with humility.

Sela laughed once. It came out too sharp. Several people smiled as if relieved to witness her humanity.

Ivet reached her at the aisle.

"I believed you," she said.

"Which part?"

Ivet's eyes were still wet. "All of it."

"You were crying."

"Because you told the truth when it cost you."

"Fen said you'd do that."

Ivet flinched. "Do what?"

"Believe me so hard it becomes something else."

For a moment the crowd moved around them and neither girl moved with it.

"I don't know how to love you less," Ivet said.

Sela wanted to say that less was not the request. She could not find the sentence before a valley woman asked Ivet to

repeat what Sela had said at the grave.

Ivet turned to answer. Sela went on alone.

Alaine sat in the far corner with her back to the griffes. Her face gave Sela nothing. Only the hand on her stick had moved lower, gripping where the wood was thinner.

The hall kept Sela for another hour. People wanted to tell her that they believed her. Every declaration made the space around her larger. One valley man thanked her for refusing power. A novice asked whether he should also refuse to name what he heard. Sela told him to ask Tomas. The novice thanked her for the lesson.

At last she reached the bench beside the arch where she had always sat.

It faced outward.

Forty people were still in the room. If she turned toward the opening, the story would have another piece by morning: Sela watched the dark; Sela sat toward the voice; Sela kept the valley before her because the dead entered by no door.

She sat with her back to the arch.

The draft touched the nape of her neck. She could not see the weather. Every part of her body wanted to turn, the same ordinary wish that had shaped where she sat since childhood.

Nobody remarked on the refusal. They saw humility, or fatigue, or nothing at all.

Fen stood in the passage with his candle box. He looked at the bench, then at Sela's shoulders. His repaired cuff showed

three uneven black stitches.

He did not come near her.

From the bench Sela heard the sentence leave the hall.

The old woman repeated it at the outer door to a man who had been kept outside. He told two people waiting beneath the covered walk. One of them asked whether the exact words were *that is how we know*. The old woman corrected him: *you know*.

At the gate, a road carrier wrote the shorter version on the back of a flour tally so he would remember it at the mill. He could write only part of it. Lysa supplied the missing word.

Nobody added a miracle. Nobody needed to.

Ansel came with the guest count. "Eighty-three expect a wall. We have room for fifty-one. Perrin can place the rest below if I release two bread carts."

"Why are you asking me?"

"I'm not. I'm telling you why the hall door remains open."

He looked at the way she sat.

"Your mother sent again about the goat. Brem found cord between its teeth. It is eating."

Relief reached Sela so quickly that she almost turned toward him. She kept her back to the arch.

"Tell him he was right," she said.

"He says he knows."

Much later, when the valley people had gone and the lamps were out, Sela returned alone.

She sat on the floor in the mouth of the arch with her back to the wall of the dead. The fires on the road shone below. Wind brought damp woodsmoke and the faint sound of somebody coughing in a camp too far down for the house to help without deciding to help everyone.

Sela faced outward.

She drew her knees up and rested her chin on them. Tomorrow she would go to her mother's and look at the goat's teeth. She would take no novice. She would ask Brem to interrupt her until he forgot he had learned caution.

The plan was small enough to belong to her.

Fen came through the listening room after midnight with no lamp. He knew the floor well enough to avoid the bench. At the arch he set Sela's cloak beside her without asking whether she was cold.

"Did the truth work?" he asked.

"Everyone believes me."

"Ah."

She pulled the cloak over her knees. "You knew."

"I guessed. Knowing is for people whose accounts get entered."

"The old woman said that's how you know."

"By morning it will be *that's how the true ones know*. By the lower ford it will be something with a rhyme."

"Can Perrin stop it?"

"He can write down which version wins."

Sela looked at the fires. "You like him."

Fen sat just inside the arch, facing neither fully in nor out.
"Yes."

"Is that safe?"

"No."

They stayed there until the stone cold reached through the cloak. Fen did not ask what she heard. Sela did not ask what he had told Perrin.

Behind her the house slept with the sentence it had made from her denial.

Below, the old woman's words traveled from fire to fire.

Chapter Nine

The Man Who Writes It Down

Perrin arrived after twenty-nine days of travel with one dry boot, a wet commission, and a mule that had learned to bite him.

Tomas was in the gate yard when the watch called down. Rain had replaced the snow and frozen again on the upper stones. The stranger came through the arch at a patient limp, leading the mule by a rope held well away from its mouth.

He pulled back his hood and looked around.

His first attention went to the drainage channel. His second went to the men hauling grit onto the ice. Only then did he look up at the house cut into the mountain.

"That is an excellent place to hear a road from," he said.

"We heard you for two hours," Tomas replied.

"Three, if your southern wall carries properly. I spent the first one arguing with her."

The mule flattened its ears.

Perrin put out his hand. He was near Tomas's age, perhaps younger by five years. The face Wren had found socially dangerous had acquired road stubble and a split lower lip, but it

was still always attending to someone. Road salt had whitened his dark coat at the seams.

"Perrin of Blackcrest. Collector for the Jubilee Chronicle. I'm here under commission, and I am sorry about the hour."

Tomas took the hand.

"Brother Tomas."

"The Tester."

"You know that already."

"I knew the office. Now I know the man."

The line had been made to be liked. Tomas liked it anyway.

"You rehearsed that," he said.

"Only the honest parts."

"That is not a quantity."

"I was warned about you."

Perrin did not hand his mule to the nearest person. He asked the gate worker's name.

"Lysa."

"Lysa, does she kick?"

"Only when people stand where she kicks."

"Sound doctrine. What does the house pay for a night of mule care?"

Lysa looked at Tomas.

"The house doesn't charge a commissioned guest," Tomas said.

"Then the person who rubs her down is subsidizing Blackcrest with an hour of cold work. I'd rather know the price."

Lysa named it. Perrin paid before surrendering the rope and added one small coin for a strip of dried apple.

"That's for the mule," he said.

"She'll spend it poorly," Lysa replied.

Perrin smiled. By breakfast he remembered her name. He had forgotten where he put his gloves; Lysa found them tucked through his own belt and refused to let him blame the mule.

They gave him the narrow guest cell overlooking the lower wall. He opened his commission before accepting food.

The parchment had traveled inside an oilskin tube, but water had entered around the cap. One corner was damp. Perrin laid the sheet flat beneath two cups and held the seals over his lamp so Tomas could inspect them without touching.

Blackcrest's seal bound the lower cord. Crown-watch had witnessed the commission in black wax beside it. The text authorized collection of Whitehart testing practice, surviving testimony, completed and uncompleted judgments, material consequences, and limits of access. It granted no power to compel a witness, open a sealed book, remove a page, or declare a House judgment false.

Tomas read the limits twice.

"You came a month for what we may refuse."

"Partly by river boat, six days by hired cart, nine on the mule, the rest walking beside her because she developed a spiritual objection to ice." Perrin shifted one cup as the parchment curled. "I came to learn what the refusal costs."

The wording reached Tomas from a room he had never seen. Someone had chosen it carefully and regretted choosing it.

"Who wrote that?"

"The commission? Aldous."

"The question."

Perrin looked at him. "A woman who dislikes questions that contain their own answer."

"Is she coming?"

"Not unless I find something that requires a person less charming than I am."

Tomas looked again at the wet seal. "Then you have already failed."

Perrin laughed softly and took the commission back.

He learned names quickly enough to make Tomas suspicious.

At the morning meal he asked who had ground the barley, who carried it, and who hauled it from the gate. By noon he knew Bryn's bread mark, Lysa's injured thumb, and which rope keeper distrusted new hemp.

He wrote the names beside expenditures, work, and testimony, including the kitchen boy's.

Wilda watched him address the kitchen boy who scraped the pots.

"It is a method," she told Tomas.

"Yes."

"You do not object."

"The boy has been here three years. I did not know his name. I would like a better ground for my objection."

Wilda said, "You could simply admit the Blackcrest man is useful."

"I could," Tomas said. "There is no procedural need."

Perrin presented himself in the hall that evening.

He spoke of the Jubilee four years away and the Chronicle that would be read there. He did not say the book would contain truth. He said it would contain what future halls could cite, which was less comforting and more exact.

"Whitehart has sent Crown-watch four centuries of entered judgments," he said. "I could copy them and leave. That would preserve the part of this house already made for preservation. I am here for the part that carries sacks, resets turf, remembers the year the west hinge froze, and knows which official account left somebody outside the door."

People sat straighter.

"You may refuse me," Perrin said. "The commission says so. I will record a refusal only when the refusal itself changes what can be defended. I will offer payment when testimony

costs work, travel, or trade. Payment buys time. It does not buy truth, and I will enter it beside the account."

That sentence pleased Tomas. He distrusted the pleasure.

After the hall, Perrin asked to see the east grave.

"It is closed," Wilda said.

"Then I will see closed ground."

"There is nothing there now."

"That is already useful."

On his second morning Tomas took him to the shoulder. Perrin stood on the new turf without stepping across the seams. He asked how many bodies.

Osric said thirty-one possible positions.

Ivet, who had come with a water flask, said she had counted thirty-three hands and had been wrong.

Tomas said the exposed portion did not permit a total.

Perrin wrote all three answers and labeled each by what had been counted.

"Who touched it first?" he asked.

Wilda began to answer.

"Before the seniors," Perrin added.

The question altered the group.

Tomas said, "Tam saw the slip. Harl set the first rope. Sela saw the hand."

"Who moved the stone that broke the cover?"

"Tam. By accident."

"Who covered the opening overnight?"

"Harl placed the plank. The rope keepers secured it."

"Names?"

Wilda looked back toward the house as if the workers might be visible through the ridge.

Tomas supplied them.

Perrin made a second list for the people who had possessed the ground before the official witnesses arrived.

"I need the boy, the drover, and Sela separately," he said. "And whoever carried the first message down."

"Why?" Osric asked.

"Because the original site existed for less than a day and no longer exists. Meaning can wait. Custody cannot."

Perrin spoke to the first handlers before he went down to the camps.

Tam sat on an upturned trough and described the stone, the folding turf, his father's grip, and the run to Whitehart. He drew the break three times and erased each attempt.

"The hand was farther left," he said after the third.

"Than what?"

Tam looked at the erased slate. "Than where I put it."

Perrin kept the rubbed slate as an object showing failed recall, not as a map.

Harl showed Perrin the rope marks on two alders and named the knot. He would give no count.

"More than we saw," he said. "Less than people say."

"How many do people say?"

"Depends how far they walked before telling it."

Sela met Perrin in the empty byre. He asked what she saw before anyone spoke to her.

"A hand. Broken cover. Tam on his face because Harl put him there."

"Did the hand point?"

"Hands don't point when the finger bones are still together."

"Did you know what was under the stone?"

"No."

"Did anything at your trial give you reason to expect a grave east of the house?"

"No."

He wrote each no separately. "Why not one line?" she asked.

"Because they answer different claims."

"They'll all become the same no when you leave."

Perrin stopped writing. "Probably."

He showed her the page. She could not read it, but she saw the three short lines and the spaces between them. Perrin turned the book a little so the lamp would not shine in her eyes. He did not call the blank parts protection.

On his third day Perrin went down to the road camps.

There were nearly four hundred people below Whitehart by Ansel's ration count. Some ate there and slept in valley houses;

Bryn sold loft space in shifts. No one knew which number described the crowd.

Perrin left after breakfast with his purse, his notebook, and one house worker to keep him from walking into a drainage cut. He returned after dark without the purse.

In between, he bought twenty-seven nights of shelter from nine households. Bryn took the largest contract and made him pay extra for dry straw because everyone else had made wet straw valuable. He hired two valley carts to carry Whitehart bread down at set hours, away from the gate. He paid four men to dig cook pits below the bend where sparks could not reach the byres. He promised reimbursement for three roofs damaged by people tying shelter cloth to them without asking.

The work began badly.

At the first camp, two families claimed the same place in Bryn's loft because a road boy had sold them copied bed marks. Perrin bought both false marks for a quarter of their stated value and moved the family with the feverish child to the mill store. By afternoon four more copies had appeared. He had put a price on forgery.

He stopped buying marks. Bryn identified the households that had paid her, and the second family took the remaining floor only after she pointed out that dignity did not shed rain.

At the second camp, a man struck a woman over bread after hearing the house would stop distribution at dusk. Perrin made Ansel's cart turn around and unload at the mill shed in full view. He paid Lysa and a valley widow to call each ration mark

aloud. The widow knew half the camp by kin and caught three doubled claims before the guards did.

"Put her on the count tomorrow," Perrin told Lysa.

"She costs."

"So does losing six loaves before noon."

At the lower bend he rented half a winter wood room for a couple with two children, then paid two boys to shift the wood. When sleet began, the boys raised their price. He paid it and wrote *weather premium* beside their names.

He also told more than a hundred people that there was no bed for them and no promise they would see Sela.

Most went home.

The gate was clear by the next afternoon. Bread left the stores under Ansel's count, traveled down under two paid guards, and was distributed from a mill shed where the road widened. Nobody had to choose between hunger and climbing to Whitehart's door.

Nobody died on the road that week.

"How much?" Tomas asked when Perrin returned.

Perrin took off his ruined boots. "Eighty-two marks spent. Thirty-four promised. Two cart days to be repaid after thaw. Three roof claims, one of which is probably false and all of which are cheaper than a burial."

"Blackcrest will pay?"

"Blackcrest will argue. Crown-watch will delay. Bryn will send a man with the account and embarrass them until they

stop." He scraped mud from one heel. "Competence is mostly knowing whose anger travels."

"You did it for the Chronicle."

"Of course. Four hundred people freezing below a holy house that has just acquired a grave and possibly a saint would become the only story anyone remembered."

He set the boot down.

"They are also alive," he said. "I have never found an order for those facts that makes either one cleaner."

Ansel audited the spending before Perrin could sleep.

They sat at the end of the meal board with Bryn's marks, the cart tallies, and Perrin's nearly empty purse between them. Ansel rejected two unwitnessed charges. Perrin sent Lysa back into the rain to find the valley widow who had counted bread.

"You paid a weather premium to boys," Ansel said.

"It was sleeting."

"It sleets here without payment."

"The boys do not."

Tomas, passing behind them, said, "The weather has also failed to submit an account."

Ansel looked at him. "Was that a joke?"

"No."

Perrin said, "Write it down before he corrects himself."

Ansel stared at him, then entered the premium.

Three promises had to wait for Crown-watch remittance. Bryn accepted Blackcrest's seal; the other households

demanded a Whitehart witness. Ansel signed, making the house liable if Perrin's commission failed.

"You have purchased a clean gate with my winter credit," Ansel said.

"Yes."

"If Crown-watch refuses?"

"You will send Bryn."

Ansel considered this and marked the account *probably recoverable*.

That night Perrin wrote a dispatch to Crown-watch.

Tomas watched from the guest-cell door. Perrin began with custody, not the dead.

Site reclosed by Whitehart before comparative examination. No claim of bad faith. Mercy and loss of original condition are the same act.

He listed the three counts. He listed the absence of a mark. He wrote that Sela denied prior knowledge and that the denial had increased public certainty. He wrote that the first handlers were available and their accounts already differed in small material ways.

At the bottom he added:

Send Wren if she will come. The ground no longer answers the convenient question. The people may answer a harder one, briefly.

He sanded the page and folded it.

"How fast?" Tomas asked.

"A valley carrier to the winter post tomorrow. A Blackcrest relay from there if the compact still has horses. Fourteen days in good weather. More if the river road has gone."

"And then a month back."

"She travels faster than I do because she dislikes inns."

Perrin sealed the dispatch with black wax. In the morning he paid Tam two marks to carry it to the winter post and half a mark more to bring back the relay receipt.

Tam held the coins in one fist.

"Will it help buy a horse?" Perrin asked.

Tam looked suspicious. "You know about the horse."

"I know about every expensive hope within ten miles. It is my profession."

Tam put the money inside his coat. "Then you should know not to say it to my father."

He left before daylight.

Perrin stood at the gate until the boy disappeared below the turn. Then he asked Lysa whether Fen had always carried the candle box on his right hip.

Tomas, beside him, felt the question arrive too late to prevent.

"Why Fen?" he asked.

Perrin looked toward the listening room.

"Because he knew which count began before Osric arrived," he said. "And because every senior I asked called him *the candle keeper* before one of them used his name."

Chapter Ten

Nobody Ever Asked

Nessa brought the flour on regular mill deliveries.

The day Perrin began asking Fen questions, she arrived with a sack against her hip and rain shining on the shoulders of her cloak. She carried the weight low and close, the way regular mill work teaches before anyone thinks to call it strength. Fen saw her from the lower passage and reached the yard before Ansel could send anyone else.

He took the sack.

Their hands met where the cloth had been mended with blue thread. Nessa's thumb pressed once against the side of his finger. She might have been finding her balance.

Three kitchen workers stood beneath the eave. Nessa thanked the space beside Fen's left shoulder.

"The mill count is inside," she said. "Bryn says the last two sacks weighed light because your measure is cracked."

"Bryn says every sack weighs light until she is paid."

Nessa did not smile. Not in the yard.

Fen carried the flour down. She followed because the count required Ansel's mark. They spoke of the road, her youngest

child's cough, and whether the mill wheel would survive thaw. Every sentence could have been spoken by strangers.

Five years earlier they had meant to marry.

The house on the north lane had a roof bad enough to occupy an entire summer of argument. Fen said he could mend it. Nessa said he would only teach the rain to enter elsewhere. They had enjoyed having a future sturdy enough to disagree inside.

Then Fen was tested at nineteen. Tomas wrote four words and stopped.

Nessa waited a year, though no record said so. Then she married a man whose standing required no explanation. Her eldest was named Fen for a great-uncle, and the great-uncle had existed, which made every part of the account true.

At the store door Ansel took the mill count from Nessa without addressing Fen. He told the kitchen workers where to put the flour. Fen was still holding it.

They took it from his arms.

Nessa left by the side passage. Fen went after her with the empty tally cord.

In the dark between the store and the yard, where no one could see which person a word landed on, she said, "Mind your back, Fen."

Every flour delivery for five years.

"The blue seam is opening," he said.

She stopped.

It was more than they usually allowed themselves.

"I know," she replied.

Then she went into the yard and he went back to the flour, and the whole of their former life closed behind two ordinary sentences.

Perrin was waiting in the listening room.

He sat on the flags beside the lower griffes with his good coat folded under him, his notebook on one knee, and one of Fen's taper cups in his hand.

"You have wax in the oil channel," Fen said.

Perrin looked into the cup. "I wondered why it smoked."

"You thought the dead had a preference?"

"I have learned not to assume which practical mistake a house has made holy."

Fen took the cup and scraped the channel with the bone blade. Perrin watched his hands.

Kindness had a shape Fen knew. It leaned down. It softened its voice. It performed the wound it meant to soothe and withdrew when the performer tired.

Perrin was interested. Interest sat still.

"How many niches?" he asked.

"Three hundred and twelve cut. Two hundred and eighty-nine occupied."

"Osric said three hundred and one dead."

"Osric counts names in the current office. Forty years use the founding calendar in the third row. Nine names were

repeated when the count changed. Three cups serve two names because stone split."

Perrin's pen stopped. "How do you know?"

"I clean them."

"How many others know?"

Fen fitted the taper cup back into its bed. "Nobody ever asked."

Perrin wrote the sentence, then turned the notebook so Fen could see it. He had written Fen's name before the answer.

The letters were narrow and quick. They existed.

"Don't make a relic of my counting," Fen said.

"Then tell me what it costs."

"Lamp oil. Knees. The upper row when my shoulder is bad."

"Who repairs the cups?"

"I mark them. Ansel orders stone twice a year. A mason in the valley cuts the replacements and thinks they are salt cups."

"Name?"

Fen gave it.

Perrin asked about wax, oil, drafts, the forty-year gap, and why the north tapers shortened first. Each answer produced a better question. By the sixth, Fen had stopped pretending not to enjoy himself.

Perrin came again the next evening.

This time he asked about the grave.

"Not what it means," he said. "Who had dirt on their hands before Tomas arrived?"

"Tam. Sela. Harl."

"What did Sela do?"

"Told Tomas not to clear the wrist."

"Why?"

"She saw the little bones moving in loose soil."

"Did she approach before or after someone called the place a grave?"

Fen thought. "Before Osric said it. After Harl saw the hand."

On the third evening he brought bread, two cups, and a question Fen had been waiting for without knowing it.

"What frightened her in the listening room?"

Fen continued scraping wax.

"Ask Sela."

"I will. I am asking what could be seen from the passage."

"The passage wasn't part of the trial."

"No. It was where the people without invitations heard it."

Fen looked at him.

Perrin put the bread between them. "I can cite you as an unentered household source and record why Whitehart gives your testimony no standing. That will make you visible outside the house and more vulnerable inside it. I can leave your name out and use the account only to shape questions. That will

protect you and make your work disappear again. Neither is clean. You choose each time."

"And the bread?"

"Supper. I missed the meal. If you answer nothing, we still eat."

Fen broke the loaf.

He understood the bargain. Perrin had not hidden it; hiding would have insulted them both. The payment was not bread. It was the sight of his name on the page and the promise that the next question depended on his answer.

He wanted it before he answered.

"She was afraid of being improved," Fen said.

Perrin waited.

"Tomas asked the same thing in four shapes. She kept making it smaller and he kept looking for what the smaller thing concealed. Her hands stopped when she looked at Alaine. She asked Alaine how a person knows. Alaine gave her work to do instead of an answer."

"Were you in the room?"

"No. Passage. Through the arch. I couldn't see Tomas's paper. I saw Sela's hands and Alaine's face from the side."

Perrin wrote the limits before the account.

Fen continued.

He told him where Sela sat and why the bench mattered. He told him she faced outward until the public hall made facing

outward unusable. He told him she slipped back later when nobody watched.

"How do you know the last part?"

"I found wax scrapings where no candle is kept and saw mud from her boots at the arch. Inference, not witness."

Perrin marked it as inference.

The distinction made Fen feel respected. It also made the disclosure easier.

He told Perrin about Merta.

He gave no private words from first snow because he had not heard them. He gave what the house knew: Col's red entry, the coat, the yearly vigil below the boundary, Wilda's descent, Sela speaking the name.

"What does Merta want?" Perrin asked.

"A correction no house can give."

"What does she know about Sela?"

"She knew her before any of this. The valley all did."

Perrin looked at the page for a long moment.

"Would she speak to me?"

"No."

"Would she let me ask?"

"Once. If you make the cost real."

"What cost?"

"Yours," Fen said. "She already knows hers."

Perrin smiled without pleasure. "There you are."

"Where?"

"At my work."

The phrase entered Fen more deeply than praise would have.

He told Perrin about the house's invisible labor: bread moved without an order, hinges greased before complaint, cups Fen replaced that entered the store count as *stone loss*. Seniors spoke of him while he held the object they discussed.

Perrin did not say Whitehart was cruel. Fen would have stopped if he had.

"Come to my table tomorrow," Perrin said when the bread was gone.

Fen laughed. "An Unwritten doesn't sit at a guest's head."

"A guest may invite whom he likes."

"There'll be a rule by the end of the meal."

"Then I will have helped your house identify a drafting need."

Fen went.

Perrin stood when he entered the hall and called his name. Not loudly. He did not need to.

The room slowed. Ansel held the ladle between pot and bowl. Osric looked from Perrin to Fen, calculating which standing governed the seat.

No rule answered.

Fen walked the length of the hall with nothing in his hands. He sat at the head of the second bench. Perrin poured him wine

and asked whether the old wall count could be drawn without removing a single name.

Fen said yes, badly. Perrin asked why badly. Fen told him. Osric leaned closer. Ansel served the next bowl.

For an hour Fen was addressed. He was funny because he had always been funny. A man who had known him since childhood asked him to explain the calendar join again.

Across the hall, Sela saw him.

Her whole face opened. She lifted one hand in a small gesture that said *look at you*.

Fen smiled back.

Under the table he held the bench until his fingers hurt.

Sela did not know that her fear, her seat, Merta's winter, and the private work of the house had purchased the hour. Perrin had lied about none of it. Fen had been offered a choice each time. He had chosen.

He knew it was a bargain.

Knowing did not make the price return to him.

The next morning Perrin went down to the road before breakfast.

Fen entered the hall and found the guest's end of the second bench empty. No cup waited there. Ansel had restored the ordinary seating because a guest's invitation did not survive the guest's absence.

Fen stood beside the place long enough for people to notice.

Ansel approached with the bread board. "Your usual place is open."

He said it quietly. He meant to prevent the whole hall from watching Fen be refused.

"This was my usual place for an hour," Fen said.

Ansel's grip changed on the board. "Perrin invited you."

"I know."

"He isn't here."

"I know that too."

Fen went to the third bench and sat where the labor list could pass over him without changing grammar. Nobody moved him. Nobody had to.

At noon Perrin returned and apologized for forgetting the invitation.

"You didn't forget," Fen said. "You thought the seat belonged to the guest. It did."

Perrin offered to call him again at supper.

Fen said yes before the offer was complete.

That night Fen lay awake and counted what he had sold.

Not secrets. That defense was true. The grave lay under public turf, Merta stood at a public boundary, and half the house had heard Sela's trial through an open arch.

He had supplied sequence, emphasis, and names nobody thought to ask.

He knew which senior arrived after which worker. He knew that Wilda touched no griffe and Alaine touched one every

time. He knew Osric had asked twice for the Ledger and been refused. He knew which four valley families ate from Whitehart stores without an entered order. He knew that Sela sat outward when alone and inward when watched.

Each fact by itself was small. Together they made a house visible from the side.

At Perrin's table, people had laughed when Fen spoke. Osric had repeated his name with an answer. Ansel had served him without moving him. For one hour the social world had behaved as if the unfinished page were not there.

Fen wanted another hour.

The wanting did not make him gullible. It made the price accurate.

Before sleep, he decided he would tell Perrin nothing about Alaine's touch.

He held the decision for three days.

On the fourth evening Perrin asked why Alaine sat with her back to the griffes.

"Ask her," Fen said.

"I did. She said the living require the open room."

Fen had heard the house answer since childhood. It was beautiful, useful, and could not be tested against the chair.

"She touches them," he said.

Perrin waited.

"The nearest griffe. Every time she passes. Two fingers below the niche, never the face. Nobody else does. The novices

think it's devotion and copy it on feast days. They put their hands too high."

"How often?"

"Four thousand times. More."

"What do you think it means?"

"I don't know."

Perrin wrote the observation, the estimated count, the difference in position, and Fen's refusal to infer. Then he wrote Fen's name.

Fen watched the letters dry.

Fen almost touched the wet F and put his hand under the table instead.

Chapter Eleven

What the Grave No Longer Shows

Wren reached Whitehart with blood in both socks and the wrong idea about the bell rope.

The winter post had found her a cart for the first six days, a mule for four, and nothing at all for the last climb. She had walked since dawn through sleet that froze on the front of her coat. By the time the gate opened, her left foot had begun to strike the ground differently from her right.

She noticed. She did not correct it. There were limits to what observation repaired.

Inside the gate, two thick ropes descended from a timber housing above the yard. Wren assumed they served the Bell and asked the gate worker who was permitted to pull them.

"Anyone when the hay lift jams," Lysa said.

Wren looked up. A platform of winter fodder hung in the shaft.

"The Bell has no rope," Lysa added. "No clapper either."

Perrin, coming across the yard, heard the exchange and smiled.

"I have been here two months and made fewer mistakes," he said.

"You have recorded fewer."

He took her satchel before she could refuse. The weight pulled his shoulder down.

"What did you bring?"

"Dry paper. Two ruling boards. A chain of custody you have already made impossible."

"The house did that before I arrived."

"And you have improved the impossibility."

He looked pleased to see her. Wren was too tired to decide what else he looked.

Tomas received her in the guest passage. He was taller than the Whitehart return had made him in her mind and less composed around the mouth. Wren found this reassuring for reasons she did not examine.

"You are Wren of Blackthorn," he said.

"Wren is enough."

"Perrin said you would want the grave before food."

"Perrin says that because he wants my supper. I want hot water, food, sleep, and the grave in daylight. In that order."

Perrin gave back her satchel.

"Less charming," he told Tomas.

Wren slept nine hours and woke cold.

Whitehart put a heated stone beneath every guest pallet. She had moved hers before lying down because she thought it was a boundary weight holding the bed frame against the sloping

floor. By morning the stone had scorched a brown line into the wall mat and her feet had stayed cold.

She entered the mistake on the first page of her working book.

Local practice: guest warming stones placed under lower blanket. I moved mine through ignorance. Ask before inferring purpose from position.

Then she ate twice and went to the east shoulder.

Perrin tried to brief her while she ate the second bowl.

He had divided his notes into people, objects, payments, and stories. The same event appeared in all four sections. Wren asked him to stop after the third time he called a witness *reliable* without stating for which observation.

"Tam is reliable about the first stone," she said. "That does not make him reliable about the number of bodies."

"He says so himself."

"Then write that instead of the compliment."

Perrin crossed out the word. "You have been here half a morning and improved me."

"I have made one label narrower."

"That is how you improve people. It is exhausting."

The barley was hot. Wren held the bowl in both hands until feeling returned to her fingers. She had recorded every delay on the road. None made the grave more recoverable.

The turf seams had begun to root despite the cold. A shallow depression showed where loose fill had settled. Three new

stones marked the repaired path; chalk remained beneath the alder roots.

Perrin stood off the turf. Tomas stood on it.

"This is where the hand lay," Tomas said.

Wren looked at the repaired ground. "No."

He glanced down.

"This is where you remember the hand in relation to a surface that no longer exists," she said. "It may be the place. We cannot call the current ground original evidence."

"I watched them close it."

"Which makes you a witness to the closing."

Tomas accepted the correction without liking it.

She measured the repair, the slope, and the distance to Harl's first rope. She used no number from Osric until she had seen all three drawings. One placed the hand below the broken roof, one inside it, and one omitted it.

"He drew these on the same day?" she asked.

"At three different hours," Perrin said.

"Then they are not three attempts at one view. They are three views after three changes. Why were they copied together?"

"Because Whitehart kept them together."

"That is custody, not sequence."

Perrin opened his notebook and inserted the word *sequence* between two earlier lines.

Wren interviewed Tam first.

He sat in Bryn's yard with slate dust on his knees and answered as if every word might be charged against him. He remembered twenty-nine shapes because Osric had said twenty-nine while Tam held the lamp. When Wren asked what he himself had counted, he said one hand, two skulls, and something he had decided was a foot because he needed it to be something.

"Why?"

Tam looked toward the lower fold.

"A thing with a name doesn't keep changing after you go home."

Wren wrote the sentence and marked it as his reason, not a property of the grave.

Ivet counted hands. She began with thirty-three, then said thirty-one, then asked whether paired wrist bones counted as a hand if the fingers were hidden.

"What did you see without another person naming it first?" Wren asked.

Ivet's face tightened. "Sela."

"At the grave?"

"She didn't know."

"I asked what you saw."

"It's my answer."

Wren wrote: *Witness protects a conclusion not requested.* She showed the line to Ivet.

"I am not accusing you of dishonesty."

"You're making it look like dishonesty."

"No. I am making the reason for the answer visible."

Ivet stood. "To whom?"

The interview ended there.

Osric's thirty-one referred to positions beneath the cover, not bodies. He had used knees, skulls, and gaps. He had written *possible*. Later copies omitted the word.

Wren wrote no total.

She spent the evening arranging the witness sequence on two ruling boards.

The first board showed the sequence from Tam's stone to Alaine's closure. The second showed custody: open ground, rope, barrier, plank, drawings, work crew, reclosure.

Perrin placed Merta in the first sequence at the moment the grave became connected to Col. Wren moved her to the point of her arrival.

"The association existed before she came," he said.

"Then place it in the story sequence, not the site sequence."

"There is no story board."

"Make one."

By midnight they had five boards: event, custody, witness, public retelling, expenditure. Wren slept beside them rather than trust the slips to a draft.

In the morning Ansel reclaimed the table for stores. They carried the inquiry to Perrin's cell one strip at a time.

She wrote:

The exposed material did not permit a body count. Reclosure prevents correction. No surviving observation links the grave to Sela's earlier experience except direction as later retold. Contemporary witnesses agree that she said north, not east.

Perrin read over her shoulder.

"That will disappoint everyone."

"It should."

"Disappointment is one of the least stable archival materials."

"Then bind it properly."

Sela agreed to speak with Wren in the north store.

She chose the place because sacks did not lean toward her. Wren chose the hour because no public meal or office followed it. Tomas remained outside. Perrin was not invited.

Wren placed no notebook on the table.

Sela noticed the absence. "Where will you write it?"

"Afterward, from memory. I will return the account to you before I use it."

"I can't read your account."

Wren felt heat rise beneath the cold in her face.

"I will read it aloud. Or a person you choose will read it, without me present if you prefer."

"Fen."

"Does Fen read?"

"Enough to know when a name is missing."

Wren entered the correction in memory: permission to review was not access to review. She had offered a right in a form Sela could not use and expected gratitude for its precision.

"Tomas burned his."

"I don't."

"Which one is meant to comfort me?"

"Neither."

Sela considered that.

Wren asked about the hand. Sela described the small bones in loose soil, the direction Tomas had moved, the place where the earth would have carried the wrist if he cleared the skull first.

She described three skulls.

"Osric's first drawing shows five visible from the edge," Wren said.

"Then I saw five."

"No."

Sela looked up.

"You remember three," Wren said. "His drawing does not give you two more."

The tension in Sela's shoulders eased slightly.

"Everyone keeps giving me things," she said.

Wren set Osric's drawing facedown. "Keep the three you saw."

Wren asked whether Sela knew of the grave before the turf slipped.

"No."

"Whether she had walked the shoulder."

"Not that part. Goat ground stops below the wet ledge."

"Whether north at the trial could have referred to a route reaching east."

"Every route reaches somewhere if you keep changing its name."

Wren almost smiled. She wrote the sentence in memory and immediately distrusted it for being useful.

"I need the trial sequence," she said.

Sela's face closed.

"No."

"The grave claim depends on what happened in that room."

"Then say the grave doesn't prove it."

"I can say the surviving evidence does not support the claim. I need the sequence to state why."

"Tomas asked me until I was frightened. I answered until he stopped. Elaine said to keep my hands useful. The paper burned. That's the sequence."

"Where did you sit?"

"No."

"That is not a question about what you heard."

"It's a question about how I looked while I didn't hear it."

Wren said nothing.

Sela stood.

"I will tell you about the grave because I saw it. I will not sit in the room again so you can decide whether I sat like a true person."

"I did not ask you to reenact it."

"You were going to. Later. After enough small questions."

Wren looked at the empty tabletop. She had intended to ask the bench, the arch, the lamp, the lines of sight. She had not intended to place Sela in the seat. Intention did not remove the shape of the inquiry.

"I accept the refusal," she said.

Sela left.

Wren reconstructed the room without her.

Tomas described where he set the lamp and why. He demonstrated his own stool, the draft, and the paper position. Fen described the passage view and where Sela's hands had rested. Alaine declined to speak. Osric supplied the usual form of a trial but had not witnessed Sela's.

Fen refused the first diagram.

"You've put me in the doorway," he said.

"You said you stood in the passage."

"Passage isn't doorway. From the doorway Wilda would have moved me. I was behind the water niche."

Wren shifted his mark two paces north. The new position removed Tomas's hands from Fen's view and opened Alaine's left profile.

"Could you see Sela's feet?"

"No. Bench stone."

"Could you see the arch beyond her?"

"A strip. Enough to see someone pass, not enough to name them."

Tomas corrected the lamp position twice. The first correction followed habit. The second followed a soot mark under the copper hood. He stood looking at the blackened stone for a long time.

"My body remembers where I usually put it," he said. "The room remembers where it was."

Wren used the room.

Wren measured the empty listening room after midnight. She set Tomas's stool by the scorch mark, marked Sela's bench in chalk, then shifted it when Fen corrected the rear leg. She marked the sightlines from the passage.

No seal was broken. No witness was compelled. Every source had standing to describe the thing Wren asked of that source.

By morning she could show why all three observers might have turned toward the arch and that Fen could see Sela's hands and Alaine's profile, but not Tomas's paper. The reconstruction could not say whether Sela heard anything.

Sela found the chalk after breakfast.

Wren returned with clean water and a rag. Sela stood in the listening room staring at the white lines around the bench.

"You said you accepted the refusal," she said.

"I did not use your account of the trial."

"You used everyone around me."

"To test a public claim."

"About me."

"Yes."

Sela looked at the line from the bench to Alaine's chair.

"Which part is mine?"

Wren had answers. The bench belonged to the house. Tomas owned his position. Fen owned the passage view. The room could be measured. None of those facts required Sela's consent.

Together they had rebuilt the shape of her body after she said no.

"The claim that the grave proves prior knowledge is unsupported," Wren said. "Your refusal helped prevent that conclusion."

"I refused to help this."

"Your distinction told me which sources I still needed."

Sela's expression changed. Not surprise. Recognition.

"Then I can't refuse you," she said. "I can only tell you where to look next."

Wren held the rag and basin. Cold water touched the rim and ran over her knuckles.

"You can refuse me," she said.

"I did."

Sela stepped over the chalk line and left.

Wren washed the marks from the flags. The chalk came away easily except where it had entered the old scorch beside Tomas's stool.

In her working book she wrote the finding about the grave. Beneath it she wrote:

Source boundary violated without compulsion or false statement. Refusal treated as a selection constraint rather than an end to use. Analytical result remains supportable. Conduct does not become harmless because result is useful.

After that, Sela answered Wren only when the question concerned weather, ground, or somebody in immediate danger. Everything else received the same reply: "Ask someone who already said yes." Wren kept the finding and lost the easier access that had produced it.

She kept the paragraph with the finding.

Perrin later asked whether she wanted it in the dispatch copy.

"Yes."

"It will weaken the finding."

"It describes how the finding was obtained."

"Same thing, in Crown-watch."

Wren closed the book and tied the thong twice.

The correction occupied four lines. The chalk room had taken an entire floor.

Chapter Twelve

Fen Who?

The name was in a flour book.

Perrin found it because he had stopped looking for Fen.

The book belonged to Bryn Corr's mill and had come up to Whitehart wrapped in sacking after the lower storeroom took water. Bryn wanted the house to certify which debts remained legible before the damp turned every old obligation into a generous memory. Ansel wanted the book dried. Wren wanted the custody chain. Perrin wanted the pages people had not thought important enough to copy.

Fen wanted the book returned before Bryn charged Whitehart for it by the hour.

They worked in the east store with the shutters cracked and three braziers placed badly around the table. Too much heat would curl the pages. Too little would leave the mold. Fen moved the braziers twice. Perrin moved one back. Fen moved it again without comment.

"You could tell me why," Perrin said.

"I could also let you discover paper has edges."

Wren, at the other end of the table, did not look up.

Perrin smiled and continued turning the leaves with a bone slip.

The older entries were household flour: births, winter illnesses, roof debts, wedding portions paid partly in meal, apprentices fed at the mill during flood season. Names entered and crossed, names followed by arrows when a daughter married out or a son went to another valley. Bryn's grandmother had written small and angry. Bryn's father had written large enough to occupy twice the paper.

Fen sorted the damaged pages by smell before Perrin understood he was doing it.

"Smoke is older than the leak," he said. "This one hung by the oven."

"How do you know?"

"Because wet flour goes sweet. Oven soot doesn't."

Perrin wrote that down.

Fen saw him.

"You don't need that."

"No."

"Then why?"

"Because I didn't know it."

Fen could never tell whether Perrin meant that as respect or whether he simply enjoyed having an answer nobody could argue with.

A page near the middle had dried into a shallow wave. Perrin eased it flat beneath two weights. The top half was a list

of winter labor from twelve years earlier: mill hands, children carrying sacks, households owed bread for roof work.

Fen was standing by the shutters when Perrin stopped.

Wren noticed him stop.

Fen noticed Wren notice.

Wren's eyes moved to him, then to Perrin, then back to the page. Fen caught all three motions.

"What?" Fen asked.

Perrin read the entry again.

Leren household: Davel, Miri, Fen, age twelve. Three days roof. Two sacks meal. One broken tile charged to Davel.

Below it, in another hand:

Fen Leren to Whitehart for winter learning, first snow.

The name was not hidden.

That made it worse.

Perrin looked at Fen.

Fen's face had changed before Perrin spoke. Not fear. Something flatter.

"Put the weight back," Fen said.

Perrin did.

Wren set down her bone slip. "Is Leren a household name?"

Fen looked at her, not Perrin.

"It was."

"Was yours?"

"The book says so."

"That is not what I asked."

Fen gave the smallest laugh. "You've been here too long."

Perrin did not write.

There were two useful questions and one decent one. He knew the difference. He also knew that sometimes the decent question made the useful answer impossible.

He chose badly.

"Why did they stop using it?"

Fen looked at the flour book.

"They didn't."

"You did."

"No. Whitehart did."

The braziers ticked as iron changed temperature.

Outside, a cart wheel struck the yard drain and someone cursed.

Fen came back to the table. He put one finger beside the childhood entry without touching the page.

"A family name carries things," he said. "Land if there is land. Debt if there is debt. A marriage portion. Burial obligation. Who answers if you break someone's jaw. Who may answer for you if somebody breaks yours. When Tomas left my page open, none of those things stopped existing. They stopped attaching cleanly to me."

"Your parents?" Perrin asked.

"Dead."

"Siblings?"

"A sister married west before my test. A cousin took the north portion after my father died because somebody had to keep the lease current. Nobody stole it. That is the part people always want. A villain. There wasn't one."

"If the page closed now?"

"Which way?"

Perrin did not answer.

Fen nodded.

"Exactly."

Wren asked, "Does Whitehart forbid people from saying Leren?"

"No."

"Then what happens if they do?"

Fen looked at her.

"Try it in front of a clerk."

Perrin should have stopped there.

He did stop there.

For almost a day.

The next afternoon the mill book was dry enough to return. Bryn came up herself because she trusted nobody else to carry three generations of debts. She stood in the lower hall with Ansel, Wren, Perrin, Fen and two valley men whose families disputed whether a roof obligation had been paid in the year of the late thaw.

The argument was tedious and therefore dangerous.

One valley man said his grandfather had supplied timber.

The other said the timber belonged to his wife's family.

Bryn said both men were trying to inherit the same plank.

Ansel asked Fen which storage mark appeared on the damaged line.

Fen leaned over the book.

"North mill. Old cut. The mark changed after the roof fire."

One of the men frowned. "Who asked him?"

Ansel's mouth tightened.

Nobody answered quickly.

Fen watched three people look at one another before anyone looked at him.

They had used Fen's knowledge for years. Trouble began when somebody had to say whose knowledge it was.

Perrin felt the anger before he examined it.

He had watched Fen sit at the head of a bench and then be moved by nobody. He had watched people use the man's hands and route around the person attached to them. He had spent weeks telling himself that attention was not ownership.

He said, "Fen Leren was asked."

The silence was immediate.

Not mystical.

Legal.

Bryn's eyes went to Ansel.

Ansel's eyes went to Fen.

The older valley man took half a step back as though a boundary line had appeared on the floor.

Wren closed her eyes once.

Fen did not move.

Perrin understood the mistake with perfect clarity and too late to prevent it.

The surname had not restored Fen.

It had made a claim.

The younger valley man said, "Leren?"

Bryn snapped, "You heard him."

"The north lease is Leren land."

"Was."

"My wife's people have paid the upper assessment for twelve years."

Ansel said, "This meeting concerns the mill book."

"If Leren is entered—"

"He is not entered," Fen said.

The room turned toward him.

He had not raised his voice.

He looked at Perrin.

"Say it again."

Perrin knew a trap when one was offered and stepped into it because refusing would be worse.

"Fen Leren."

"Now tell them what that means."

Perrin said nothing.

"You found a name in a flour book," Fen said. "You like names because they make people harder to lose. Good. Tell them whether I inherit the north lease."

"I can't."

"Tell them whether Nessa could have married me."

"I can't."

"Tell them whether my cousin owes me ten years' rent."

"I can't."

"Tell them whether saying it makes me less Unwritten."

Perrin felt Wren watching him and hated that part of him wanted to answer well.

"No," he said.

Fen nodded.

"Then what did you give me?"

Nothing in the room moved.

Perrin looked down at the flour book.

"A complication."

"No." Fen's voice remained quiet. "I had complications. You gave them an audience."

The older valley man looked suddenly ashamed. Fen would have preferred anger.

Fen closed the flour book. He tied Bryn's sacking around it with the blue mill cord and handed it to her.

"Your grandfather's roof entry is north-mill cut," he said.
"The timber claim is probably hers, not his. If you want certainty, find the fire copy."

Bryn took the book.

"Thank you," she said.

She said it to Fen's face.

He flinched more at that than at the surname.

The meeting ended without anyone agreeing what Perrin's words had done.

Wren waited until the others left.

"You knew names carry standing," she said.

"I knew in principle."

"You knew the rule," Wren said. "You didn't know the price."

Perrin looked at her.

"That sounded prepared."

"It wasn't. Don't write it down."

He did not reach for his notebook.

Fen was halfway to the passage.

Perrin followed him.

"Fen."

Fen kept walking.

"Leren?"

That stopped him.

He turned slowly.

"Do not use it when we are alone because you think that makes it intimate."

Perrin felt the correction like a hand against his chest.

"What should I call you?"

"Fen."

"And in the Chronicle?"

Fen laughed then. One sharp sound.

"You still think you're getting that far."

He went down the passage.

Perrin remained by the wall with his notebook inside his coat.

He had wanted to return something.

He told himself he had wanted to return something.

The thought sounded noble enough that he stopped trusting it. He had also wanted to be the man seen carrying the lost thing back.

He did not write that either.

At supper, nobody called Fen Leren.

That might have been respect.

It might have been fear of the lease.

For the first time since arriving in Whitehart, Perrin understood that the two could look exactly the same from across a room.

Chapter Thirteen

The Corrected Entry

Merta's kitchen had one good chair and three poor ones. The good chair remained empty.

Tomas noticed because Fen had told Perrin to notice. Perrin noticed because he had come to purchase a memory. Wren noticed and wrote nothing, which Tomas had begun to understand was not the same as failing to record.

Merta served tea to all three of them and sat on a poor chair by the fire.

Fen had led them to the third house past the mill, then refused to enter.

"She knows why you're coming," he told Perrin at the door. "That will not improve it."

"Will you wait?"

"No."

He went back up the road with his candle box. Merta watched from the window until he disappeared.

Perrin placed a small leather purse on the table. He did not push it toward her.

"Twelve marks for an afternoon of recorded testimony," he said. "Payment for time and loss of work. You may review the

account through Brother Tomas before it leaves the valley. You may refuse any question. Refusal ends that question, not the interview."

"And the thing you actually think I want?" Merta asked.

Perrin took out one blank Chronicle sheet.

"Col's name in the Jubilee record. His age. The red judgment as Whitehart entered it. Your dissent stated as yours. The sixteen winter vigils. The fact that Whitehart forbade the name on its ground and that you observed the boundary."

"In black ink."

"All Chronicle body text is black. It would not change the Ledger's red."

"But people would say it did."

"Some would."

Perrin had learned. He did not offer the misunderstanding as mercy.

He opened his payment book and showed her the entry already ruled for the interview. Her name stood there, the twelve marks, the date, and the purpose: *time lost from wool sorting; testimony concerning Col and Sela; no purchase of conclusion.*

"If you refuse, I enter no payment," he said. "I may record that access was refused if the refusal limits the account."

"So refusing you becomes part of your book."

"Only the fact of it. Not why, unless you tell me why."

"And if you think you know why?"

Wren said, "He may record an inferred motive if he labels it as inference and states the observations beneath it. He may not present it as your testimony."

Merta turned to her. "Will you stop him using it?"

"No. I can make the use visible."

"Then you are the cleaner hand on the same knife."

Wren received the sentence without writing it. Perrin did not.

"Do not," Merta said.

His pen stopped above the page.

"That is mine too."

Perrin put the pen down.

"What do you want from me?" Merta asked.

"Sela before the trial. One account that belongs to a girl rather than a house."

"Why?"

"Because the house has made her smooth. She hears, she refuses, she is humble, she turns toward openings. That is an emblem. A human detail will keep the record from consuming the person entirely."

"Or give it better teeth."

"Yes," Perrin said.

Wren looked at him. Tomas did too.

Merta's hands remained around the tea cup.

"There is a story," she said. "A true one. She was small. Col was alive. It happened in this room."

Perrin did not reach for his pen.

"Would it make her ordinary?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Would it make the entry better?"

"Much."

"Will you tell me?"

"No."

"Does Sela know it?" Tomas asked.

"She remembers being here. She may not remember why."

"Does anyone else know?"

"My daughter. She was in the next room. She will not tell you."

The memory had two living custodians and no page. Tomas felt Perrin count both facts and choose not to ask the daughter's name.

The fire settled. One piece of peat broke and exposed a red center.

Perrin left the purse on the table. "May I ask why?"

"You may ask."

"Why?"

"Because you will do exactly what you say. You will write it kindly. People will love her for being afraid or greedy or foolish. Then someone who needs her small will cite the same story as proof that she was never anything else."

"I would label the use as inference."

"You won't be there every time it is read."

Wren said, "The recorded testimony would be the event you described. A later claim about what the event proves would be inference."

Merta looked at her. "Does writing the second word smaller stop it being used?"

"No. It tells a careful reader what has happened."

"How many careful readers does a Jubilee have?"

Wren did not answer.

"Read me the sentence you would use," Merta said.

Perrin took a breath before opening his book.

"Col of the Light Heights was found false and Given Back at first snow. His mother Merta maintained that the judgment was wrong and kept a vigil below the Whitehart boundary for sixteen winters."

"No."

"Which part?"

"Maintained. It makes me sound like a wall left standing after everyone sensible went home. Write *said*. Every year I said the testing was wrong. Every year Wilda said the rule. We were both doing something."

Perrin changed the word.

"Kept a vigil," Merta continued. "I carried his coat. Some winters I stood an hour. One year I came late because my daughter was ill. A vigil sounds clean."

"What wording?"

"Write what I did."

Perrin crossed out the phrase and replaced it with the coat, the line, and the years.

"Now it is longer," he said.

"He was alive for seventeen years. You can spare him another line."

Wren watched the entry become more exact through refusal and correction. Merta had still given Perrin no childhood story. She had made him pay attention to the life he already meant to use.

Perrin folded his hands. "The offer is real. So is the danger. I cannot promise the entry will only be used by people I trust. I can promise the first version will keep the distinction."

"And I can keep the story."

"Yes."

Merta pushed the purse back across the table.

"Then keep your twelve marks."

Perrin put the purse away.

He did not ask again.

Tomas felt something in the room alter when Perrin accepted the refusal. Not forgiveness. Merta had lost nothing she had not chosen to expose. Perrin had lost the thing he came for. The refusal therefore remained hers.

Before they rose, Perrin slid the corrected Col sentence across the table, then remembered Merta did not read the Chronicle hand easily. He read it aloud a second time. She

changed *below the boundary* to *on the valley side of the boundary*.

"Below makes it sound like I was kept at a respectful distance," she said. "I stood exactly where your grant says I stood."

Wren marked the spatial wording as Merta's testimony. Perrin marked the earlier phrase as his inference.

Merta accepted neither page. "Take your paper. Leave my table."

"I have something else," Merta said.

She went to the good chair and lifted its cushion. Beneath it lay a narrow household tally board wrapped in cloth. The marks along its edge recorded births, deaths, portions, and winter stores. Tomas recognized the valley system. Older families kept one even when the mill tally held the same facts.

Merta placed it before him.

"Your book says Col was in his eighteenth year."

Tomas remembered the red page. "Yes."

"He was seventeen."

"The testing date falls after his seventeenth winter. Whitehart counts the year entered."

"He had not reached his eighteenth naming day. The mill count kept age by naming day. You copied the winter count as age."

Wren leaned over the board but did not touch it. "Do you have a second record?"

"The mill has the birth tally. Nessa brought it to the window when she saw you coming down. She'll witness the mark if you ask her yourself."

Tomas looked at the cut for Col's birth, then the deeper cut for his naming day. He had entered the age from the winter roll sixteen years ago. He had copied correctly from a record that answered a different question.

"The judgment does not change," he said.

Merta's face went hard. "I know which thing you are willing to correct."

"I will enter it."

"I did not bring it for your conscience."

"Why did you?"

"Because he was seventeen."

They went to the mill.

Nessa set the birth tally beside Merta's board. The marks agreed. Wren recorded custody, Perrin witnessed the comparison, and Tomas carried the boards separately.

Meal dust whitened the older cuts on the mill tally. Nessa wiped around Col's mark without touching it.

"Who can read this system?" Wren asked.

"Anyone who keeps a household board," Nessa said.

"Could the mark have been added later?"

"The wear crosses the cut. Three winter totals refer back to it."

Nessa showed her the later notches. Flour touched Wren's sleeve.

"That supports age of the mark, not the truth of the birth."

"Then ask Merta whether she borrowed a baby to fool you twenty years later."

Wren straightened. "I am asking what the object establishes."

"And I'm telling you what the question costs when spoken in a mill."

Tomas saw Wren take that correction more slowly than the one about the warming stone.

Nessa made a rubbing of the tally on thin paper. She signed the rubbing with the mill mark and kept the original on its peg. Merta's board returned to her kitchen. The records remained with their owners; Whitehart carried witnessed copies.

In the Ledger room he opened Col's red entry.

Perrin stood at the end of the table. Wren stood beside the shutter where the light was best. Merta had not come. She had said the correction belonged to the house that made the error.

The age stood in Tomas's younger hand.

Eighteen.

He did not strike it out. In the margin he entered the date of correction, supplied seventeen, named Merta's household tally and the mill birth tally, and wrote that the earlier entry had treated winter-year as completed age. Wren and Perrin signed that they had witnessed the records and the correction. Nessa's

mill mark and Merta's household mark were copied beside the note, not as consent to the judgment but as provenance for the age.

The red line remained below.

Col was now correctly seventeen when Whitehart sent him into the first snow.

Tomas remembered the boy's wrists.

At seventeen Col's hands had already been broad from mill sacks, but the sleeves of the brown coat covered half of them. He had kept pulling one cuff back to rub the blue elbow patch. Tomas had written the repetition on trial paper, then burned it.

The correction did not change what Tomas had seen. It changed the person he had allowed himself to remember seeing.

Perrin read the page.

"More accurate," he said.

"Yes."

"Not more merciful."

"No."

Tomas turned forward to Fen's unfinished page. Four words, then ruled space.

"Your Chronicle will have places like this," he said.

"Every page has them. We hide ours better."

"You criticize us for leaving him unwritten and criticize us for the judgments we finish."

"I criticize the cost. The blank may still be the least harmful choice you had. It is not therefore empty."

"And what will you write about him?"

Perrin looked at Fen's name.

"If I write nothing, Whitehart's absence becomes the only surviving fact. If I write him as a source, I make his wound useful to the same history that ignored him. If I write him as a man denied standing, someone will ask what he told me and why."

"There is no harmless entry."

"No. There are only entries whose harm is visible and entries that call it something else."

Wren closed her working book with more force than necessary. "That sentence is going to travel without the problem attached."

Perrin rubbed his eyes. "Then do not write it down."

"I already did."

They returned Col's page to its place and closed the Ledger.

Tomas carried Merta's household board back himself.

She opened the cloth at her table and inspected the edges. Whitehart had added no seal, tag, or mark to the wood. Only Wren's paper rubbing remained in the record.

"You wrote seventeen?" Merta asked.

"Yes. The earlier age remains visible with the correction beside it."

"And the red?"

"Unchanged."

"Of course."

She rewrapped the board.

Tomas said, "I remembered him as seventeen."

Merta's hands stopped on the cloth.

"The book said eighteen," he continued. "I let the book make the room easier to remember."

"Does that mean you judged him wrong?"

He wanted to offer doubt as a form of restitution. He understood, before speaking, that doubt placed another burden on her: to comfort him, condemn him, or stand again inside a trial she had never witnessed.

"It means the age was wrong," he said. "I cannot recover enough of the burned account to make a new judgment."

"Then don't bring me almost-mercy and ask me to name it."

"I won't."

Merta put the board beneath the good chair rather than under its cushion. The hiding place had changed. The record remained hers.

At the lower turn Tomas looked back toward Merta's house. Through the small window he saw her carry the good chair from the wall and set it beside the glass. She sat where the empty cushion had waited sixteen years and watched the three of them climb back toward the house without the story they had wanted.

The corrected age went with them.

The childhood memory stayed in her kitchen.

Chapter Fourteen

Not That Way

The thaw came four weeks early and arrived before dawn.

By breakfast water ran beneath the upper snow. The yard looked solid until a boot broke the white skin and sank ankle-deep into brown slush. Every drain filled at once. Ansel sent novices to clear the lower channels, then sent them back for different tools because the frost had not left the soil beneath the water.

Sela spent the morning at the byres moving feed away from a sweating wall. It was her first ordinary work in weeks. Beside Ivet, she shifted twelve sacks and found two wet at the bottom.

Ivet said it could be dried.

Sela said it could be fed to pigs.

"We don't have pigs," Ivet said.

"Then your plan is already better."

Ivet laughed anyway. For several minutes the only problem was damp meal.

Harl came through the gate before noon leading a pack mule loaded with iron fittings from the valley smith. Mud reached the animal's belly. Harl's boots had been wrapped in sacking to keep the wet from entering at the seams.

He saw Sela under the byre eave and pointed at her with the end of the lead rope.

"You've gone thin."

"You say that every time."

"You keep doing it. Do they not feed you?"

"Ansel will hear."

"Good. He'll give you cheese to defend his accounts."

He began unloading the fittings. Sela took one end of a hinge strap before he could decide she was too holy or too slight. He let her carry it.

"Tam?" she asked.

Harl looked down at the buckle he was loosening.

"Nearly said yes."

"Nearly?"

"I told him plain. If the summer route pays, the grey mare is his to haul on his own account. Not mine lent when convenient. His. Feed, shoeing, mistakes, all of it."

"What did he say?"

"Said *all right* and walked away."

"That's not yes."

"From Tam, that is a wedding office."

Harl's delight made him clumsy. He dropped a buckle pin, found it, and blamed the mud.

Sela wanted to see the moment when the mare changed hands. She wanted Tam to pretend indifference and Harl to believe him for the length of one breath. The wanting had

survived the grave, the hall, and Wren's chalk. That made it feel important.

"Bryn still has the deposits?" she asked.

"More than deposits. Twelve summer parties booked. Forty people a week if the road holds. She has roof slate coming from the west and two cousins building beds. I've got rope, a pack saddle on credit, and six men promised road shares."

He pulled the mule's blanket aside to check for rub marks.

"High road?"

"Of course high road. One day with people and packs. Low road is two days, more food, another night, and half of them go elsewhere before paying."

Sela looked beyond the gate toward the east shoulder.

The thaw had darkened long lines in the snow. Water moved beneath the white cover and came out lower down carrying black soil. During the night she had heard the slow, deep sounds of saturated ground settling above the house.

"Not that way," she said.

Harl stopped rubbing the mule's back.

"What?"

"Not the east shoulder. Not this thaw."

She pointed. "The snow came down warm and the frost is still under it. Water can't sink. It's running between the soil and the frozen ground. The turf above the wet ledge was moving yesterday."

Harl looked where she pointed. He knew exactly which ledge she meant.

"It moves every spring."

"Not this early. There's too much snow above it."

"Then I use the neck."

"The neck takes everything the shoulder sheds."

Around them the working yard quieted by degrees. A novice at the drain stopped levering ice. Two kitchen workers stood with a water tub between them. Ansel remained at the store door with his tally raised.

Ivet held the wet meal sack against her hip.

Sela became aware of every listening body at once.

"I'm talking about ground," she said.

Harl heard the correction. So did everyone else.

"I know what you're talking about," he said. "I've walked it since I was nine."

"Then look before you take bookings up."

"Bookings are already taken."

"Change the route."

"To two days? I refund half the spring, Corr sells her new roof to pay the rest, the road men lose their shares, and Tam gets half a horse."

"Better than no Tam."

The words landed badly.

Harl's face closed, then opened again with effort.

"That's fear talking," he said.

"Yes. Mine."

He gave the mule a pat and took up the lead. "I'll inspect before I carry anyone. If the shoulder's bad, I go over rock at the neck. I've eyes."

"Harl—"

"Go dry your pig food."

He left with one hand raised behind him.

Ivet carried the saved meal to the kitchens. When the cook asked why the yard had stopped, she said Sela had warned Harl off the east route until the ground dried. She said nothing about a voice, the dead, or prohibition.

The cook told the milk carrier because her sister had contracted to supply Bryn's guests. The sister told Bryn before the next bread load went up.

Bryn came to Whitehart angry enough to walk faster than the mud allowed.

"Did you forbid my road?" she asked Sela in the yard.

"No."

"Did you tell Harl not to use it?"

"I told him the ground is wet and the thaw is wrong."

"So yes."

"That's not the same."

"It is to twelve parties with deposits in my jars."

She turned on Ansel. "Who heard?"

Ansel looked at the yard. "Everyone who had business here and several who invented some."

Ninety minutes after Sela spoke, the first road camp had the account.

By evening it had divided.

One version said the Called had forbidden the shoulder where the unnamed dead lay. The other said Sela was a frightened goatherd who knew wet slopes and that Whitehart made an office from every practical sentence.

Both versions used things Sela had actually said.

Near dusk Sela passed Bryn's barn and saw Perrin sitting on an overturned grain measure while two travelers gave him opposite versions of her words. He corrected neither. Wren stood beside the booking slate and marked where each traveler said the account had reached them.

Fen came through the yard carrying candle oil. He saw Sela, shifted the jar to his other hip, and went inside without greeting her.

Sela did not know how the gentler story had begun. That one frightened her differently. The holy version took her authority. The sympathetic version took her competence and called the theft protection.

She went to Osric before the evening office.

"Let me speak in the hall," she said. "I'll say I did not forbid anything."

Osric put down his pen.

"What do you think the room will hear?"

"The correction."

"They will hear the Called refusing authority again. They already use your refusal as proof."

"Then I will say the road is safe."

"Do you believe that?"

"No."

"They will believe you. Harl will go. Bryn will keep the bookings. If the ground holds, the house will call it mercy. If the ground fails, they will call it sacrifice or mystery."

Sela stared at him. "Is that what you want?"

"No. I am telling you which public sentence would change the market by morning."

"And the truth?"

"The truth already changed it."

He was not pleased. That made the answer worse.

Outside, rain struck the shutter. The mountain gave a low sound too deep to be thunder.

"What do I do?" Sela asked.

Osric rubbed ink from one finger. "Choose what you say. Then live with what they do to it. Silence counts."

She returned to the yard without speaking in the hall.

The next morning she went down to Bryn's.

The barn roof was half new. Slate covered the corner where snow had entered all Sela's childhood. Beneath it stood twelve

sleeping boards, half bought with deposits and half made from doors Bryn would need again after summer.

Twelve household marks filled the booking slate. Three deposits could still be returned whole. Five depended on selling the new slate; four had become rope, iron, wood, and promised wages.

"I thought deposits stayed in jars," Sela said.

Bryn looked at her. "Only honest ones."

"That explains finance."

"The first one did. Then people wanted a roof to deposit under."

Bryn put a finger against the first mark. "Six days west, with an old mother whose legs won't take the low road. This one brings two children. If I close for weather and cannot name an opening day, they take what coin remains and sleep elsewhere."

"Then tell them I didn't close it."

"I have. Half think I'm defending my money. The other half think the Called is too humble to admit what she did."

Sela looked at the new roof. "I can work off some of it."

"At what wage?"

"None."

"Then every woman who carried slate for pay gets told the holy girl worked for love and asks why she wanted money."

Bryn took the slate down and set it on the board between them.

"You are not the only person whose meaning moves now," she said. "That's what you don't understand."

Tam entered from the rear stall with mud on his forearms. He had been fitting a borrowed pack saddle to a mule. The grey mare's lead rope hung from his belt as if possession could begin with an object.

"He'll use the neck," Tam said.

"I know," Sela replied.

"It held yesterday."

"Yesterday isn't today."

"If he cancels, everyone says you stopped him. If he goes, everyone says he defied you."

Tam pulled the lead rope free and coiled it tighter.

"You left him no road that was only a road."

The sentence was cruel because it was exact. Bryn started to rebuke him. Sela stopped her.

"I know," Sela said.

Tam looked at her then, anger losing its clean direction.

"I still want the horse," he said.

"I know that too."

She spent the afternoon carrying dry boards into the loft at Bryn's day rate. Bryn entered the wage beside her name and made Sela take two meal tokens. No one saw holiness in the work because Bryn shouted at her whenever she slowed.

That evening a traveler recognized Sela on the ladder and knelt in the straw. Another saw the kneeling and left the barn,

saying he would not pay to sleep in a shrine.

The two stories continued down different roads.

At the gate, two men argued over whether she had saved the road or ruined it while she stood ten paces away. One called her a saint. The other called her a frightened child.

The frightened-child version hurt worse. At least the man calling her a saint had the decency to sound ridiculous.

She went home to her mother before returning to Whitehart.

Brem had fixed the lower goat's appetite by pulling a length of cord from between its back teeth. He described the operation three times and improved his own courage with each telling. Their mother let him until he claimed the goat had tried to swallow his whole hand.

"Your fingers wouldn't satisfy a goat," Sela said.

Brem threw a crust at her.

She caught it. For part of the meal they argued about whether Tam's mare had one white ear or merely a pale scar. The argument almost became ordinary.

Then their mother asked, "Will Harl go?"

"Yes."

"Should he?"

"No."

"Did you hear that?"

Sela looked at the crust in her hand. "No."

Her mother nodded. She did not look relieved or disappointed.

"Then he'll have to choose with what you gave him," she said.

"I gave him wet ground."

"You gave him wet ground in front of a yard."

Sela left before dark with the unused crust in her pocket.

Whitehart issued a road notice on the third day.

Osric drafted it. Ansel removed every word that might create a refund claim against the house. Wren removed every claim the ground had not established. Perrin shortened it until a wet traveler could remember it.

East-shoulder travel remains open under guide judgment. The house has issued no sacred prohibition. Wrong-thaw conditions require inspection before every ascent. The Called reports no voice concerning the road.

Sela listened while Osric read it.

"Don't call me the Called in the last line."

"If I write your name, people say the house is hiding your standing when it weakens the warning."

"If you write the Called, they stop at the first word."

They posted both versions: one with *Sela*, one with *the Called*. Believers copied the second. People seeking refunds copied the first.

By the fifth day, one camp said Whitehart had opened the route against Sela's wish. Another said Whitehart had admitted she heard nothing and owed every deposit.

Chapter Fifteen

Nine Fares

Harl left the next morning before daylight with nine fares, a new rope, and food measured for the high road.

Ivet brought the news to Sela not long after first meal.

She had run from the lower store. Her face was wet from rain and tears.

"He's gone up. Bryn says he took the booked party. She says he inspected yesterday and the neck held."

Sela was already pulling on her cloak.

"Nine?"

"Nine. Four marks each."

"Tam?"

"Stayed below. Bryn said he wasn't on the first run."

That was like Harl: risk his own body to prove a route safe enough for his son's future.

Sela went out through the gate at a walk. Running wasted breath on the first climb. At the lower turn she passed an Ashbourne road man with one shoulder bound, arguing with the bonesetter about whether a sling counted as rest. She did not know his name yet. The high track rose four miles to the long traverse. Rain had cut channels across it. She used the grass

edges where roots still held and kept her pace below the point where her lungs began making decisions for her.

At the first water place she found the print of Harl's iron-shod stick and nine separate boot patterns churned around it. One traveler dragged a heel. Another stepped only on stones when stones were available. Harl had marked the worst mud with alder twigs so the return party would not widen the path.

Sela followed the marks.

Above the second turn, a shallow runnel crossed the road where none had been the week before. Water carried grains of pale stone. She put her palm on the turf above it. The ground trembled faintly under the force of water she could not see.

She climbed faster after that.

She caught them before noon at the lower end of the traverse.

Nine travelers stood behind Harl in city boots and wet blankets. He had tied the slowest two to a guide line because they were hiding their fatigue. The kneeling man had walked from the western plain after his wife died. A woman carried her father's work token for the griffes. Two brothers had spent a season's spare coin and would not admit the mountain frightened them. Turning would cost each of them more than four marks.

He saw Sela and closed his eyes once.

"Four miles in this rain," he said. "Your mother know you're out?"

"Come down."

One traveler knelt in the mud.

Harl did not turn. "Get up. You'll need those knees."

The traveler rose.

"The shoulder is moving," Sela said.

"We're not taking the shoulder."

"The neck catches what comes off it."

"The neck is rock. I walked it yesterday. Drove an iron pin at the narrow shelf and loaded it with my whole weight. No shift. Water's running east of the crossing."

He pointed with his stick. The route he described climbed above the turf line and crossed a rib of exposed stone. It added three hours but avoided the repaired grave and the wet ledge.

It was a defensible choice.

"The slope above can take the shelf," Sela said.

"It can. The low road can flood. A horse can break a leg in its stall."

"Take them down and refund them."

"Thirty-six marks in fares. Twelve to me for the guide day. Six already in rope, iron, and food. Bryn has spent deposits on beds and roof. If I turn here because you came up frightened, every booking is a claim."

"Let it be a claim."

"Paid from what? Tam's mare? Corr's roof? The road men's winter grain?"

The travelers listened. One looked from Sela to the dark ground above, then loosened his pack as if preparing to turn.

Harl saw.

"Give me the words," he said quietly.

"What words?"

"The ones they'll accept."

Sela knew.

Harl said them for her, six words, low enough that only the nearest travelers heard.

"The voice said you will die."

Rain struck the rope between them.

"Say that," Harl said, "and I turn. I refund what I can. Corrsells slate. Tam waits another year. Nobody calls me afraid because no man is expected to argue with the dead."

The sentence lay ready. It would save him. It would fit every account already running through the valley. No person on the mountain could disprove it.

"No," Sela said.

Harl waited.

"I didn't hear that. I did not hear words. Not today. Not at the trial. I don't know if I hear anything at all."

She made herself keep looking at him.

"I know ground. I watched the dark lines open this morning. The thaw came early. There is frozen soil under water and the whole face is moving. I think the shelf will go. I am afraid. That is what I have."

Harl's expression softened.

It was worse than anger. He believed her completely.

"Then it's wet ground," he said.

"Yes."

"And I have walked wet ground my whole life."

"Not this ground today."

"Yesterday. With iron. The neck held."

He shifted the rope on his shoulder.

"The low road takes two days. We have food for one and no second guide. These people paid for the route I judged. I will not take the turf. I will cross the neck one at a time, unroped at the shelf so no fall drags another. I will put myself first over every doubtful place."

"That doesn't make it safe."

"No. It makes it work."

Behind him, the traveler who had loosened his pack tightened it again. Harl's practical detail had given the group something firmer than Sela's fear.

Harl put one hand on her shoulder.

"You did right," he said. "A lie would have got what you wanted and you still told me straight. Remember that."

"Please."

"I love you too, girl. I'm still going."

He removed his hand and turned to the party.

"Neck route. Three hours added. Nobody steps where I haven't stepped. If I say drop a pack, you drop it. If anyone wants down now, Corr returns the bed money and I return what fare I haven't spent."

He took six silver marks from the inner pocket of his coat and set them on a flat stone.

"That is what remains of my guide share. One mark back to each of the first six who turn. The last three claim against Corr because her jar holds the balance. I will witness it."

The woman with the red scarf asked Sela, "You truly heard nothing?"

"Nothing."

"But you believe the road will fall."

"Yes."

"Because of the ground."

"Because of the ground."

The woman looked almost angry at the absence of mystery. She tightened the scarf beneath her chin and left the coin on the stone.

One of the brothers picked up a mark. The other stared at him. After a moment the first brother put it back.

"That is not consent to die," Harl said. "It is consent to the route I described. If the weather changes, I turn you whether you like it or not."

He made each traveler answer. Yes to the neck. Yes to the added hours. Yes to abandoning a pack if ordered. Their answers were tired, embarrassed, devout, stubborn, or practical. None meant the same thing.

No one left.

Sela waited until the travelers began retightening their packs.

"Why nine on the first run?" she asked Harl. "Take two. Load the route before you sell the rest."

"I loaded it yesterday with Tam."

"Two bodies are not ten."

"No. Ten bodies are how I learn whether the route carries ten bodies. Every first run is the first run sometime."

"Then charge less for being your test weight."

"I did. Four marks instead of six. Corr's slate says opening fare."

The fact angered Sela because it made the arrangement fairer without making it safe.

Harl put the six refund marks back inside his coat. "If we turn at the neck, they get the full guide share back. If we reach the shelter late, I pay the extra meal. If a pack goes over, the owner carries the loss unless I ordered the placement. Those are the terms."

"And if you go over?"

He touched the small knife at his belt, checking the sheath thong from habit.

"Tam has my accounts. Bryn has the deposits. You tell him the mare was his if the road paid, not if I lived to hand over the rope."

"Don't make me carry that."

"Then I'll carry it home myself."

Harl smiled then, tired and pleased with himself, as if a bad bargain had become respectable because he had found the last term.

Harl led them upward.

Sela watched the line reach the fork. He took the right-hand rise toward the rock neck, away from the grave and away from the wet shoulder path. At the first narrow place he halted the party, crossed alone, and waved one person after him.

He did what he said.

Sela stayed until the last traveler passed out of sight.

Then she went down.

She waited that night at the gate. Harl had planned to bring the party to a pass shelter before dark and return the next day with a wool train. The rain continued. No lamp came below the elbow.

Ansel brought her a covered cup after the evening meal.

"You can wait inside the gate."

"Then I can't see the turn."

"You cannot see it now."

Fog had swallowed everything below the first stones. Sela held the cup between her palms and remained outside.

Perrin came through once, stopped, and decided not to ask a question. Wren came later with a dry scrap of paper under her coat and asked only what time Harl had intended to reach the shelter. Sela told her. Wren wrote the answer and left before Sela could hate her for using it.

Near midnight Wilda ordered the gate watch changed early because the two younger novices had been staring down the road instead of listening. She did not order Sela indoors.

Sela slept for an hour against the wall and woke when her cup fell.

On the second day she waited on the gallery. Tam came up before noon and stood beside her without greeting. He wore the new lead rope for the grey mare wound around his waist, though the horse had not yet been bought.

"He'll have stayed at the shelter," Tam said.

"Yes."

"River could be high."

"Yes."

"He went by the neck."

"I watched him."

Tam looked at her then. "You told him not to."

"Yes."

He turned back to the road.

"I went with him yesterday," Tam said after a while.

Sela waited.

"Only to the neck. He wouldn't let me cross the shelf. He drove the pin until the head bent. Tied the new rope and hung both of us on it. Made me jump."

"Did it move?"

"No. Water was east, like he said. Rock sounded clean."

"What was above it?"

"Snow. Turf. Same as always."

"Not the same amount."

Tam struck the gallery rail with the heel of his hand. "You think I don't know that now?"

He showed her a shallow cut across his palm from the inspection rope.

"He asked me to go today," Tam said. "Said I could see the first paid run. I told him somebody had to fit the saddle."

"For the mare."

"For a horse that isn't ours."

He closed his hand.

"If I went, maybe he turns because I'm there. Maybe he doesn't because I'm there. I chose the saddle."

Sela stood beside him with no correction to give. Harl had inspected the route. Tam had chosen work. She had given warning. Every decision could be defended before the shelf failed.

At midday Bryn brought the booking slate wrapped in oilcloth. She and Tam checked Harl's times: fork by noon, shelter before dark, wool train on the second morning, return by last light.

"The wool train could be late," Bryn said.

"He'd send one of the pilgrims down," Tam replied.

"Unless the river cut the lower track."

"Then he'd wait."

Sela said, "He took the neck."

Bryn put one finger on the route mark. "I know."

"If people say otherwise—"

"Let him come back and tell them himself."

The words held the rest of the afternoon together.

Before dark, Tam went down to fetch two valley men and a spare rope. Wilda stopped him at the elbow. Search in night rain would risk four more bodies and find no route Harl had not already judged. Tam argued until his voice broke. Wilda stood in the water and let him spend the anger on her.

He returned to the gallery without the men.

The second night the rain stopped. The mountain became quiet enough that Sela heard water draining from individual roofs. She did not listen for a voice. She listened for boots, a mule bell, Harl swearing at the last turn.

Nothing came.

Tam slept sitting beside the gate with the mare's rope looped around one fist. Sela covered him with her cloak. At dawn he woke and accused her of treating him like a child.

"You were asleep like one."

"I was resting my eyes."

"Your mouth was open."

He wiped his face and discovered the mark from the rope across his cheek. For half a breath they both nearly laughed.

Word climbed on the morning of the third day.

First a boy from the mill, running. Then three men at the elbow carrying no load and moving as if they did. Behind them

came a pilgrim with blood dried down one side of his coat.

They stopped when they saw Sela above the gate.

The pilgrim began to kneel.

Sela went down before he reached the ground.

Chapter Sixteen

Four Accounts of a Rope

The pilgrim could tell them where the shelf had gone. He could not tell them who remained alive above it.

He had left the neck two days earlier with a cut across his scalp, one sleeve torn away, and Harl's instruction to bring rope. Floodwater forced him west. He slept one night beneath a rock and lost the next morning finding a descent that did not return him to the broken slope.

"Four dead," he said at the gate. "I saw four. Five alive when I left. One hurt badly. Harl—"

He looked at Tam and stopped.

Roderick took control before Whitehart decided who had authority.

He had arrived three days earlier with an Ashbourne road escort and Jubilee dispatches. His right shoulder was already bound from a bridge rescue the previous autumn; the wrapping pulled his coat slightly crooked and kept that arm closer to his body than the other. Everything else about him moved as if the injury belonged to someone he had no time to consult. He gave the history to the bonesetter; by afternoon the camps had made him strong enough to hold the bridge itself.

He asked the pilgrim five questions: where the shelf broke, what remained anchored, who could walk, what rope Harl carried, and when the last movement occurred.

Then he said, "We leave now. Another night kills the injured even if the slope holds."

Wilda objected to sending an exhausted party onto unstable ground. Roderick agreed and sent the exhausted people away. He chose two Whitehart rope keepers, three valley climbers, Tam, and two of his own road wardens. He took Harl's old heavy line from the store and every short rope the camp could supply.

He made each person state one useful skill. A valley man knew the upper water cuts; another could set an anchor. Tam knew his father's knots. Sela knew the neck from below and the sound of saturated turf. Roderick placed them by those answers.

He rejected six volunteers. One called him a coward. Roderick asked whether the man could identify a loaded hemp line by sound; when he could not, Roderick told him to carry blankets.

Brem attached himself to the party with a coil too large for him. No one noticed until the elbow.

Sela did.

"Go home," she told him.

"Tam needs the line."

"Tam needs you not under his feet."

"I'm not under them. I'm behind."

He was twelve and terrified and had found a distinction he believed ought to save him.

Roderick looked at the coil, then at the boy. "You come to the lower marker. You do not pass it. You give the rope to an adult there."

"Which marker?"

"The one I make."

Brem nodded.

Sela said, "He'll keep going if Tam does."

"Then stay beside him."

"You just told me not to climb."

"I told the house I need people who know rope above the line. I need you below it because you know the ground and because he will listen to you before he listens to me."

It was practical. Sela still heard the assumption inside it: Roderick would decide the line, the risk, and who proved useful on either side.

They climbed.

What happened above the long traverse survived in four accounts.

None contained the whole slope.

The account from below

Sela saw Roderick place the lower marker where an alder root crossed exposed stone. He drove a pin into a crack, tied red cloth to it, and ordered everyone without a rope task downhill.

The broken shelf lay three hundred paces above. A grey cut ran across the neck where the rock rib had detached with the soil behind it. Harl had taken the safe route. The safe route was gone.

Roderick spent twenty minutes before crossing. He rejected two pins, loaded the alder root, checked for water below the rock, and threw stones onto the first plate to hear whether it moved.

To the people waiting below, the twenty minutes looked like delay. To the injured above, it was twenty minutes more in wet clothes. Roderick ended it before every uncertainty was answered.

Two survivors waited on a narrow patch to the west of the cut. Three more sheltered beneath an overhang farther up. Between them and the rescue party lay tilted stone, running water, and a strip of turf that moved whenever anyone placed weight near its upper edge.

The dead were lower down. Sela could see one blue coat and nothing she could name as Harl.

Roderick tied the main rope around his waist and over his left shoulder, avoiding the bound right one. He gave the standing end to the two rope keepers.

"Test it with a load before you cross," Sela called.

"I am the load," he answered.

He stepped onto the first loose plate.

Everyone watched where he put his feet. That was useful. It also made following him look like the measure of courage.

He crossed to the nearer survivors and sent them back one at a time. He came last. On the third crossing, water pushed gravel from beneath the plate. Roderick dropped to one knee, the rope loaded, and his right arm jerked despite the way he had bound it.

He got up without using the arm.

Below, Brem had left Sela's side.

Tam called for the smaller coil. Brem carried it past the red marker before Sela caught his sleeve. He twisted free—not from her, he said later, but from the coil, which had snagged.

The turf under his downhill boot folded. Brem slid six feet and struck a stone with one leg trapped beneath the coil. Mud filled his mouth when he shouted. The next movement would take him across the wet face.

Sela went toward him.

Roderick shouted, "Stay."

He was already crossing back.

He came down the loaded line without waiting for the rope keepers to reset their hands. The right shoulder failed when he swung below the broken plate. Sela heard the sound he made. He reached Brem with his left hand, cut the coil loose, and set the short rescue hook through the boy's belt and into his own line.

The turf shifted again. Roderick put his body between Brem and the open slope.

The rope took both of them. It struck the alder hard enough to strip bark. The keepers lurched forward; Tam threw himself onto the line. Sela caught the wet tail, lost skin from both palms, and wrapped it around the root. The load stopped with Brem's boot hanging over open ground.

They hauled Brem first.

Roderick climbed after him using one arm and his knees.

When he reached the marker, he did not lie down. He turned uphill and saw three valley men moving toward the higher survivors because he had gone and returned.

"Back below the red," he ordered.

One kept climbing.

Roderick stepped into his path with the useless arm held against his chest.

"I went because the boy was moving," he said. "He is not moving now. The face is. Back."

The man obeyed.

That prevented the second fall.

Sela could not see the retreat order reaching the people below. She could see them watching Roderick stand.

Brem's account, given later

He said he never crossed the marker on purpose. Tam had asked for the coil; Sela had grabbed the wrong sleeve; the ground vanished before his foot touched it.

He remembered Harl sitting on a stone below and raising one hand. Harl was already dead and was not sitting.

He remembered Roderick saying, "Look at me."

No one below heard those words.

"He came down head first," Brem said. "His arm didn't work. He put the hook through my belt and told me not to help. I helped. I held his coat."

He remembered Sela calling his name throughout the fall. She remembered shouting twice.

Brem could not remember the red cloth.

"There wasn't any marker where I stepped," he said.

The cloth remained tied to the iron pin and mud from Brem's boot marked the uphill side.

Wren entered both facts and did not ask him to choose between terror and cloth.

The torn piece of Roderick's coat remained in Brem's hand when they reached Whitehart.

"Would you have fallen without him?" Wren asked when she recorded the account.

Brem looked offended. "I was already falling."

The pilgrim who saw only the rope

The third surviving pilgrim lay beneath the upper overhang with a broken ankle. She saw only the main rope tighten across the shelf, slacken, then tighten again.

Roderick had crossed first. Harl had crossed first on the day of the accident. She said that was why she trusted the rope when it reached her.

The rescue reached her after dark by a line set from above. Roderick did not make that climb. His road warder did. The woman nevertheless told Perrin that the Ashbourne man had brought her down.

"I saw his rope," she said.

"Did you see him at the upper anchor?" Perrin asked.

"No."

"Did someone tell you he set it?"

"Everyone knew."

Perrin entered the rope, the inference, and the uncertainty as separate lines.

The novice's account

Novice Kessa carried hot drink to the lower marker after sunset and remained for the descent.

She remembered Roderick saying, "No one goes where I have not gone first."

Roderick denied using the sentence.

Sela remembered Harl saying something close to it three days earlier.

Kessa remembered a clear retreat order after Brem was saved. The rope keepers remembered only the valley men being ordered below the red cloth. Tam, staring at the blue coat beneath the neck, heard nothing.

Kessa's account contained the most orderly rescue. It was also the one repeated in the hall.

Perrin asked for Roderick's exact words and whether he spoke them before the first crossing or after Brem fell. Kessa insisted on *No one goes where I have not gone first* and placed it before. One rope keeper placed it after. The other remembered only, *Back below the red*.

Kessa began to cry from anger. "I know what I heard."

"I believe you remember it," Perrin said.

She heard the distinction and cried harder.

What remained

They recovered the living first.

Roderick refused to move the dead until every survivor had reached the lower marker. Tam argued when he saw the blue coat below the neck. Roderick stood between him and the descent.

"If he is alive, another hour kills him," Tam said.

"If he is alive, going without an anchor kills both of you. If he is dead, waiting changes nothing for him."

Tam struck him across the chest with both hands. Roderick took the blow and did not move. Sela pulled Tam back before the second.

They set a separate recovery line after dark. The heavy rope had to be cut where stone trapped it; three fathoms remained on the mountain. Harl came up last because his body lay lowest and because Tam would not leave until he did.

No one carried a body alone. No one went first for that part. The dead crossed by a system of hands, anchors, rests, and

names called at each transfer.

Four people had died: Harl and three travelers. Six came down alive, including the pilgrim who had carried word. Brem came down wrapped in a road blanket with his trapped leg bruised and unbroken. Roderick walked beside the hurdle until the elbow, where his right hand lost its grip and hung open.

The valley bonesetter bound the shoulder and said the old injury had torn again. Roderick could move two fingers. He could not lift the arm.

"Will he lose it?" Sela asked.

"Not today," the bonesetter said. "Ask after swelling."

Roderick sat against the yard wall while Sela washed mud from Brem's face. Brem kept trying to apologize and losing the sentence halfway through.

Sela crossed to Roderick when her brother slept.

"You made them follow you," she said.

His face had gone grey beneath the weathering. "I ordered them back."

"After you crossed three times."

"Two survivors were exposed. Delay would have killed them."

"You put your body first and made every man behind you feel his body had to answer the same question."

Roderick looked toward the gate where the rescue party entered one by one.

"I knew the anchor, the load, and how fast the face was moving," he said. "They didn't. Going first was how I learned what I could ask."

"Did they know that?"

He did not answer at once.

"No," he said.

"Then when you tell them back, they hear that the brave man crossed and they did not."

"If I wait to make courage private, your brother goes over the edge."

"I know."

Roderick looked at her.

Sela sat on the wet stone beside him. "Brem lived because you went. That doesn't mean everyone who stayed below was wrong."

"No."

"Say that when they tell it."

"I did."

Across the yard, Kessa was already telling Ansel that Roderick had gone first.

By supper the phrase reached the road camps.

His retreat order did not.

Chapter Seventeen

What Harl Became

Fen received the four bodies in the cold room.

No office assigned the work to him. The dead came through the listening hall, the bearers set down the hurdles, and every person who had brought them found another necessary task outside.

Fen fetched water. He cut the wet clothing away where cloth had dried into wounds. He wrote no names because he had no standing to enter them, but he laid one wood marker beside each body so Ansel would know which family received which effects.

The first traveler was a woman from the western plain. The third was one of the brothers who had refused to admit fear. The fourth carried only Bryn's bed mark and a coastal prayer sewn inside his coat.

Perrin found the fourth man's name on the booking slate. Fen wrote it on the marker, then rubbed it away when Osric entered because it had not been witnessed. Osric compared the slate and survivor list and wrote the same name.

The body had possessed the name throughout. Only the hand changed its standing.

Harl was second.

The mountain had not crushed his face. Mud filled one ear and dried along his jaw. The small knife remained in its sheath at the front of his belt. Fen removed it, cleaned the sheath, and placed it with the rope buckle, six silver marks, and the torn strap from Harl's pack.

Four marks a head.

The phrase would not leave him. It was what the travelers had paid Bryn. It was not the value of the dead, not even the whole fare, but the number sat in his mind while he wrung pink water from the cloth.

The survivors produced three route accounts before the water warmed a second time.

Two said Harl crossed the east shoulder against Sela's warning. Three said he used the rock neck; one described the tested pin and crossing order.

The last surviving traveler said only that Harl had gone first, the rope had moved, and the mountain was beneath them before he understood it was moving. He could not name the fork.

Sela's account was exact.

She had watched Harl take the right-hand rise and the party cross one at a time. Tam confirmed the plan. The food packet's three added hours matched the neck.

In Whitehart's hearing, Sela was also the Called whose counsel Harl had defied.

Every person knew what such a Sela must say after his death: that he had followed her practical advice and died

anyway. Her accuracy looked like self-defense before she finished the first sentence.

Fen believed her.

Belief gave her no standing the house would accept from him.

He washed Harl's face.

Sela came to the cold-room door and stopped.

"Can I help?"

Fen looked at the four bodies, the bucket, and the cloth in his hand. "Yes."

No rule prevented her. No rule assigned her. He gave her a clean cloth for Harl's hands.

She washed the mud from beneath his nails. The left thumbnail was split where he had caught the rope. A blister crossed the base of his forefinger from the new hemp. These details told her he had worked. They told her nothing about what he believed when the shelf moved.

"He used the neck," she said.

"I know."

"Say it in the hearing."

"They won't receive it from me."

"Say it anyway."

Fen wrung out the cloth. "You say names anyway. Has that made names ordinary?"

Sela looked at him.

"That was unkind," he said.

"It was also an answer."

She finished Harl's hands and left the cloth folded beside them.

While he worked, the chain assembled itself. Fen had told Perrin that Sela was afraid. Perrin's questions had fed the story of a frightened girl with good terrain sense. Harl could reject her warning without rejecting the dead and keep his contracts, his son's horse, and his judgment of the neck.

The thaw caused the fall: water over frozen ground, weight, a rock plate that held under one man and detached under ten passages. Fen had helped build the language in which Harl chose.

He found Perrin outside the cold room.

"Did you start the frightened-girl story?" Fen asked.

Perrin did not ask which story.

"No. I asked where people heard it. I asked whether Sela claimed a voice. I did not correct people who said she hadn't."

"You knew which questions would feed it."

"Yes."

"Because I told you."

"Yes."

Fen waited for defense.

Perrin said, "Harl made a materially reasonable choice on incomplete ground. The story gave him a way to make it without calling himself impious. I did not foresee the shelf."

"Neither did I."

"No."

Sharing the limit did not divide the guilt. It gave each man his own portion.

Whitehart held the route hearing the next morning.

Osric called it an account, not a judgment. Wren placed the three survivor statements on the table and read only the material claims: fork taken, surface crossed, order of travelers, location of the failure. Perrin kept his notebook closed while the house heard them.

Sela stood at the end of the board.

"He took the neck," she said. "I watched every person turn right at the fork. Harl crossed the first narrow place alone. The others followed one at a time."

One surviving traveler rubbed both hands over his face. "I remember the grave below us."

"You could see it from both routes," Tam said.

"We were on the forbidden side."

"There is no forbidden side," Sela replied.

The traveler looked at her with pity. "You warned him. Of course you need him to have listened."

The room shifted toward the kindness of that explanation.

Sela turned to Osric. "Is my account refused?"

"No."

"Will you use it?"

"It is entered as eyewitness testimony with a known interest in the dispute."

"His account has an interest. He wants the ground to have answered me."

"Wren has marked that."

"And Tam?"

"Kin interest. Marked."

"Then why does mine weigh less?"

Osric did not hide behind the paper. "Because the house already treats you as the person whose counsel gave the route meaning. Your account cannot arrive before that meaning now."

"So the more exactly I saw, the less I can say."

No rule said this. No one in the room had lied.

Fen stood at the rear with his box. Sela looked toward him once. He could have repeated that he believed her. His belief had less standing than hers.

He said nothing.

Tam came for the effects.

He wore Harl's winter coat because someone had brought it from Bryn's house and put it around him. The sleeves ended at his knuckles. He looked at the knife first.

"He was going to give that to Sela," Tam said.

Fen knew nothing of this. "When?"

"Someday. He said she needed to learn not to cut at her thumb."

Tam picked up the knife, then set it back.

"It's mine now."

"Yes."

"So I decide later."

"Yes."

Fen could say the word to him in the cold room. No rite was being entered. No senior stood within hearing. The legal sentence had nowhere to land and the human one did.

Tam gathered the buckle, coins, and strap. He left the knife until last.

At the burial two days later, the grey mare stood in the lower fold under another man's mark. The seller had returned Harl's small holding payment and kept one mark for the missed sale. Bryn brought the spice jar from her barn and set every unspent deposit on a board for the families to claim. The roof already carried the rest.

No one accused her of theft. Three families demanded full return anyway. She wrote their names and said she would pay after summer even if she had to remove the slate herself.

The survivors refused repayment for the guide day. Two bereaved families demanded it. One said Harl had earned the mark and Tam should keep it; another said it belonged to the dead man's burial.

Tam accepted none of it at the graveside. Bryn kept separate jars because grief had not made the accounts agree.

Tam stood at Harl's grave in the large coat. Brem stood beside him on a crutch. Ivet came from the Whitehart line and placed herself on Tam's other side.

She did not tell him what the death meant.

She said, "Your father bought the wrong rope. It rubbed his neck all winter and he complained every time."

Tam made one broken sound that might have been a laugh.

Then he cried.

The valley looked away and let him.

After the grave was filled, a man from the western camp began a song.

He had no instrument and only one verse. Harl climbed where the silent girl warned him not to climb; the mountain opened its hand; the brave road man went first. The tune was an older hauling air, easy to learn while walking.

Wilda stopped him before the second repetition.

"The neck failed," she said. "The grave did not open."

The man bowed. "Sister, I only meant to honor him."

"Then honor what he did."

He changed *the mountain opened its hand to the wet rock left the hill*. The new line did not fit the tune. By evening the camps were singing the first one again.

Fen heard both versions while carrying Harl's empty effects board back to the cold room. Correction had not failed because nobody cared. It failed because the wrong line could be sung in one breath.

Perrin wrote the Chronicle entry on the fourth evening. Earlier that day he had asked Alaine whether Whitehart wanted her birth name on the witness list. "Mother Alaine is sufficient," she had said. Perrin entered the refusal instead of guessing.

His guest-cell door remained open. Fen passed with the candle box and saw Harl's name at the head of the page.

"Come in," Perrin said. "I need the route word."

Fen stayed in the doorway.

Perrin read the entry aloud.

In the four-hundredth year, in the valley of the Light Heights, Harl of the low pasture took nine paying travelers by the east-shoulder road against the counsel of the Called. The neck failed in the wrong thaw. Four were brought back for burial, Harl among them.

There was no miracle in it. No curse. No claim that Sela heard the dead. The neck appeared. The thaw appeared. The fares appeared through the word *paying*. Every sentence could be supported.

"He used the neck," Fen said.

"It says so."

"Then why call it the east-shoulder road?"

"Because that is the route system Bryn sold. The neck is its weather diversion."

"People will hear that he walked on the place she forbade."

"Some will."

"You put *against the counsel of the Called* before the ground."

"He did go against her counsel."

"She gave him terrain advice."

"She was treated as Called when she gave it. That treatment changed the price, the route, the available retreat, and his reason for refusing. Leaving it out would make the choice cleaner than it was."

Fen put the candle box down.

"Write nothing."

Perrin leaned back. He looked older than he had at the table where he first called Fen's name.

"The road already has songs," he said. "One says she cursed him. One says the dead opened the mountain under his feet. If Blackcrest writes nothing, absence does not preserve the neck. It leaves the field to the version with a rhyme."

"Then write all three accounts."

"I will keep all three in the source packet. The Chronicle entry is not the packet. It is the line that survives being read aloud."

Perrin opened the packet.

Sela's account occupied two pages, dictated and read back through Wren. The three survivors' route accounts followed. Harl's inspection marks, the food measure, Bryn's booking slate, and the cut rope were listed as material support. Roderick's rescue accounts sat in a separate section because the later hero story had already begun to attach itself to the earlier fall.

"This is the truth you say won't survive," Fen said.

"This is the material from which later editors may recover it."

"May."

"Yes."

"And the short line is what every child gets."

"Probably."

"Choose Sela's."

"Her account has no accepted standing here and every political reader will call it interested. I can enter it as attributed testimony. I cannot make it carry the public line alone."

"So you choose the saint."

"I choose the account least likely to get her killed, Wilda installed over Alaine, or Bryn's barn burned by people who believe money defied a holy prohibition."

"Kindest version."

Perrin flinched.

Fen saw it and was not satisfied.

"Every word true," Fen said.

"Yes."

"And not what happened."

"No."

Rain tapped the narrow shutter. In the listening room beyond, one of the north candles smoked because Fen had not yet trimmed it.

Perrin turned the page toward him.

"Your name is in the source line," he said. "For the effects, the bodies, and the three accounts. I can remove it."

Fen looked at the letters.

The attention still worked. Even now, with Harl's face in his hands and the chain visible, the sight of his own name steadied something in him.

"Leave it," he said.

Perrin waited, giving him room to change the answer.

Fen hated him for the courtesy.

"Leave it," he said again. "But write that Whitehart will not hear my account."

Perrin added the sentence.

Then he sanded the Chronicle entry.

The wet ink dulled. Harl became a line that could travel dry through weather, copy into another hand, and arrive at the Jubilee without the smell of the cold room.

Against the counsel of the Called.

No word in it was false.

Chapter Eighteen

The Rule of Six Words

Mother Alaine called the house to the long hall five days after Harl's burial.

She called it a precaution before she said what the precaution was.

Sela sat on the third bench beside Ivet. Fen stood at the rear with the candle box because the evening tapers still required trimming, even when the man who trimmed them had become the subject of the hall. Perrin was absent. Wren stood near the north wall with her hands empty. Tomas had taken his usual place to Alaine's right, but his stool was half a pace farther back than Sela remembered.

Osric read the facts.

Private matters from the listening room had entered an external record. The count of the griffes had traveled. The sequence of Sela's trial had been reconstructed. Perrin's notes included Osric's two refused requests for the Ledger. Wren had measured where Alaine placed her fingers when she passed the dead.

Osric did not say how those facts had traveled. He did not need to.

The hall looked toward Fen.

He set the candle box on the floor. His face did not change.

Sela knew three versions of what he had done.

In the kitchen version, Fen had sold house secrets for wine and a seat. In the novice version, Perrin had tricked him with kindness. In the camp version, the nameless keeper possessed every hidden truth in Whitehart and had chosen which ones the world was ready to hear.

Sela knew about the bread between them, the place at the second bench, and the way Fen had looked at his own written name. She knew he had told Perrin about her seat and Alaine's touch. She did not know what she would have done if someone had made her ordinary for an hour and asked the price afterward.

Before the hall, Ivet had asked whether Sela meant to defend him.

"He hasn't asked me," Sela had said.

"Would he?"

The question stayed with her now. Fen stood beneath a hundred eyes and did not look toward the one person the room expected to answer for him.

Alaine waited until the room was still.

"No crime has been entered," she said. "No oath has been broken. The young man who keeps the north wall will remain housed and fed. He will continue the work he has done faithfully. No hand will be laid upon him, and no word will be spoken against him."

Sela heard several people breathe again.

"But this house has learned that its private life travels through places it has failed to guard. We made a person socially absent and then depended upon his presence everywhere. The fault is ours. The danger is now known."

Alaine looked down the hall, not at Fen.

"Until the Chronicle inquiry is complete, no member of this house will address him in hall, passage, kitchen, workroom, or at the wall. No question will be put to him. No answer will be received into house business. This is precaution, not punishment."

She said it gently. That made every part of it easier to obey.

Sela stood.

The movement surprised Ivet. Her hand caught at Sela's sleeve and slipped away.

"No," Sela said.

The word reached the roof timbers.

Nobody had invited her to speak. Nobody told her to sit. A year earlier, Ansel would have asked whether she had forgotten her place. Now the whole hall waited as if Alaine had called on her by title.

Sela felt the waiting and hated that part of herself which answered it.

She was angry for Fen. She was afraid for him. She was also angry that the room had learned to stop for her and pleased, in one hard private corner, that it had stopped now.

"He is not a passage," she said. "He is not the place your business escaped through. He is a man you failed to ask until someone from outside did."

Fen bent and picked up the candle box.

"He told Perrin things because Perrin called him by name. Because Perrin put a cup in front of him and waited for the answer. Any one of you could have done that."

Osric lowered his paper.

Sela looked at Alaine. "You cannot fix what we did by doing more of it."

The room moved around the word *we*. It sounded like humility in her mouth. Sela had meant accusation.

Alaine said, "What would you have us do?"

It was the question Sela wanted. She had imagined it while walking to the hall. Let him sit where he chose. Let his work be named. Let people speak to him as they had before Perrin arrived, badly and ordinarily and without a rule.

She should have said one of those things.

Instead she looked toward the rear.

"He is my friend," she said.

The hall made a small sound.

Pride carried her past it.

"He was my friend when everyone else watched me eat. He sat beside me when nobody knew where to put me. He knows every name on that wall. He has kept this house lit while you spoke over him as if the candles filled themselves. I will not

pass him in a corridor and pretend there is nobody there. I will speak to him. I will say his name."

She said it then.

"Fen."

At the rear of the hall his eyes closed.

Sela thought he was moved. She went on.

"You may decide what you like about your records. You may not decide that I cannot speak to Fen."

Ivet had begun to cry. Sela heard it and mistook the sound for support.

Mother Alaine regarded her for several breaths. No anger entered her face. No public doubt did either.

"Of course," she said.

She turned to the benches.

"The Called may speak to him."

Relief moved through the hall.

It came first from the novices, who had been frightened that obedience would make them cruel. Then from the workers, who had not wanted to lose Fen entirely and now had a form in which they could imagine he remained held. Osric bowed his head. Ivet pressed Sela's sleeve against her wet face.

Someone near the door whispered, "She keeps his name."

The phrase was not Alaine's. By the time the hall emptied, three people believed it was.

Osric came to Sela as the benches cleared.

"You spoke bravely," he said.

"Did I?"

"Yes."

"Then why do I feel as if she used me?"

Osric looked toward Alaine, who was receiving a question from Wilda as though no decision had divided the room.

"Use does not cancel courage," he said.

It was meant to comfort her. Sela heard the room making space for both statements and understood that no answer from Osric would make one release the other.

Sela went to Fen at once.

He had left before the office ended. She found him in the listening room trimming the north tapers. Two novices worked at the far end. They had always asked him which wick to cut and which cup to leave alone. Now they moved without speaking, choosing badly rather than risk a question.

"Fen," Sela said.

Both novices stopped.

Fen scraped old wax from a cup. "Go away."

"I stopped her."

"No."

"She said I can speak to you."

"Yes."

His knife caught a ridge of wax and skipped. A thin curl broke beneath his thumb.

"Every time you say my name now, someone hears the Called naming the Unwritten. The girl at the far wall will tell

her bed row. The bed row will tell the kitchen. By morning the camps will have a man whose name only you are allowed to keep."

"Then I'll tell them that isn't what it means."

Fen set the cup back.

"You told them the grave meant nothing."

Sela stopped.

"You told Harl the ground was wet. Perrin wrote the neck. The song kept the shoulder. Which part of this year makes you think one more exact sentence will remain yours?"

He did not speak sharply. Anger would have given her somewhere to stand.

"I was trying to help you," she said.

"I know."

The novices had not resumed work.

Fen picked up his box and walked past them into the kitchen passage. Sela followed.

Sinnet stood at the bread board. Every morning for years she had called Fen a lazy article before putting a heel in his hand. Sela had heard her do it often enough that the insult had become part of the kitchen noise. Her apron was flour-grey at one hip from wiping the same hand there; one thumbnail was split down the middle and held a permanent white line.

Fen stopped at the board.

Sinnet cut a heel, placed it beside him, and looked at the loaf.

Her mouth moved. Nothing came out.

Fen took the bread.

In the lower passage, Ansel approached with a tally and two lamp orders. He held the paper toward Fen, remembered the ruling, and drew it back. He turned to a novice.

"The upper cups require counting," he said.

Fen stood between them holding the count in his head.

The novice nodded without looking at him.

At the laundry turn, two girls stood over a basket of damp cloth. One had always asked Fen to carry the heavy end. She lifted it with the other girl instead. They struck the wall, dropped three sheets into the dirt, and apologized to the sheets.

Fen picked up one muddy corner. The girls waited until he released it before bending down.

At the outer store, a rope keeper needed the key Fen carried. He pointed to the lock. Fen gave him the key. The man returned it to the shelf beside Fen's hand.

Nobody was cruel. Cruelty might have failed under its own shame. They were careful, and care could continue forever.

Fen led Sela to the cold room. Harl's hurdle had been removed. A dark water line remained beneath the wall where the washing bucket had spilled.

"This morning Sinnet swore at the flour," he said. "She wanted me to know she was still capable of it."

Sela wiped her face with the heel of her hand.

"I can go back to the hall."

"And say what?"

"That they should speak to you."

"Because the Called commands it."

"Because you are a person."

"Declared so by the Called."

She turned away from him. The bucket smelled faintly of lye.

"There must be something I can do."

"There is."

Fen waited until she looked at him.

"Never say my name again."

The sentence was so small that at first she thought she had heard it wrongly.

"What?"

"Let the office starve. If you use it, they will keep it alive. Every word between us will become a lesson. Every kindness will prove what they made you. I would rather have the silence."

"You don't mean that."

"Do not improve my answer."

His voice shook then. Once. He steadied it before continuing.

"You wanted to give me back ordinary speech. You cannot. Give me the one refusal they left."

Sela looked at the young man who had brought her cloak to the arch, who had sat half in and half out of every room, who

had sold pieces of her life for one hour at a table and known exactly what he was doing.

She wanted to argue. She wanted him to forgive her before she obeyed him. Both wants belonged to her.

"All right," she said.

Fen nodded.

He picked up Harl's empty effects board and left the cold room.

Ivet waited outside.

She had followed at a distance and heard none of the words through the closed door. When Fen passed, she stepped aside so quickly that her shoulder struck the wall.

"Did you fix it?" she asked Sela.

"No."

"But the hall—"

"The hall liked it."

Ivet looked after Fen. "I thought that meant you won."

Sela remembered the relief, the tears, and the private pleasure of a room yielding when she stood. "So did I."

They went to wash before supper. Ivet spoke twice on the way and stopped both times because Fen worked somewhere ahead of them in the passage. The rule did not merely silence words meant for him. It made every nearby sentence inspect itself.

At the basin, Sela scrubbed wax from her fingers though she had touched no candle. Ivet washed beside her and did not offer

comfort. It was one of the better things she had learned.

At supper he sat on the third bench. Sinnet put bread at his place. Ansel sent the lamp order through a novice. Ivet looked toward him three times and spoke each time to Sela instead.

Sela ate with his name behind her teeth.

The next day the camp version said the Called had preserved one forbidden name from the silence. Visitors began leaving small wax scraps at the lower gate for Fen, though nobody knew whether he received them. Ansel swept the first pile away. A second appeared before evening.

Sela carried the scraps to the store fire and burned them. Ivet helped without asking why. Neither spoke while Fen crossed the yard behind them with lamp oil.

On the third morning, Sinnet put down the bread and opened her mouth from habit.

Fen looked at her.

Sinnet struck the knife against the board hard enough to notch it. She turned and shouted at a novice for cutting onions too thick.

The sound filled the kitchen and went around the person it belonged to.

Chapter Nineteen

Lethren

Aren Lethren arrived while Wren was counting people who refused to stay counted. He was broad rather than tall, close-shaved, with one ear flattened by an old break and a Lethren nose too aristocratic for the rest of him. His coat was good wool, his boots were better, and both had been used hard enough to make the quality look like planning rather than display.

He came with four clerks, two store guards, no banner, and a mule carrying more blank boards than food. By noon the camp had decided this meant Lethren intended to govern it. By second meal the same rumor said he had come to close it.

Aren heard both versions while standing in the ration shed with Ansel and asked only whether the people repeating them had eaten.

"Most," Ansel said.

"Most is not a store category."

"Neither is rumor."

"Rumor eats nothing. People do."

Sela disliked him immediately.

That annoyed her because he had not yet done anything wrong.

He carried no sword in the shed. The two guards did. Men who arrived armed often wanted the weapon noticed; Aren seemed more interested in whether the people standing near it had eaten.

A woman at the door asked whether Lethren grain had arrived.

"No," Aren said.

She cursed him.

"Reasonable," he replied. "Still no."

The woman stopped long enough to decide whether she had been insulted. Aren was already asking Ansel how many mouths had received food the day before.

That was when Wren came in with four different answers.

Wren counted three thousand seven hundred and forty-two people and refused to call it the population.

She had counted for two days. On the first, sleet blurred the lower rows and three families moved uphill while she was between lanes. On the second, the mill opened its loft and released forty sleepers she had already counted at the ration shed. Two children followed her because they liked the black tally stones and were entered twice before she noticed.

She corrected the children. She could not correct everyone who had slept elsewhere, worked beyond the ford, hidden from a clerk, or walked away between counts.

The children were called Pell and Moss. Pell carried black stones from Wren's left cup to her right when a person passed. Moss returned three stones whenever Wren looked down to write. They had created fourteen extra residents before Pell betrayed him over a disputed heel of bread.

Wren made Moss remove the stones himself.

"Which ones were mine?" he asked.

"You did not mark them."

"Then you don't know."

He sounded pleased.

"Correct," Wren said.

The pleasure left him. Children, she thought, disliked accuracy most when they had discovered it first.

Wren cleared the whole lane and counted it again in rain. Moss followed without touching anything and announced each uncertainty before she did.

At the ninth shelter a woman refused to uncover a sleeping shape because her brother had no ration mark and feared removal. Wren counted the covered body as *present, identity withheld*. Farther on, a man offered two absent cousins because their shelter still stood. She counted neither. By the end of the lane, the number described an hour already gone.

On her board she wrote:

Bodies observed over two days: 3,742. Not simultaneous. Known duplication removed where identified. Known absences unmeasured.

Ansel disliked the note.

"How many people are below my stores?"

"That question is not answered by this count."

"It is the question I asked."

"Then you need a different count."

He already had one.

The ration boards showed four thousand and eighty-one portions issued on the last full day. Sick people received two small portions. Water crews received extra bread. Some valley households collected for road kin who did not sleep in camp. Some camp workers ate at Whitehart and remained on the board below.

"So there are fewer than four thousand," Ansel said.

"There may be more. A portion is not a body."

The shelter clerks listed three thousand two hundred and ninety-six sleeping places. That did not count children sharing pallets, workers sleeping in shifts, or families lodged in valley barns. It counted a square of floor as a place even when rain made the square unusable.

Roofs were not sleepers. Bread was not bodies.

The fourth count came from labor.

Halvard's materials had not yet arrived, but Maren—the compact wound-cart healer who had arrived without asking Whitehart's leave—needed high-source carriers, waste crews, vessel washers, and firewood. She moved through taller carriers with the hard economy of someone who had learned to make

space around pain before anyone offered it. Row clerks had secured one thousand one hundred and seven adults who could be guaranteed for at least one half-day in three. The number excluded the sick, old, nursing, injured, unentered, unwilling, and anyone whose promise no recognized person would support.

"Able labor," Osric called it.

Wren crossed out *able*.

"Guarantored labor," she wrote. "We have not measured ability among the people no one will guarantee."

Her fingers had split at two knuckles from wet cold. Ink entered the cuts. She wrapped them in thin cloth and spoiled a page because the bandage dragged across the figures.

The four counts lay beside one another on Ansel's worktable.

3,742 bodies observed.

4,081 ration portions.

3,296 sleeping places.

1,107 guarantored workers.

Every number was honest enough for its task. Any one of them could become a lie by answering the wrong question.

Near the fifth shelter row, Sela had seen one of Maren's sick children sitting under two blankets with a green-glazed cup between both hands. Her name was Lio. She was six and had spent ten minutes floating a wood shaving in the water instead

of drinking it. When Maren took the shaving away, Lio called her a thief and finally swallowed three mouthfuls out of spite.

Each office chose the number it preferred.

Aren chose none.

He stood over the boards with his sleeves rolled and read all four without touching them. Sela had expected a Lethren to seize the cleanest figure and make it law. Instead he asked Ansel for the store horizon, Maren for the sick count, Wren for the uncertainty ranges, and Fen for the number of people receiving work without standing.

Fen looked at him.

"You know I cannot enter that count."

"I asked whether you know it."

"Approximately."

"Then approximately is what I asked for."

Fen gave him the number. Aren repeated it to one clerk, who wrote it under a separate heading.

Sela watched Fen's face. He did not soften. Good. Being treated like a person by one competent lord did not repair a system.

Aren pointed at the four main counts.

"We need categories that move food without pretending categories are people."

Wren said, "That is the problem."

"No. The problem is that categories become people after we use them long enough."

She looked at him more carefully.

He drew five headings on a clean board: *resident household, road sleeper, worker, dependent, transient.*

Fen laughed from the doorway.

Aren looked up.

"Which one is funny?"

"Me."

"Which are you?"

"That is why."

Aren considered the board.

"Worker."

"When there is work."

"Resident."

"Not by standing."

"Dependent?"

Fen's expression changed.

Aren put down the chalk.

"No."

The word came quickly enough to matter.

"Then the categories are bad," he said.

"They are useful," Wren replied.

"Useful and bad are not enemies."

Sela thought of Alaine and hated him a little less.

Aren added a sixth line: *uncategorized provision.*

Ansel said, "That becomes a hole people can use."

"Yes."

"How large?"

"Large enough that a human being does not go hungry because our board is elegant. Small enough that the stores do not disappear into the elegance of compassion."

"And who decides?" Sela asked.

Aren looked at her.

"Someone must."

"You?"

"Today, perhaps."

Sela looked from the sixth line to Aren. He had cut a hole in the rule to keep people fed and then, naturally, stationed himself beside the hole.

Her mouth twisted.

Aren saw it and did not apologize.

Ansel used ration portions to request grain because hunger followed portions, not bed space. Wilda used observed bodies to request guards because people, not bread, climbed paths. Maren used shelter places to assign clean vessels because illness traveled through sleeping groups. Halvard used guarantored labor to estimate whether a runnel could be maintained.

Osric asked which number should enter the house account.

Wren said, "All four, with the question attached."

He looked at the crowded board. "The house account has one population line."

"Then the line was designed for a different crisis."

Osric did not argue. He left the line blank and put the four figures in the margin, where a later copyist would be tempted to choose one.

The Duskport paper arrived at midday.

A mill factor carried it inside a waxed leather fold, together with three timber measures and a packet of iron prices. The writing named Nella of Duskport and no office. It offered credit for cut timber, fittings, six cart journeys, cord, lime, and food for two hundred worker-days. Values would be entered as receipts arrived. No fixed interest. No due day. No named final sum until the works stood and the route accounts closed.

At the bottom, the people accepting materials were to be entered by name whether or not they possessed a current portion or recognized standing.

Perrin read that clause twice.

"Ravensshade formation," he said.

The factor folded his arms. "Duskport work."

"Open name, open value, no date, future request retained."

"Nella says a widow at the east quay taught her the name line, a sailmaker taught her the value line, and three debtors taught her not to put a day. You may tell your Chronicle whatever House makes that easier to shelve."

Perrin smiled. "Did she write that answer for me?"

"She charged you half a mark for it."

The factor handed him a second slip.

Perrin paid.

The exchange was light enough to entertain the room. Wren watched the factor keep the first paper under his palm until Perrin's coin was visible. Nella's network made affection and verification occupy the same gesture.

"Why six carts?" Wren asked.

"Because five carry and one breaks."

"Which one?"

"If we knew, we would send five."

"And if none breaks?"

"Nella finds it a return load before the driver discovers leisure."

The factor knew road failure, not the camp. When Wren asked where the carts could turn below the mill, he pointed to a grain map that predated the shelter rows. Ansel took him outside and showed him that his turning ground now held eighty-seven roofs.

The sixth cart became timber storage before it arrived.

Wren entered the paper under credit, not charity. Ansel entered the food under stores not yet present. The factor refused to say the materials belonged to Whitehart, the camp, Halvard, or Nella once delivered.

"They belong to the account until the account changes," he said.

"An account cannot hold timber," Ansel replied.

"It has done so for twelve days."

The first carts were already on the regional road.

Wren added the credit to her risk memorandum.

The memorandum had begun with water and become about a gate.

The camp depended on Whitehart bread, the high springs, the mill path, and a single narrow ascent. Every successful intervention let more people remain. Every day of remaining increased the consequence of sudden withdrawal.

Wren tested the path at three meal hours.

At first meal, bread carts moved outward while water carriers climbed. At noon, work crews crossed the same turn as people seeking Whitehart's yard. At evening, returning carriers met visitors who had waited all day for one sight of Sela.

On the second evening Sela came down carrying an empty yoke.

She wore no Whitehart cloak and no title. The first person recognized her at the elbow. A line waiting for water turned its head. Three people stepped out of place. A man carrying a sick child moved uphill because he believed Sela's descent meant the house had opened a nearer source. Others followed his urgency rather than his belief.

Within thirty breaths, the retreat side of the path had become an approach.

Sela stopped. "I'm going to the spring."

The statement traveled backward as *she is taking us to water*.

Wren and two water guarantors cleared the lane by moving Sela below the turn and sending the sick child first. No one had intended to form a crowd. No one had been irrational. Each person had acted on a small visible change with incomplete information.

Sela found Wren afterward at the worktable.

"Are you going to write that I caused it?"

"I am going to write that your appearance changed movement."

"I was carrying wood."

"A yoke."

"Empty."

Wren added *ordinary purpose unrelated to crowd* beside the observation. The path on the page stayed exactly where it was.

She wrote conditions, not advice.

If the gate ever closed, notice had to reach every row before the bar moved. Rations had to be released outward rather than held behind the wall. Separate approaches were required for appeal, water, work, and ordinary passage. A retreat lane had to remain visibly open. Negotiation had to occur where the crowd could see it. Sela had to remain away from the gate because her appearance would change a practical gathering into something else before any speaker could correct it.

Wren rewrote the last condition three times.

Sela is a crowd trigger treated a person as a mechanism.

Public interpretation of Sela may alter crowd movement
was accurate and too slow to read during danger.

She kept both.

For two nights Wren worked in the guest passage because Perrin's cell was full of source packets and the store table belonged to Ansel. The warming stone under her feet cooled before midnight. Her split fingers left small brown prints where blood mixed with ink.

Pell and Moss brought her three claims from the camp: that Whitehart meant to bar the gate, that Sela would order it opened, and that Nella's carts already carried enough grain for winter. None had a source closer than a cook fire. Wren entered them under crowd expectation because false material could still alter bodies.

"Which is true?" Pell asked.

"I don't know."

"Then why write them?"

"Because you changed where you slept after hearing the second."

Pell considered this and demanded a quarter mark as a source. Wren gave him bread instead and entered the payment.

For the route between camp rows and the upper house, Wren used information Fen had given Perrin during their private meals: the passages workers used, the times bread moved, the unofficial low turn, the way people approached the listening arch without crossing the main yard.

She entered him in the source line.

Fen, keeper of north wall; unentered Whitehart source; decisive for unrecorded movement.

Sela saw the line when Perrin read the source sheet aloud to Tomas.

She did not say the name.

"Did he permit this use?" she asked.

Wren looked from the sheet to her. "He gave the route information to Perrin."

"For Perrin's questions."

"The routes are necessary to the closure analysis."

"That isn't what I asked."

Tomas and Perrin remained at the table. Neither helped.

Wren said, "No. I do not have separate permission for this use."

"Will you remove it?"

The risk line depended on routes official counts omitted. Removing the source would leave the claim without visible support. Keeping it made Fen legible to anyone who received the working paper.

"I can seal the source key," Wren said. "The analysis must state that an unentered household source supplied the routes."

"Must?"

Wren disliked the word as soon as she heard it in her own voice.

"If the claim travels without support, it becomes authority by handwriting," she said.

"And if his name travels with it?"

Wren had no clean sentence.

Sela touched the edge of the board. "Needing what he knows isn't the same as having his leave."

"No," Wren said.

She wrote that beneath the source line before the discomfort could improve itself into something more professional.

Sela remained beside the table.

"He asked me not to use his name," she said.

Wren put the pen down.

"Does that instruction extend to me?"

"You are asking the wrong person."

"I cannot ask him without the house turning the question into another breach."

"That doesn't make me his permission."

Wren looked at the source key. The name existed in Perrin's notes, Halvard's work sheet not yet made, and her own record. Removing one occurrence could protect him from one custody chain. It could not return anonymity.

She folded the key separately and sealed it with plain wax rather than Blackthorn's mark.

"This limits ordinary release," she said. "It does not undo the use."

Sela nodded once. She did not thank her.

Whitehart requested a short copy of the memorandum the next day.

Wren supplied one page. It kept all six closure conditions and the limits of each count. Osric carried it to the senior room.

That evening Wren found a half-page copy pinned beside the store horizon.

At present density, abrupt closure while inward rations continue will cause massing on the gate path.

The sentence was hers.

The notice requirement was not there. The outward food release, separated approaches, retreat lane, visible negotiation, and Sela condition remained on the longer page in Perrin's cell.

Nothing on the half-page was false.

Wren took it down, read the pinholes, and put it back where Whitehart had chosen to keep it.

Chapter Twenty

Serenel

The first Serenel cart arrived without a banner.

That was the first thing Sela liked about it.

The second was the cook.

He climbed down before the driver had stopped swearing at the axle, looked once at the lower rows, and asked where people were shitting.

No one answered him for a moment.

He sighed.

"Then that is where I begin."

The cart carried rolled canvas, two chests of dried leaf and bark preparations, copper pans, three sacks of clean linen cut into strips, lamp oil, needles, thread, salt, soap, and enough onions to make the lower yard smell like supper before anything had been unloaded.

Two more carts appeared at the elbow before noon. Neither carried grain.

That disappointed people who had been told Serenel money could purchase anything.

A woman in a grey traveling cloak heard the complaint and said, "It can purchase grain. It cannot purchase grain already

eaten."

She was perhaps forty, with hair the color of wet honey pulled into a loose knot that had lost half its pins. Her eyes were large and green-brown, and when she turned to listen she tilted her head a little to the left.

Sela stopped carrying the linen.

The woman saw her stop.

"Too heavy?"

"No."

"Then you're thinking."

"Sometimes."

The woman's mouth changed.

Not a smile exactly.

Sela nearly dropped the bundle.

Mother Alaine made that expression when someone said something she intended to pretend had not amused her.

The similarity vanished as soon as Sela looked for it.

The woman stepped over a drainage cut and held out her hand.

"Elya Serenel. I am told this belongs in the upper clean room and that nobody has decided which room is clean enough to deserve the name."

Sela looked at the offered hand.

Serenel.

The name meant something. She knew that from the way the nearest novice stopped moving.

It did not mean enough to Sela to arrange her face properly.

She shifted the linen to one arm and took the hand.

"Sela."

Elya's grip was dry and strong.

"Yes," she said.

Sela let go.

"That sounded unfortunate."

"I meant I know your name."

"That is what made it unfortunate."

Elya laughed.

The corners of her eyes folded in the same place Alaine's did when a goat misbehaved during prayer.

Sela stared a moment too long.

She had known families who shared nothing but a chin, others whose children looked stolen from three different villages. Harl lived most clearly in Tam when Tam was angry, though the two men had never looked alike at rest.

Elya's eyes were enough.

"Where is Mother Alaine?" Elya asked.

The question landed differently from the name.

Sela said, "Upper house."

"Good. She'll be angry I came without warning."

"She is good at being angry quietly."

"She learned from my mother."

The linen slipped against Sela's arm.

Elya had already turned toward the cart.

Sela said, "Your mother?"

Elya looked back.

Her expression changed again, this time not with humor.

She understood what Sela had not been told.

"Alaine's older sister," she said.

The lower yard continued around them.

A man carried a bucket past. Two children fought over an onion skin. The cook had found the waste trench and was using language Sela had previously heard only from Harl when rope froze.

"Older?" Sela said.

"Was."

Elya did not explain the death. That made Sela like her a little more and trust the situation less.

"You are her niece."

"One of them."

"She never said."

"Alaine rarely says what can be discovered by inconvenient means."

The sentence was affectionate.

That hurt more than criticism would have.

A shout came from the second cart. A wheel had sunk to the hub in mud. Elya turned at once.

"Hold that thought if you can," she said. "If not, choose a better one."

She went to the wheel and put her shoulder beside two laborers as though the name Serenel had not just rearranged part of Sela's childhood.

Sela carried the linen uphill.

By second meal everyone knew the carts were Serenel.

By evening half the camp knew Mother Alaine was Serenel too.

No proclamation had been made. No one needed one.

A novice called Elya *cousin* where Sela could hear. A healer addressed a folded note to *Mother Alaine Serenel*. Someone in the bread line repeated the name and was corrected on pronunciation by a woman who had once made pilgrimage south.

Sela heard the surname become ordinary in other mouths. It had apparently always belonged to Alaine. The world had contained it while Sela did not.

She found Ivet tying canvas between two posts above the temporary sick ground.

"Did you know?"

Ivet looked up with the rope between her teeth.

"Know what?"

"Alaine Serenel."

Ivet's hands stopped.

Sela set down the linen.

"You knew."

Ivet spat the rope end into one hand. "Everyone in the house knows."

"I didn't."

"You lived below."

"I slept here every first snow since I was nine."

"I thought—"

Ivet stopped.

Sela waited.

"You thought what?"

"I thought you didn't care."

The answer was so ordinary that Sela could not decide where to put her anger.

"About her family?"

"About names like that."

"I care when everyone else knows one about someone I love and I don't."

Ivet's face tightened.

"She loves you too."

"That is not the same thing."

"No."

Ivet looked down at the canvas line.

"I am sorry."

Sela wanted to ask whether Ivet had been told not to say it.

She did not.

Because if Ivet said yes, Alaine had hidden it.

And if Ivet said no, Sela had simply been outside a thing everyone else considered obvious.

She hated both possibilities.

"Your knot is wrong," Sela said.

Ivet closed her eyes.

"It is not."

"It will pull sideways when the canvas wets."

"I learned this from Tam."

"Then Tam is wrong too."

"That is a different kind of courage than the house usually asks of me."

Sela took the line from her.

Ivet let her.

They retied it together.

It was not forgiveness.

It was canvas.

Canvas. She knew what to do with canvas.

Corven Serenel arrived after dark on foot. He had the inconvenient kind of presence that made an entrance even when the man himself was carrying timber.

Sela knew him before anyone said his name.

Not because he looked like Elya.

Because he looked like Alaine had been young.

It was in the eyes, mostly. Large, attentive, too expressive for the stillness Whitehart admired. His hair was darker than Elya's, brown with a warm gold where the cookfire caught it, and it had been cut badly with a road knife. He was perhaps thirty-five, perhaps younger when clean. Mud covered one boot to the knee. His left hand was wrapped in a strip of linen already red at the palm.

He entered the lower cook shelter carrying the other end of a beam.

The man on the front end did not seem aware that anyone important had arrived.

"Higher," the man said.

"It is higher."

"Your side isn't."

"Then yours has become ambitious."

They set the beam across two stones. Corven straightened, saw Elya, and then saw Sela.

His face did something Alaine's face had done a thousand times.

It assessed the room before greeting the person.

Then he smiled.

People around him changed.

Not much.

A kitchen woman stopped swearing. One child came closer. A laborer who had been sitting with his head between his hands

looked up. Corven had learned young that attention could be given like bread: directly, without making the receiver beg for it. He gave it wastefully and was loved for the waste.

Sela noticed because she knew what it was to make a room move now.

Corven crossed to Elya, kissed her forehead and asked, "How bad?"

"Bad enough that the cook has taken command."

"Then civilization survives."

Elya pointed at Sela.

"Sela."

Corven's attention settled on her fully.

It was not reverence.

Sela let out a breath she had not meant to hold.

"Of the Light Heights?" he asked.

"So people tell me."

"They have been telling me other things for three weeks. I prefer the one with geography."

His bandaged hand had begun dripping again.

Sela pointed at it.

"You are bleeding on the onions."

Corven looked down.

"That explains their improvement."

"It explains why nobody should eat them."

The cook shouted from the next shelter that somebody had better remove Lord Serenel before he seasoned the whole meal with himself.

Sela looked at Corven.

"Lord?"

"Unfortunately."

"Does it hurt?"

"Mostly other people."

He did not perform modesty. He simply held the wounded hand over the dirt.

"Can you tie this better? Elya says I bind wounds like a man trying to punish cloth."

Sela almost said no.

Not because she could not.

Because the request felt too easy.

People with names like Serenel were not supposed to arrive carrying beams and ask goatherds to tie their hands.

That, she understood, was part of why he did it.

Maybe not consciously.

That did not make the effect unreal.

She took the linen from him.

The cut was shallow and wide, a splinter tear from the beam.

"You should wash it."

"I did."

"In what?"

"Water."

"Clean water?"

He hesitated.

"Water with a good reputation."

Sela looked at Elya. "Is that how Serenel medicine works?"

"Only on Serenels," Elya said. "Everyone else gets clean water."

"He is very valuable to us. We are considering teaching him the difference."

Corven smiled while Sela cleaned the cut properly.

"You have the face of someone deciding whether I am useful or merely expensive," he said.

"Can you be both?"

"My family has worked very hard to prove it."

His charm was not false.

At the next fire, a man who had not heard the joke smiled because Corven had.

Sela kept cleaning the cut.

Mother Elaine came down after midnight.

No escort.

No formal robe.

Only her walking stick and a dark wool cloak.

The work had slowed. Rain pressed gently on the canvas.
Someone snored beside the medicine chest.

Elya saw Alaine first.

For one breath neither woman moved.

Then Elya crossed the shelter and embraced her.

Alaine held her with both arms.

Sela had never seen her do that with anyone.

Corven stood.

Alaine touched his face with one hand.

"You cut your hair yourself."

"I was attacked by necessity."

"Necessity has poor hands."

"You always disliked my independence."

"I dislike evidence presented as virtue."

Corven bent his head into her palm for one brief, unguarded second. Then he said, "You said the same thing last time."

"You cut it yourself last time too."

Elya laughed into her sleeve.

"So Sela said."

Alaine's eyes found Sela.

There was no way to conceal the family now.

Not after Elya's face.

Not after Corven's.

Not after the tenderness Alaine had just allowed herself.

Sela waited for an explanation.

Alaine gave none. The silence came close enough to a lie that Sela could feel the difference without forgiving it.

"You should sleep," Alaine said.

Sela looked at her.

"Alaine Serenel."

The name was not an accusation until it left her mouth.

Alaine's hand remained on Corven's cheek for half a breath too long.

Then she lowered it.

"Yes."

"How long?"

Corven looked away.

Elya did not.

Alaine said, "All my life."

Sela stared at her. "That is impressive. I thought Serenels were supposed to be good with words."

It was such a stupid answer that Sela laughed.

One hard breath.

Alaine flinched.

Good, Sela thought.

The thought shamed her and did not leave.

"You knew what I meant."

"Yes."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

Alaine's mouth opened.

Sela watched her choose among truths.

She had never understood before how visible the choosing could be once you knew to look.

"Because here," Alaine said, "I am Mother Alaine."

"Not to them."

"No."

"Not to yourself either, apparently."

"That is harder."

The answer was honest enough to make anger difficult and incomplete enough to keep it alive.

Sela picked up the empty linen basket.

"Everyone keeps giving me truths that have already been cut to fit the room."

Alaine said nothing.

Sela walked uphill before Alaine could improve the silence.

The next morning three people asked Sela to hear the west road.

By midday it was fourteen.

A cart from the lower valley had failed to arrive with lamp oil and dried peas. The road was wet, the axle on that route was bad, and the driver had a mother in the camp who had begun telling anyone who would listen that the delay meant death.

Sela knew none of this could be solved by listening.

That did not stop the questions.

At first they came one at a time.

Which way should the search party go?

Was the cart below the ford?

Had she felt anything when she woke?

Did east mean east-east, or only away from Whitehart?

Sela answered until the answers became a crowd.

"I don't know."

"I didn't hear anything."

"Send someone who knows the road."

The woman whose son drove the cart caught Sela's sleeve.

Not hard.

That made it worse.

"Please."

Sela looked at the woman's hand.

"Let go."

"Just tell me which way."

"I don't know."

"You knew for the child."

The woman's fingers tightened.

East sheds first.

Sela had named one direction once. Now every road seemed to think it was owed another.

More people pressed beneath the canvas. The cook shouted that he would throw everyone out if they overturned the clean-water barrel. Nobody listened.

A man with a valley owner's cord on his coat said, "If she will not speak here, bring her to the listening room."

Sela pulled at her sleeve.

The woman held on.

"I said let go."

"My son is out there."

"And I do not know where."

"Then listen."

The word struck harder than the hand.

Sela felt the crowd waiting for her to become useful.

She also felt, with disgust, the part of herself that knew exactly how to make them quiet.

She could point.

They would go.

"Take your hand off her."

Alaine's voice came from behind the crowd.

Nobody moved at first because nobody knew who had spoken.

Then they made space.

Alaine came through without her walking stick. Elya followed two paces behind. Corven stood outside the shelter with his injured hand newly bound and did not come in.

The woman released Sela's sleeve halfway.

"Mother, I only need—"

"You need your son found."

"Yes."

"Then send road people."

"She found the child."

"A search found the child."

"Because she told them where."

Alaine stopped beside Sela.

Not in front of her.

Beside.

The distinction was small enough that Sela nearly missed it.

The man with the owner's cord said, "Mother, stand aside.
No one is threatening the girl."

Alaine looked at the hand still closed around Sela's cloth.

"Then releasing her should be easy."

The woman let go.

The man did not.

He stepped nearer instead.

"People may die while she protects herself from an answer."

Sela saw Alaine become still.

Not the Mother-stillness from the listening room.

Something older.

More personal.

"If you mean to force a Whitehart girl to become a prophecy because fear has made patience expensive," Alaine said, "then do it while I stand beside her."

The man frowned.

"As Mother?"

Alaine's eyes did not leave his.

"As Alaine Serenel."

Nothing visible happened. No guard entered. No bell sounded. Corven did not move.

The man simply stopped.

Two people at the back stepped away. The woman whose son was missing began crying in earnest now that she was no longer asking Sela to save him.

The name had changed the cost of touching her.

Sela hated that.

She loved Alaine for spending it anyway.

The feelings arrived together and refused to separate.

Alaine turned to the cook.

"Who knows the west road?"

"Bryn's brother. Two carriers. Harl would have known it best."

The last name emptied a little air from the shelter.

Alaine did not improve the silence.

"Send the carriers," she said. "Pay them from Serenel aid if the house board refuses the expense."

The man with the owner's cord said, "You cannot purchase every answer."

"No," Alaine said. "Today I am purchasing boots."

The cook made a sound into her sleeve. Alaine glanced at her. "You may laugh. Serenel money improves under ridicule."

Only then did Sela notice that Alaine had come without her stick. Her left leg had begun to tremble beneath the cloak. Sela's hand moved before pride caught it. Alaine saw. Neither pretended otherwise.

The crowd broke slowly.

Sela waited until only the cook, Elya and Alaine remained.

"You could have said that name yesterday."

Alaine looked toward the opening where the others had gone.

"Yes."

"You hid it from me and then used it on them."

"Yes."

"It worked."

Alaine's face tightened.

"Yes."

Sela rubbed the place on her sleeve where the woman had held her.

"Does that bother you?"

"More than if it had failed."

That answer found the old Alaine inside the new name.

Sela did not forgive her.

She moved half a step closer anyway.

Behind them, the Serenel name traveled through the camp faster than the search party traveled west.

Sela had known Alaine most of her life and had somehow never pictured her as somebody's aunt.

The omission embarrassed her.

Whitehart had filled so much of Alaine's outline that Sela had mistaken the outline for the woman.

Seeing the rest of her did not make Sela feel safer.

Chapter Twenty-One

The Price of Water

The child died before Maren finished counting the cups.

Her name was Lio. She was six. Her family slept in the fifth shelter row below the mill and drew water from whichever well had the shorter queue. Tomas learned those facts in the cold room because Maren asked them before she asked what office Whitehart meant to say.

Lio's mother stood beside the hurdle with both hands locked under her arms.

"She drank from the north well," Maren said.

"Sometimes."

"After rain?"

"There has been rain every day."

"Did anyone else in the shelter loosen first?"

The mother's head came up. "You can say *sick*."

Maren nodded once. "Who was sick first?"

Tomas watched the correction cost her time. She paid it.

Maren had arrived six days earlier with a wound cart traveling north and permission from no one. She was a compact woman with a stiff smallest finger on her working hand and a habit of remembering a person's cup before their face. On her

first morning she asked Ansel for every death since thaw. On the second she walked the camp rows. On the third she began tying lengths of cord across a board in the mill shed.

She did not ask whether the flux was punishment, poison, bad air, or a trial sent by the dead. She asked where people slept, which water they carried, where they emptied waste, what day the rain came, who fell ill first, and which vessels changed households.

The day before Lio died, Tomas had found Maren sitting on an overturned bucket outside the fifth row. The child lay beneath two blankets and refused water because every swallow cramped her belly.

Maren held up a cup. "This is the worst medicine I own."

Lio opened one eye. "It's water."

"You see through every trick. I shall have to retire."

"You are old."

"Then the retirement is overdue. Drink."

Lio managed three mouthfuls. Afterward Maren could describe the cup—green glaze, chipped foot, north-well red at the seam—but had to ask Tomas which face belonged to Lio's mother.

At the mill shed she built the pattern from objects before names. One black stone for each sick shelter. Red cord to the north well, pale cord to the south, undyed for uncertain. Short chalk marks for rain days. Knotted thread for people who changed rows.

Tomas held the board while she shifted the cords.

"You are counting households as if they remain still," he said.

"They do not."

"Then the board lies."

"The board stops. People move. I move the cord when I learn it."

"And what you never learn?"

Maren tugged a knot loose with her stiff finger. "Kills people whether or not I draw it."

He disliked the answer. He continued holding the board.

By the fourth day she believed the north low well was the center.

She said so to Tomas in the meal yard.

"Twenty-three shelters with flux," she told him. "Seventeen draw mainly north. Four draw there when the south queue closes. Two uncertain. Close the north well now and watch the south."

"Watch for how long?"

"Long enough to be wrong more safely."

Before Ansel could send men with a cover, a woman from the eighth row came up carrying three water cups on a cord. Her household had four sick people and had not used the north well once.

Maren asked the same question three times in different shapes. The answer remained south.

"Then it is not the north well," Tomas said.

"It may not be only the north well."

The woman held out the cups. Pale grit had dried beneath each rim.

"That's south," she said. "North leaves red."

Maren scraped the grit with her nail, smelled the inside, and asked where the cups had been rinsed.

"At the well."

"On which side?"

"The downhill stone. Same as everyone."

Tomas followed Maren down to the wells.

The north and south wells stood two hundred paces apart at the bottom of the camp flat. Neither was deep. Stone rings kept the edges from falling in; boards covered half the mouths. The north water came up through reddish soil. The south held pale mountain grit. Camp people had begun calling them blood and bone, though both names had been invented after sickness started.

Maren knelt at the north ring and touched the water with the back of two fingers. She did the same at the south. No color, smell, or warmth proved anything.

"Where are the pits?" she asked.

Nobody answered at first.

Ansel had a map of the sanctioned waste ground. The camps had three more grounds he did not know about and dozens of shallow pits dug by households unwilling to walk at night. The

nearest lay uphill of the south well beneath a shelter that had been moved after the last hard rain.

Maren made them uncover it.

The family in the shelter refused.

"My daughters sleep there," the father said. "You don't dig under their bed in front of the road."

"Where is the waste carried?" Maren asked.

"Away."

"By whom?"

"Away."

"Where are soiled cloths rinsed?"

The people around the shelter looked toward the daughters. One was old enough to understand what the question suggested about bodies and shame. She stared at the mud.

"Enough," the father said.

Maren stopped asking him. She walked uphill, found the rain channel by its flattened grass, and followed it down. It crossed two filled pits, passed beneath the moved shelter, divided at a cart rut, and reached both wells from above.

At the south ring, pale foam clung to the downhill stone.

The assumption changed in her mouth.

"Not one bad source," she said to Tomas. "Two low mouths taking the same surface wash after rain. Perhaps. Close both."

"You have not examined the pit."

"They refused."

"Then on what authority do you close their water?"

"On twenty-three shelters, two wells, three rain days, the direction of the ground, and one dead child. If the pattern is false, the harm is thirst and labor. If it is true, waiting gives me more children."

Tomas had heard arguments like it in the listening room. Evidence, cost, unequal errors. The language differed. The shape did not.

He looked at the people queued with buckets.

"Close them," he said.

The order belonged to Whitehart once he spoke it.

Harl's old road boards covered the north well. Two mill doors covered the south. Ansel posted workers at each because people lifted the boards as soon as the first high-source queue passed an hour. One woman filled a cup from seepage around the north ring and told the guard that closed water could not be dangerous because danger moved.

The first afternoon nearly became a riot without anyone deciding to riot.

The high spring released water no faster because the low wells had closed. Buckets accumulated down the path. A man at the front filled four vessels for one household. A woman twenty places back struck one from his hand. The bucket broke, the water entered the mud, and everybody who had waited watched a full carrying load disappear under their feet.

Roderick stepped between them with his injured arm bound. He did not raise his voice. People saw him and made room

because of the neck story. Wren, watching from the path, wrote down that the crowd responded to his body before any order.

Ansel issued one vessel mark per shelter until nightfall. The rule made no allowance for seven-person households or for a woman alone. Maren changed it to one mark per four people. The clerks could not verify household size without stable company rolls, so families borrowed children from one another while passing the board.

By dark the spring had produced the same amount of water through three different failures of counting.

Maren marked the affected shelter rows with white cloth.

She meant the cloth to tell water carriers where clean vessels must go first. By noon children from unmarked rows had begun calling them flux flags. A bread clerk put marked households at the end of the ration line so they would not handle the common tokens. Maren removed the rule when she found it. The next clerk restored it after she left.

The fifth row had to move.

The closest shelters stood on ground crossed by the runoff. Families argued that the rain had passed, that new ground cost poles and cloth, that their sick could not be carried, and that moving marked people among healthy rows might spread illness.

All four objections were reasonable. The shelters moved.

Lio remained in the cold room.

Her mother would permit washing and burial. She would not permit Maren to examine the body.

"You counted her while she breathed," she said. "You don't count her now."

Lio's father stood at the wall. "If it tells her about the other two—"

"It won't bring this one back."

"I know."

The parents did not look at each other.

Maren said, "No cutting. I need the mouth, eyes, belly, hands, and the cloth beneath her. I need to know whether this resembles the other deaths or something put in one household's food or water. I may learn nothing."

"You will learn that she is dead," the mother said.

Tomas should have ended it there.

Instead he asked the father whether he consented. The father said yes. The mother walked out and struck the doorframe with her shoulder because she would not move aside for him.

Maren uncovered the child.

She worked without ceremony and without haste. Dry mouth. Sunken eyes. No blood at the lips. No burn in the throat. Belly drawn rather than swollen. The same marks of lost water she had seen in two adults from the north row and one boy from the south.

"It supports flux and thirst," she said. "It does not prove the wells caused either."

Lio's father began to cry. Maren covered the child before writing anything.

Outside the cold room, Lio's mother waited beneath the eave.

"He said yes," Tomas told her.

"I know what he said."

"She did not cut."

"That is what you think I was protecting?"

Rain dripped from the roof between them.

"You chose the answer that let you continue," the mother said.

Tomas had no procedural correction. The father had answered a question. The mother had also answered it. He had selected the usable one.

Tomas entered the office afterward. The mother's refusal did not appear in it. The father's permission did not appear. The child received a name, a date, and words that had been spoken over children for centuries without asking which water they drank.

Maren ate with him after midnight.

She would not write while either of them held bread. The cord board leaned face-in against the wall.

"You keep the names with the cases," Tomas said.

"Until treatment ends. Longer if later care or a household claim may depend on them."

"A name can make the marked rows permanent."

"Without a name, the clerk tells a mother there is no proof her child was examined."

"And with it, every later clerk knows what was in her bedding."

Maren turned her cup by its chipped handle. "Yes."

She asked what happened to Whitehart's trial notes. Tomas told her they burned after judgment.

"All of them?"

"The Ledger keeps the entry."

"The entry keeps the conclusion."

"The notes keep a frightened person's smallest movements after the need for them has passed."

Maren looked toward the cold-room door. "Need passes differently depending on who expects another case."

Neither persuaded the other. Tomas respected her more for failing.

Maren found Sela carrying high-source buckets on the second day of closure.

The path from the upper spring added a mile to every load. Sela had a yoke across her shoulders and mud dried to both calves. Maren took one bucket without asking and nearly spilled it because the weight pulled her stiff finger open.

"I can carry it," Sela said.

"So can I, badly. Walk."

They carried the buckets down side by side.

Maren asked whether Sela had eaten before her trial.

"Barley."

"How much?"

"A bowl."

"Sleep?"

"Some."

"Cold?"

"It was first snow."

"In the room."

"The arch was open."

"Had you fasted during the winter on the pass?"

Sela adjusted the yoke. "We missed meals. We didn't call it fasting."

Maren glanced at her.

"Whitehart has better nouns," Sela said. "Hunger does not."

"How long without sleep?"

"I don't know."

"Did the arch return sound? An echo, a second step, speech from the passage?"

Sela stopped walking.

The water moved in both buckets.

"I told Wren no."

"Then tell me no."

"No."

Maren nodded and began walking again.

"Do you think cold made me hear something?" Sela asked.

"I think cold, hunger, fear, sleeplessness, echo, and expectation can alter what a body reports. I think a body can

also report accurately while suffering all of them. I have no comparison that answers your case."

"Then why ask?"

"Because people are dying from a pattern they dislike being asked about. I am trying not to let that make every refusal look the same to me."

The answer was less polished than Perrin's and less exact than Wren's. Maren was out of breath from the bucket.

At the fifth row, a boy saw the white cloth tied to his shelter and moved away from Sela rather than brush her sleeve.

The wells remained closed.

Flux fell first in the unmarked rows. Three more people became sick in the marked shelters, then one, then none for two days. The high springs could not supply the whole camp without queues lasting into darkness. Fuel went to boiling water instead of cooking. Women carried farther. The old and injured traded ration portions for filled vessels.

Maren slept in the mill shed beside the cord board. Twice each night she walked the marked rows and counted covered vessels. She found clean water poured into an old north-well jar, an unmarked family hiding a sick grandfather, and a ration clerk using her case list to deny a woman kitchen work.

She corrected each thing she saw. The things she did not see continued without her.

Tomas moved between the high spring and the cold room until the questions began to repeat in his dreams. Who drank. Who emptied. Who shared. Who refused. Each answer

prevented one kind of harm and placed a household more firmly inside the pattern.

Lio's mother tore the white cloth from her shelter every morning. Every morning a water worker tied another one.

Fewer people fell ill.

No one stopped seeing the flags.

Three days after Lio's burial, the first engineering carts reached the elbow. Nobody cheered. The camp had learned that a useful arrival could still be late. Aren Lethren walked beside the lead axle checking the ration release against the work crew. Elya Serenel came behind with the healer's chest because the jolting had opened one of the salve jars. They argued about whose people should receive the first clean draw while both carrying the same broken barrel uphill.

Sela watched them and thought this was what Houses looked like before history made banners out of them: two tired adults disagreeing about water while trying not to drop it.

Halvard arrived with six carts, twenty-four iron fittings, and an argument about the timber before he had both feet inside the gate. The contract had been made ugly on purpose: Serenel money paid the first half, Lethren stores guaranteed the second, Whitehart granted no ownership, and Halvard retained the right to stop work if either patron tried to turn a water line into a boundary claim.

The argument was with the mill factor.

"One hundred and eighty lengths," Halvard said.

"One hundred and eighty were cut."

"These are not all lengths. Seven are ambitions."

He struck the nearest timber with his knuckles. The wood answered with a dull split note. Halvard turned it, found rot beneath one pale edge, and set it apart.

"One hundred and seventy-three lengths, seven ambitions, six carts charged. Write it that way."

The factor did.

Fen watched from beneath the gate stair with a shovel in his hands.

For nine days nobody in Whitehart had addressed him. The silence had developed manners. People no longer stopped visibly before failing to speak. They looked toward the nearest object and gave the object whatever sentence might have belonged to him.

"The drainage shovel is required below," Ansel told the stair.

Fen carried it down.

Halvard was nearly fifty, square through the middle, and deaf enough on the left that he turned his wrong shoulder toward every quiet speaker. He carried broken fittings in a leather roll and good ones loose in his coat. Before examining the millrace, he tested the water with the back of two fingers, then asked the miller how high the spring floods reached.

The miller showed him a mark on the wall.

Halvard asked who had cut the overflow ditch below it.

The miller said nobody.

Fen, standing beside the ditch with the shovel, looked at the old spade lines.

Halvard followed his eyes. He did not ask.

The design began at the millrace, above the closed wells and below Whitehart's lower store. A narrow timber runnel would take a controlled share of mill water along the camp's upper edge. Two covered troughs would let grit settle. Draw points would release water into vessels without hands or cups entering the main channel. A waste sluice would carry the first muddy flow away each morning.

Nothing in it was new to the valley. The mill had carried water in timber for sixty years. Shepherds used settling tubs after storms. Stone weights closed simple sluices along the pasture cuts.

The difficulty was making all of it work at the same time for nearly four thousand people.

Halvard walked the line with Maren, the miller, two valley carpenters, and three camp women who carried water daily. He changed the draw height after the shortest woman demonstrated that a full bucket would strike her knees. He moved the first trough because Maren would not permit it downhill of the marked rows. He abandoned an iron brace when the local carpenter showed him how the freeze would draw it out of the softer post.

Each correction entered the margin beside the original measure.

The mill factor opened Nella's account on the first morning.

Timber: one hundred and seventy-three accepted lengths.

Iron: twenty-four fittings, three to be returned if unused.

Carts: six outward, six return obligations held.

Food: two hundred worker-days at Whitehart's ordinary labor ration, not pilgrim price.

The current value stood at three hundred and twelve marks before the first trench was cut. No final sum. No interest. No due day. Nella of Duskport's name at the head.

Halvard made Ansel read the account aloud to the crews.

"If you work, your food is charged to the system," he said. "It is not a gift from the house and not a favor from me. If the value changes, it is read again."

A man from the seventh row asked who owed the three hundred and twelve marks.

Halvard looked at the factor.

The factor looked at the open account.

"At present," he said, "the work."

The man laughed. "Then ask the trough for it."

Nobody supplied a better debtor.

They built for eight days.

The first two were trench and support. Camp crews cut the high line while valley carpenters shaped channel boards. Whitehart supplied two rope teams and lime from a repair store Ansel had meant for the east wall. The mill lost one grinding hour each morning while the intake was measured. Bryn sold

hot onions beside the work line and charged Halvard double after he repaired her ladle handle without asking.

By the third day everybody had a complaint that could be expressed as a measure. The trench crews said the carpenters cut faster than earth could be cleared. The carpenters said the trench wandered. The miller said the intake took one part in twelve of his useful fall; Halvard measured one part in fourteen and discovered they were using different water marks. Maren refused the first trough cover because dirty boots could stand on it above the draw point.

Halvard wrote each dispute in a margin and gave it a time. The pages looked fair. The work remained cold, wet, and heavier for the outer rows whose walk began before the ration fire lit.

One worker left after two days because Nella's account named food but not an injury portion. Another took his place because the water queue had already cost his household more labor than the trench.

Fen moved where the unassigned work collected. He cleared chips beneath the carpenters. He found the stone buried under the third support before a loaded post found it. He carried dull blades uphill and returned with sharpened ones because the smith's boy accepted objects without needing to speak to the person holding them.

Nobody entered his hours against Nella's food.

On the fourth day he took bread from Whitehart as usual. The runnel account therefore showed every named worker fed

except the man who had worked longest beneath it.

The next flour delivery brought Nessa.

Fen saw the blue repair seam before he saw her face. She came through the mill yard carrying one side of the sack while a road boy carried the other. The load was too light for two people. Nessa had arranged it that way so she would not have to give Fen the work in front of the crews.

For five years she had found the dark passage after the delivery and said *Mind your back, Fen*. The valley was not bound by Alaine's ruling. Nessa could have spoken.

She had also heard that only the Called kept his name.

She stood beside the new channel while Ansel marked the flour. Fen worked ten paces away setting stone beneath a support. Once, Nessa looked toward him. Her mouth tightened around the sentence she had used at every flour delivery.

She thanked the road boy and left.

Fen set the same support twice because the first time he placed the broad stone upside down.

On the sixth day Halvard discovered the omission.

He stood at the ration board, turning his right ear toward Ansel.

"Who clears beneath the supports?"

Ansel looked past Fen. "The house provides incidental labor."

"Name."

The pause told Halvard there was a problem he had not measured.

Wren, at the end of the board, said, "Fen. His standing is unfinished."

Halvard wrote the name on a scrap and put the scrap in his coat.

Fen continued carrying blades.

The first water entered the runnel on the morning of the ninth day.

Halvard lifted the mill sluice one finger-width. A dark thread moved between the new boards, carrying sawdust and lime dust. Workers ran beside it. The thread widened, struck the first turn, climbed one side, settled, and went on.

At the first trough the water came brown. At the second it came pale. Halvard opened the waste sluice until the grit cleared, then closed it and released the first draw point.

A cup filled.

No office was said. No House claimed the moment. The shortest water carrier drank, made a face because fresh mill water tasted of new timber, and handed the cup to a child.

Then everyone wanted to touch it.

The water carrier filled a second cup and poured it over the hands of the woman beside her. A boy pushed his face beneath the draw and came up choking. Somebody beat time against the trough with a spoon until Halvard took the spoon away to protect the joinery.

For the length of one full basin, no one argued about who owned the works.

Children ran beneath the channel and came out wet. One carpenter sat in the mud and laughed until he coughed. Maren filled three clear vessels and held them against the light. Ansel tried to begin a queue while people were still cheering.

Fen stood behind the second support with water dripping from his hair. He had not meant to go under it. A child had turned the draw lever too far and the stream had struck him in the chest.

For one breath he laughed with everyone else.

The sound startled the nearest worker. The worker looked at him, remembered, and turned back to the water.

The first trough overflowed before noon.

The controlled inlet had been measured for ordinary mill flow. Meltwater entered from an upper cut Halvard had seen dry. The settling screen clogged with bark stripped from a rough channel board. Water rose beneath the trough cover, found the support trench, and came out twenty paces lower in the middle of the sixth shelter row.

People shouted that the runnel had broken.

Halvard shut the intake. The new channel emptied. The cheering ended in the time it took the last water to leave the draw point.

He opened the screen housing and found the bark.

"Plane every board," he said. "Larger waste mouth. Raise the trough."

Fen walked away from the trough.

He went downhill past the flooded shelters, past the place the support trench released water, and stopped beside a line of nettles behind the old tanning frames. The ground there had been dry throughout the build. Now a thin stream showed beneath last year's stems.

Fen put the shovel in and lifted one mat of roots.

An old stone-lined run appeared beneath it.

It did not lead toward the waste ground. It turned west, passed under a stack of abandoned boards, and ended at a gravel fan below the camp flat. Fen knew it because the north-wall roof water found the same line during hard mountain rain. The route appeared only when the upper ground was full. Nobody counted it as a ditch because nobody maintained it as one.

Halvard came down. Fen pointed from the clogged trough to the support trench, then to the hidden run.

Halvard knelt and struck the stones with his knuckles. He traced the turn, measured the fall with cord, and returned to the trough.

The revised overflow left the first settling basin by a broad wooden lip, crossed the path in a covered chute, and discharged into the old run above the gravel fan. It required twelve more lengths, two fittings previously marked for return, and thirty-six additional worker rations.

The factor added them to Nella's account.

The second flow held.

Halvard made it hold through two deliberate failures. He blocked the screen with bark and watched the broad lip take the rise. He shut a draw point while the intake remained open. He sent four people to stand on the covered chute and listened for the supports. The fourth person refused to jump when asked.

"Three loads are enough," Halvard said.

"You asked for four."

"I was wrong."

The man stepped down without becoming a lesson about courage.

At dusk Halvard completed the maintenance sheet. Intake check at first light. Screen clearing four times daily and after rain. Trough scour every third day. Support inspection after frost. Overflow run cleared weekly and kept free of shelter, store, or waste.

At the bottom he entered the correction:

Overflow route identified by Fen, keeper of the north wall.

Fen read the line over his shoulder.

"Take it out," he said.

It was the first speech Halvard had heard from him.

Halvard turned his right ear, but Fen did not repeat it. He pointed to the name.

Halvard looked toward Ansel. The steward's eyes remained on the board. Wren stood beyond him with both hands inside

her sleeves.

Halvard took the pen and drew one line through the credit.

The letters remained legible beneath it.

Fen touched the paper once, over the crossed-out name, then lifted his hand.

Halvard did not write another source. He did not black the name until it disappeared. The sheet went into Wren's custody exactly as altered.

After dark Halvard found Fen at the intake.

The mill noise lay on Halvard's bad side. He turned until his right ear faced the water and listened to the screen rhythm. Fen stood beside him holding the new bone scraper.

Halvard pointed to the maintenance sheet now sealed in Wren's fold, then to the overflow run. His hands asked a question the house's order had made difficult to speak.

Fen showed him.

He blocked half the run with wet leaves. The trough note deepened before water became visible at the lip. Halvard put two fingers against the channel and felt the change. He cut a shallow notch in the nearest support at the level where vibration altered.

Anyone could test the notch without knowing who taught it.

Halvard placed the broken scraper handle from the first failure beside Fen's candle box. Failed objects, his coat suggested, deserved custody.

Fen left it there until morning, then used the bone to wedge a loose taper cup.

No thanks passed between them. Nothing was repaired by the omission.

Water ran through the night.

The marked rows sickened less. The queues moved faster. The outer shelters walked farther because every draw point stood above them. Four crews now had to clear screens, guard levers, scour troughs, and keep the overflow route open or the whole camp lost clean water at once.

The first queue formed before dawn. It reached from the upper draw to the fifth row. Roan had not yet arrived, and nobody knew whether mill households, marked rows, sick shelters, or workers possessed priority. A Whitehart novice tried to organize it by arrival. Maren reorganized it by need. Ansel reorganized it by vessel mark. All three systems occupied the same path for an hour.

A woman from the outer row left her bucket to keep a child from being trampled. When she returned, the line had moved around it and no one admitted knowing her place.

Halvard built a second waiting rail that afternoon. By supper people were arguing over which rail had priority.

Fen lay awake in the north passage listening to the new sound below the wall.

He could hear when the screen began to fill.

Chapter Twenty-Two

What She Never Told Him

Fen told Perrin something Sela had never meant to give him.

It was not locked in a book or whispered under oath. Parts of the trial had been heard from the passage. Harl knew the winter. Her mother knew more. That made what Fen did easier to excuse and impossible to return.

Perrin had asked why Sela still went down to her mother's house alone after the road camps began to form.

"Because she can," Fen said.

"That is not an answer."

"It is the answer Whitehart would miss."

They sat in the north passage where the stone sweated whenever the outside air warmed. Perrin had brought two cups of hot beer and paid Fen a quarter mark for an hour of route questions. Payment had become formal after the flour-book mistake. Perrin put coin on the ledge before asking anything and wrote whether Fen accepted.

The formality made Fen feel safer.

It also made the bargain easier to pretend was only work.

"What does she do there?" Perrin asked.

"Goats. Her mother's roof. Brem."

"What does she not do here?"

Fen drank.

He knew the answer.

He had seen it the afternoon Sela returned from her mother's after the thaw. She had come through the lower wicket with mud on both knees and half a heel of bread in her sleeve. Nobody below knew she was there yet. In the store passage she had leaned her forehead against the cool wall and stood with her eyes closed.

Fen had been carrying lamp oil.

She did not see him.

She whispered, very softly:

"I don't want to be good at this."

Then she opened her eyes, saw Fen and said, "If you tell anyone I talk to walls, I'll deny it."

Fen had said, "The wall has no standing."

She laughed.

He had kept the sentence because it had been given to him accidentally.

Now Perrin waited.

"She rests," Fen said.

"At her mother's?"

"Before she goes in."

"From walking?"

"No."

Perrin's pen remained still.

Fen should have stopped.

He thought of Fen Leren in the flour book. He thought of the hall standing still when Perrin said it. He thought of Nessa saying his name in the passage after every flour delivery where nobody could hear.

He thought of how expensive it had become to be asked a question and know that the answer would alter the next one.

"She said she doesn't want to be good at this," Fen said.

Perrin did not immediately write. Fen wished he had.

"At what?"

"Being watched. Being believed. Whatever it is. She didn't say."

"Who heard?"

"Me."

"Did she know?"

"After."

"Did she ask you to keep it?"

Fen looked at him.

Perrin lowered the pen.

"That was a question, not a defense."

"She threatened to deny talking to walls."

"Fen."

The quarter mark sat between them.

Fen touched it with one finger.

"She didn't say I could tell you."

Perrin closed the notebook.

"Then I won't use it."

Fen was irritated.

"Why ask if you won't use the answer?"

Perrin looked at him.

"Because I wanted to know."

It was exactly the answer Fen had once admired.

This time it sounded like appetite.

Three days later Sela heard the sentence from a man she had never met.

He was a cooper from the lower road. One of the new water barrels had split along the second hoop and he had come up to argue that the damage was in the wood, not his work. Sela was beside Maren measuring clean vessels when the cooper looked at her and smiled as though they shared something.

"You needn't be good at it," he said.

Sela looked at him.

"Good at what?"

The man's smile changed.

He understood too late that he had stepped into a place prepared by someone else's words.

"Nothing."

"No. Say it."

Maren stopped counting cups.

The cooper's ears reddened.

"The Blackcrest man said—"

Sela was already walking.

Perrin was not in his cell.

Fen was in the north passage outside it.

He had come to replace a cracked taper cup and was kneeling with the stone ring in one hand when Sela came around the corner.

He looked up.

Her face told him before she spoke.

The cup remained suspended above the niche.

"Did you tell him?" Sela asked.

Fen could have asked what.

That would have bought seconds.

Maybe enough to build a cleaner answer.

"Yes."

The word entered the room and did not improve.

Sela stood very still.

Fen lowered the cup.

"He said he wouldn't use it."

"He did."

"Then he broke his word."

"Did I give you one?"

Fen looked at her.

"No."

"Did I give him one?"

"No."

"Then why are we talking about his word?"

The anger in her voice was low. Fen had heard Sela shout at goats, at Brem, once at Harl for crossing wet ground without a line. This was worse because she was trying not to give the room anything it could repeat.

"I shouldn't have told him."

"No."

"I know that now."

"You knew it then."

That struck.

Fen stood.

"Yes."

Sela's eyes filled and did not spill.

"Why?"

There were answers that would make him smaller.

Because Perrin asked.

Because Perrin paid.

Because Fen was lonely.

Because Sela had become public material and public material felt different from a person until the person stood in the doorway.

Because for an hour at a time Perrin made Fen feel like the world had not successfully erased him.

Fen said, "I wanted him to keep asking me things."

Sela looked at him.

The honesty did not help.

It only removed somewhere for her anger to go.

"So you sold it."

"Yes."

"For a quarter mark?"

"No."

"What then?"

Fen almost said *you wouldn't understand*.

Fen swallowed it. He had heard men use that sentence when they wanted to keep both the wound and the last word.

"For the next question," he said.

Sela's mouth opened, then closed. Her eyes went once to the quarter mark still lying between them.

Fen wished she would call him cheap. Cheap would have had a number.

"You should have taken the money," she said.

Then she left.

Fen remained by the wall niche with the replacement cup in his hand.

He fitted it badly the first time.

Removed it.

Tried again.

Perrin found Sela at the lower spring before dark.

He did not begin with an apology.

Fen noticed that before he noticed anything else.

"The cooper heard it from me," he said.

Sela filled a skin and did not look up.

"Fen said you wouldn't use it."

"I didn't put it in the Chronicle material."

She corked the skin.

"That is not what I said."

Perrin closed his eyes for half a breath.

Wren had started doing that when he made a mistake too obvious to deserve analysis.

"No," he said.

"Who did you tell?"

"Corven Serenel."

That made her look at him.

"Why?"

"He asked whether you were becoming comfortable with the attention."

"And you thought he needed to know I wasn't."

"Yes."

"Why?"

Perrin could have said because Corven was deciding whether to use her name in an appeal for camp recognition.

He could have said because if Corven believed Sela wanted leadership he would treat her differently.

He could have said the information protected her from being mistaken for an ambitious actor.

All true.

"Because I wanted to give him a better picture of you," Perrin said.

Sela stared at him.

"A better picture."

"Yes."

"Did it have me in it?"

He did not answer.

She picked up the water skin.

"You all keep making me accurate enough to use."

"Sela—"

"No."

He stopped.

"That word still means something when I say it," she said.
"I am trying to keep it that way."

She walked uphill.

Perrin stood by the spring until the next person in line asked whether he intended to fill anything.

He moved aside.

That night he opened the notebook to Fen's account and drew a line through Sela's sentence.

The words remained legible beneath it.

Chapter Twenty-Three

You Knew What They Would Hear

Mother Alaine waited until the evening hall was full.

Sela stopped just inside the arch. Alaine had not asked her what should be said.

The benches were filled, the wall lamps trimmed, and three Serenel aid workers stood at the rear beside Elya as though they were trying very hard not to look like a delegation.

Corven stood outside.

Sela had seen him there through the arch, talking to two camp speakers under the eave.

Aren Lethren sat near Ansel with his hands on his knees and no expression at all.

Perrin had left his notebook closed.

Wren had not brought one.

That frightened Sela more than either of them writing.

"What are we doing?" she asked.

Alaine's gaze moved toward the benches.

"Answering what can be answered."

"That isn't what I asked."

Tomas looked down.

He had heard that sentence too many times lately.

Alaine said, "The lower camps have sent a request for Whitehart to state whether your direction at first snow constituted recognition."

Sela laughed once.

Nobody else did.

"Of what?"

"They do not agree."

"Then answer no."

Alaine's hands tightened slightly on the head of her stick.

"No to which part?"

"All of it."

"That would also be a claim."

"Everything is a claim when you say it."

The sentence struck harder than Sela intended.

Alaine's face remained calm.

That calm had once made Sela feel safe.

Now she could see the work inside it.

"Then you understand the difficulty," Alaine said.

Sela looked at her. "I understand the excuse."

Alaine's mouth thinned. "You have become very economical with respect."

"Winter."

"Of course."

"No. I understand the excuse."

A murmur began in the benches.

Alaine waited until it died.

She did not call for silence.

She rarely had to.

Sela looked around the hall.

Faces she knew. Faces from below. People who had slept in rain because Whitehart's gate remained open. People who had eaten from Serenel pots. People whose children worked the water line. Ivet on the third bench. Fen at the rear with the candle box. Elya. Aren. Tomas.

Everyone wanted the sentence for a different reason.

Sela walked toward Alaine.

"Say you don't know."

The room changed.

Alaine's eyes stayed on her.

"I have said that many times."

"Not where they can use it."

"Sela."

"Say it here. Say you do not know whether anything spoke to me. Say you do not know whether the Bell, the griffes, the dead, the mountain, God, chance or my own frightened head put anything in me. Say Whitehart does not know either."

Tomas's head came up at *God*.

Alaine's face did not.

Sela continued before fear could make her cleaner.

"Say I am a goatherd who made a choice at the pass and another at first snow and people lived, and that does not make

the choices holy. Say the grave is a grave. Say Col is a name I said and you do not know why. Say I can be wrong."

Alaine listened.

Sela knew that look.

It was the look Alaine wore when someone brought a difficult animal into the byre: compassion first, then assessment of whether the creature could be saved without killing the herd.

Sela hated herself for the comparison.

She hated Alaine more for making it fit.

"I can say much of that," Alaine said.

"All of it."

"No."

Plain enough that the room heard it.

Sela's throat tightened.

"Why?"

Alaine looked briefly toward the Serenels, then toward Aren Lethren.

The whole valley sat inside that glance.

"Because Whitehart does know some things," she said. "We know that people experience what they cannot verify. We know that such experience can alter judgment, courage, fear and community. We know that refusing every account because it cannot be repeated creates its own victims. We know that claiming certainty where none exists creates others. We have law because both failures kill."

"That is a beautiful answer."

"It is also true."

"I asked about me."

Alaine's jaw moved once.

Sela saw the woman beneath Mother Alaine and almost stopped.

Almost.

"You could end this," Sela said. "Not all of it. Enough. You could tell them I am not recognized."

Tomas said quietly, "She is not."

Every face turned toward him.

Tomas did not move.

"No judgment has been entered," he said. "That is fact."

Sela looked at Alaine.

"Say that."

Alaine's eyes closed for the length of one breath.

When they opened, Sela understood that she had decided before the hall filled and was deciding again now because love had made the first decision painful.

Alaine stepped forward.

The house stilled.

"No judgment has been entered concerning Sela of the Light Heights," she said.

Relief moved through Sela so quickly it hurt.

Then Alaine continued.

"Whitehart has found no falsehood in the account she has given under test. She has neither claimed a voice she cannot name nor improved what she cannot prove. She has shown the discipline our oldest teachers required of those who stood nearest uncertainty: useful hands, exact account, no ornament where no knowledge stands."

Sela felt the floor change beneath her.

Not literally.

She understood why people later said it had.

Alaine was still speaking.

"Therefore Whitehart will neither declare what has not been established nor dishonor the honesty with which Sela has refused to declare it herself."

There was no word *Called*.

No word *holy*.

No recognition.

Every sentence was true.

Someone in the second row began to cry.

A man near the back whispered, "She kept the discipline."

Another said, "Whitehart accepts her."

The phrase moved before Alaine could finish.

Sela stared at her.

Alaine heard it too. Her face did not change. She had known.

Sela crossed the space between them.

"You knew what they would hear."

The hall became silent enough that Sela could hear a lamp cup settling in its niche.

Alaine looked at her.

For once there was no House answer ready.

"Yes," she said.

At nine, Sela had been sick through a whole winter night in the novices' room. Alaine had held the bowl, washed it herself, and told everyone else to sleep. Sela had forgotten the fever and remembered the hand moving slowly between her shoulders.

That memory came now with nowhere useful to go.

Sela stepped back.

Alaine reached for her and stopped before touching.

Good, Sela thought again.

Again the thought shamed her.

"Why?" Sela asked.

Alaine's voice lowered.

"Because the house is not only what it has done to you."

"I know."

"Because if I say Whitehart has no right to weigh an uncertain account, I do not only free you. I tell every widow whose testimony was protected against a lord's certainty that the protection was fraud. I tell every family whose dead were entered on less than perfect evidence that their burial stood on nothing. I tell every frightened novice that honesty has no form here except refusal."

"So you used me to protect them."

"I protected something that protects them."

"That is not the same sentence."

Alaine looked older.

"No."

Sela wanted to hate her cleanly.

Alaine would not permit even that.

Because the examples were real.

Because Whitehart had protected people.

Because Alaine believed every word.

Because she had also used Sela.

Corven entered from the arch after the last whisper had already begun spreading outward.

He looked from Alaine to Sela and understood enough.

"What did she say?" he asked Elya.

Elya answered, "Something true."

Corven's eyes went to Sela.

"That bad?"

Sela laughed despite herself.

It came out close to a sob.

She hated him for the timing and was grateful for it.

Alaine sat down.

Nobody called the hall dismissed.

People began leaving anyway, carrying the sentence in different shapes.

Sela stood until Ivet came to her.

Ivet did not say Alaine meant well.

Did not say Whitehart needed this.

Did not say the words had been technically precise.

She touched Sela's sleeve once.

Sela let her.

At the door, a pilgrim bowed.

Sela saw him begin and said, "Don't."

He straightened.

For one moment the word worked.

Outside, someone was already repeating that Whitehart had confirmed the honesty of the Called.

By the lower fire it became that Whitehart had confirmed the Called.

By morning, one road singer had added:

She would not name the voice, and therefore the House knew it true.

By morning, two children in the lower row were singing the line while they carried ash buckets uphill.

Chapter Twenty-Four

The First Command

The child went missing between the bread line and the east sheds.

At first nobody knew he was missing.

The camp had grown large enough for every adult to assume a missing child belonged to somebody else.

His mother thought he had gone with his sister to the water queue. His sister thought he had followed two older boys toward the mill. The older boys had been sent uphill for pegs and assumed the small shape behind them belonged to somebody else's child.

By the time the mother began shouting his name, three different searches had already started in three different directions.

The boy was called Renn. He was five and wore one red stocking because the other had been lost in the rain.

Sela learned those facts while carrying a bucket of hoof wash.

She was crossing the lower lane when Renn's mother caught her arm.

"Please."

The word made Sela pull back before she understood why.

"What happened?"

"He is gone."

"How long?"

"I don't know. Since bread. Maybe before. His sister—"

The woman looked behind her as if the child might appear because the sentence had become unbearable.

People had noticed Sela stop.

That was enough.

The lane slowed.

A man set down a bundle. Two water carriers turned. Someone called from the next row, "What is it?"

Sela saw the movement begin.

Not belief yet.

Attention.

The raw material.

"Who has searched?" she asked.

The mother pointed without precision.

"There. The mill. Below."

Sela climbed onto an empty flour box.

She did not decide to use the crowd.

That was what she told herself later.

She decided the child needed finding and the crowd was already there.

"Listen."

The word did what a shout could not.

People stopped speaking.

The silence hit her in the body.

Three hundred faces, perhaps more, turned toward her.

For one shameful heartbeat she forgot the child.

She thought: *again*.

Then Renn's mother made a small broken sound below the box.

The world returned.

"Nobody goes to the mill," Sela said.

Someone repeated, "No mill."

"I said it once," she snapped. "It does not improve in a chorus."

A few people laughed from nerves.

Good.

"He is five. One red stocking. Last seen near bread. The water lane has already been searched?"

A woman shouted yes.

"Not by you. Who searched it?"

Names came.

Sela pointed to Maren. "Write them."

Maren had no paper.

Wren appeared from the upper turn and handed her a board without asking why.

Sela continued.

"Children go where adults tell them not to go because adults put interesting things there. East sheds first. Under carts, behind lime, inside empty barrels. Two people per shed. Everyone else stays where they are until someone names a place not searched."

The crowd moved.

Fast.

Too fast.

"Walk!" Sela shouted.

Some did.

Others ran because the urgency was real and because she had spoken.

A stack of roof slates went over when three men took the same corner. Nobody was badly hurt. Sela saw the slate break and stored the fact somewhere she would find it later.

"East sheds first!" someone shouted from farther down.

The sentence moved beyond her control.

Sela climbed off the box.

Renn's mother caught her sleeve.

"Where is he?"

"I don't know."

The woman stared.

"But you said east."

"Because nobody had searched them."

The distinction landed too late.

Sela saw it.

So did Wren.

Wren's face did not change.

"Come with me," Sela told the mother.

They went east.

The first shed held lime, canvas and two sleeping men who woke furious and then joined the search.

The second held broken yokes.

The third had been used for onions until the Serenel carts arrived. The smell remained. A child could not hide there without coughing.

The fourth was half collapsed and supposedly empty.

Brem stood outside it with one of the older boys.

"We heard something."

Sela pushed past him.

The rear wall had fallen inward, leaving a triangular space between boards and stone. Renn had crawled inside after a dog. The dog had crawled out.

Renn had not.

He sat in darkness with both knees drawn up, one red stocking grey with dust, too frightened to answer the adults calling from outside because he believed he would be beaten for entering.

Sela lay flat and reached through the gap.

"Renn."

He looked at her.

"Am I in trouble?"

"Probably. Your mother looks talented."

He began to cry.

That was how they knew he could still breathe properly.

"Come here."

"I can't."

"Then I will."

The gap was too small for her shoulders.

Brem pulled two boards while Sela levered a third with the heel of Harl's borrowed road tool. Wren stopped three people from helping because more hands were moving the wall rather than opening it.

When the gap widened, Renn came out headfirst into Sela's arms.

His mother screamed once and struck him across the back before pulling him against her so tightly that Sela had to help free one arm.

People cheered.

That was the part Sela had not expected.

The sound moved through the sheds and out into the lanes. Someone raised both hands. A man near the water line knelt.

Sela stood with dust on her face and the child's shoe in one hand.

For one instant the cheering entered her like heat after cold.

She had spoken. They had moved. A child was alive.

It felt good.

The honesty of that frightened her more than the cheering.

Corven was at the edge of the crowd.

He had not joined the search. He had been meeting with a grain factor and arrived only at the end.

Aren stood several paces away.

Their expressions were different.

Corven looked at Sela as if she had revealed a tool he had suspected she possessed.

Aren looked at the broken slates.

Sela followed his gaze.

One man sat beside the fallen stack holding his wrist. Another slate had cut a woman's calf badly enough that a strip of her skirt was already dark with blood. Maren would later bind the wrist and forbid the man from lifting for a month.

They had happened because people ran when Sela said east.

Renn's mother put the boy down long enough to seize Sela's hands.

"You knew."

"No."

"You sent them straight there."

"Because nobody had searched it."

"You knew."

The woman was weeping too hard to hear grammar.

Sela pulled her hands free.

"I didn't."

Someone behind them said, "She doesn't have to say it."

Sela turned.

She could not see who.

That made it worse.

Aren came forward and lifted the injured man's hand.

"Two fingers move. Wrist perhaps broken. Get Dova—no, Dova is below. Get Serenel's bone woman."

He looked at Sela.

"Your search worked."

She heard the rest before he said it.

"And?"

"And a working thing can still need limits."

Corven reached them.

"The limit was a child dying in a shed while committees counted lanes."

Aren did not look at him.

"The child was not dying."

"We knew that afterward."

"Exactly."

Sela looked between them.

"Do not make this yours."

Both men stopped.

That felt good too.

Worse.

She handed Renn's lost shoe to his mother and walked away before anyone could ask where next.

That evening Sela went alone to the listening arch.

She did not enter.

The room was dark.

No trial. No lamp. Only the smell of cold stone and old oil.

She sat on the ledge where she had sat before Tomas and listened to the yard settle.

Nothing came.

No direction.

No voice.

No sudden knowledge.

She was relieved.

Then disappointed.

The disappointment embarrassed her more than the fear.

For several minutes she tried to tell herself the disappointment was because a direction would answer something.

It was not.

Some part of her wanted the thing to return because if it did, the attention might become deserved.

She pressed both palms against her face.

"Idiot," she whispered.

The wall did not disagree.

Footsteps approached.

Sela lowered her hands.

Tomas stopped outside the arch.

"May I?"

"Apparently people do what I say now."

He sat anyway.

Good.

For a while neither spoke.

Then Tomas said, "You found a child."

"Everyone else found him."

"You organized the search."

"And broke a man's wrist."

"A slate broke his wrist."

"Because they ran."

"Because a child was missing."

"Because I said east."

Tomas considered.

"All three can be true."

Sela looked at him.

"That is becoming everyone's favorite way to avoid deciding anything."

"It is also often how decisions begin."

She leaned back against the stone.

"I liked it."

Tomas did not pretend not to understand.

"The cheering?"

"Before that. When they stopped."

She heard herself say it and wanted to take it back.

Tomas saved her from the kindness of pretending she had not.

"Why?"

"Because I said one thing and the whole place became simple."

"For how long?"

"A breath."

"That is longer than most rulers get."

Sela laughed despite herself.

Then the laugh left.

"What if I get good at it?"

Tomas looked into the dark listening room.

"Then being bad at it will no longer protect anyone."

It was not comfort.

Sela had begun to value him for that.

Below, someone called Renn's name and another voice answered that he was asleep.

The camp returned to ordinary noise.

Sela pressed her tongue to the back of her teeth, as if that could keep the next order there.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Two True Messages

Roan arrived after three months on the road and said we before he said his name. Road dust had worked into the seams of his coat, and the shoulder straps of his pack had polished two pale tracks through it.

"We've come by the low ford," he told Ansel, cleaning the last of his bowl with bread. "Word said the high road was bad."

Ansel looked past him. One mud-coloured horse stood beneath the eave.

"Who is we?"

Roan glanced toward the passage as though the answer might have followed him inside. "People on the road."

He had come on pack business. The camp kept him. His pack sheets used Stormrider measures: the same load and relay columns no matter which road community had filled them.

By his second morning he knew which harness would fail next, which store hinge announced itself, and which shelter rows had built drainage without waiting for anyone to call it lawful. He did not ask first who commanded the work. He asked what happened when nobody came.

The answer, too often, was Fen.

When the intake screen clogged, water rose against Halvard's supports while five groups explained why clearing it belonged to someone else. Roan shut the gate to the runnel, spread the work sheet on a grain board, and asked the same question until people stopped answering with names of institutions.

"Who does it when it fails?"

A mill worker said, "Whoever sees it."

"Then whoever sees it is an office without a name. That is how people get worked to death."

He cut five company marks from scrap wood: water, waste, fire, stores, watch. Each shelter row had to provide labor to two. Each company had a named guarantor whose punishment for failure was not a fine but the obligation to find the missing hands and explain the failure where everyone could hear.

The first meeting lasted half the day because every row wanted water and none wanted waste.

Roan listened until complaint began repeating itself.

"Good," he said. "Now we know what nobody will volunteer to carry."

Waste went by rotation.

People hated the decision. Waste still moved.

The system was neither fair nor clean. A fire guarantor traded his watch for beer and one cooking shelter lost its roof before dawn. Roan made him take two replacement watches.

When Halvard observed that the system had failed, Roan looked at the blackened rafters.

"Aye. It told us where."

"After the roof burned."

"Before the row did."

Neither man found the answer satisfying.

Fen crossed all five companies because no list could hold him. He cleared screens, carried ash, noticed loose hinges and moved broken tools uphill. The water clerk could not give him priority bread because he had no row. Roan tried *north-house maintenance*. Whitehart would feed him but not guarantee him. He tried *independent essential labor*. The ration board had no such class.

At last he wrote *unplaced*.

Fen took the charcoal from him and drew a box around the word.

Roan looked at the box for a long moment. Then he crossed the whole slip out.

"Better?"

Fen shook his head.

"No."

"Good. I was worried I'd solved you."

Fen almost smiled.

The company work continued without solving him.

Three days later Signe came down from the valley with cord, pegs, two masons and the patience of a woman who had

spent twenty years listening to people call bad planning temporary. She looked easier to overlook than the things she carried: cord cut to measured lengths, pegs worn smooth by handling, and a board she kept turning toward the ground as though the slope were the only opinion she trusted.

The camp had begun as fires. Fires had become shelters. Shelters had become rows wherever mud, slope and quarrel permitted. The result could still feed four thousand people badly. It could not carry them through winter.

Signe walked it once and returned with a piece of board covered in lines.

"No," said the widow whose hearth stood where Signe wanted a firebreak.

Signe looked at the hearth. "That is why the line bends."

"It's my hearth."

"Then the line bends farther."

The widow had prepared for a fight about authority. Signe gave her one about distance instead.

By evening the board held a central water spine, two wider waste lanes, common ovens, a clear path for carts, and shelter plots aligned closely enough that fire could be fought without climbing through other people's beds.

Whitehart had authorized none of it.

"Planning is not permission," Signe told Tomas when he came down.

"People live inside plans."

"They already live here. I am trying to keep the roofs from killing one another."

She offered the cord to him.

Tomas did not take it.

The first permanent peg went into the mud before Whitehart answered.

A family moved because the new water line cut beneath its sleeping boards. Another shifted to stay beside them. The third row moved a roof because the second had moved a wall. Roan's companies supplied hands because the work belonged to three different rows and none could finish alone.

No one announced a settlement.

The ground acquired one.

Whitehart fed the workers under the existing water ration because refusing food to people rebuilding the water line would have been absurd. Nella's credit bought iron. Valley masons took payment from an account whose final debtor did not yet exist. Ansel objected when house spades appeared in a waste lane and did not send anyone to take them back.

At the next Whitehart meeting, Osric asked who had authorized the camp to become permanent.

Ansel set two ration boards on the table.

"We fed it," he said.

Outside, two communal ovens smoked.

The first loaves were bad. The north oven burned them underneath and left the crowns raw. Sinnet came down, broke

one loaf open, blamed the masons, the flour and everyone who kept lifting the oven stone to see whether bread improved when watched.

The second firing held.

Children ate the burned first loaves around the black edges.

Sela was offered a plot near the upper path on the sixth day.

It was dry, clear of the waste lanes and larger than a solitary worker's allotment. Signe had left it empty because some people believed the Called should live among them and others feared assigning ordinary ground to her without asking.

"No," Sela said.

"You haven't looked."

"I looked."

"It can take a roof before frost."

"Give it to someone who sleeps here."

Signe pressed the peg deeper with her boot. "If you refuse, I keep a gap."

"Keep it."

She did.

Within days children used the gap as the shortest path between water and the ovens. Roan's companies assigned it to nobody. Ansel's board spent no ration on it. The plan called it *unassigned*.

People made use of it anyway.

On the twelfth day Tomas entered only the acts: permanent pegs driven, shelters moved, ovens raised, lanes opened,

Whitehart ration supplied, ownership disputed, no authority settled by the entry.

Every group objected to a different word.

He kept the objections beneath the record.

The Oath-hold still had not answered.

At dusk Tomas walked the rows. Water moved through Halvard's line. Bread cooled near the ovens. A waste cart passed without tipping. A one-horned goat slept against a permanent peg and had chewed Signe's bright cord almost through.

The camp had learned how to remain before anyone had decided whether it was allowed to.

--- The first spear appeared beside the north store because a man had lost his shovel.

That was the version everyone preferred afterward.

He had been digging a drain below the second row. Someone borrowed the shovel, then somebody else carried it to the waste lane. When his watch began at the grain shed he took the only long object available from a wall rack: an old boar spear with no matching head guard and a shaft warped by winter damp.

Aren Lethren saw him with it and told him to put it back.

Then the third Serenel wagon failed to arrive.

Not failed entirely.

It arrived below.

The cart had been entered against the upper reserve before it left the west road: dried peas, salt fish, three barrels of meal, lamp fat and two sacks of apples too bruised for market. Serenel had paid. Whitehart had agreed to receive. Aren's ration horizon included the food because arithmetic did not care who owned generosity once people planned to eat it.

Corven met the wagon at the lower elbow.

The seventh and eighth rows had lost two days' bread to mold after a roof collapse soaked the storage shelter. Children were already being moved into neighboring rows at night so their morning portion could be shared without altering the ration board. Corven saw the wet grain, asked the driver what the wagon carried, and sent it into the camp.

He did not steal it.

He signed his name.

He instructed the factor to charge the loss entirely to Serenel and wrote that Whitehart remained free of the cost.

Every part of the note was true.

At noon Aren received the duplicate.

He read it twice, then asked Ansel, "Where is the food?"

"Below."

"It was on the horizon."

"Yes."

"Can I feed a horizon?"

"No."

Aren closed his eyes.

He did not curse Corven.

That would have made the disagreement easier.

"How many days?"

Ansel moved three objects on the board.

"If the camp distribution continues at its present level? Eight and part of nine before the next road delivery. If the lower mold loss spreads, seven."

"And if the west road closes?"

"Less than arithmetic can help us with."

Aren stood for a long moment.

Then he ordered two Lethren retainers to the upper grain shed and two Whitehart gate guards to the flour store during issue hours.

"No one draws a weapon unless the store itself is breached," he said.

Ansel looked at him. "They will see weapons."

"They already see an empty cart track."

"Corven will call this a threat."

"Corven may call it supper if he can make the missing wagon reappear."

The guards went.

By evening the camp knew armed men stood at Whitehart's stores.

By night the story said Lethren had put soldiers over the grain.

Corven heard it while helping move the last of the spoiled meal out of the seventh-row shelter.

He wiped both hands on his trousers and asked Roan how many watch companies already carried staves.

"All of them, if you count walking sticks aggressively," Roan said.

"I mean weapons."

Roan looked at him.

"Then ask a worse question."

Corven did.

"How quickly could the companies keep the camp lanes open if Whitehart's men came down armed?"

Roan's expression changed.

"Do not make me answer that lightly."

"I am not."

"You are asking work groups to become force. Once they learn the shape, they will remember it after tonight."

"If they do not learn it and somebody comes through the rows with blades?"

"Then people die."

"Yes."

Roan rubbed one hand over his mouth.

"Garron used to say a road guard is a road worker with one additional bad day behind him."

"Did he?"

"One man says he did. Another says Garron said the opposite. The third says Garron never spoke to road guards at all. I carried all three accounts south last year. They travelled equally well."

Corven almost smiled.

"Which do you believe?"

"I believe men become very interested in the dead when the dead cannot object."

He looked toward the upper path where a spearhead caught firelight.

"And I believe the camp needs lane watches tonight. No banners. No line across the road. Staves first. Knives stay sheathed. Every group answers to a named guarantor."

"Do it."

"You don't command me."

Corven took the correction without offense.

"Will you do it?"

"Yes."

The distinction mattered to Roan.

By morning it would matter less to everyone who saw the result.

--- Perrin carried the first true message uphill himself.

He found Aren beside the ration board with his coat off and sleeves marked in flour.

"Corven has organized armed lane watches below," Perrin said.

Aren's head came up.

"Armed how?"

"Staves. Some spears. Knives already present. No banner. Roan is organizing the shifts."

"Why?"

Perrin could have said because your guards are visible.

He could have said because Corven feared an incursion.

He could have said because a camp of thousands already needed night watch and the change from stave to spear was smaller than either side wanted to admit.

Instead he said, "He believes the camp needs to protect itself."

True.

Aren looked toward the dark slope.

"From whom?"

"He did not name one enemy to me."

Also true.

Aren ordered the store guards doubled at dawn.

Not because Perrin told him Corven planned an attack.

Perrin had not.

Because a responsible man who knew an armed body was forming below his stores had to account for the possibility that it might become an army.

Perrin understood the logic.

That made carrying the second message worse.

He found Corven at the waste lane before first light.

"Lethren is doubling the upper store guard," Perrin said.

Corven stopped tying a sack.

"Because of us?"

"Aren knows the watches are armed."

"Who told him?"

Perrin looked at him.

Corven understood.

"You."

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because he asked what changed below."

"And now you are here because I asked what changed above."

"Yes."

Corven's mouth bent.

"You are very useful."

The phrase should have pleased Perrin.

It did not.

"That is becoming a problem," he said.

Corven looked uphill.

"How many?"

"Four at the grain shed. Two at flour. Gate watch unchanged."

"Weapons?"

"Spears and crossbows."

Corven turned to Roan.

"Double the lane watches near the upper path."

Roan stared at him.

"No."

"Roan."

"No. You asked me to keep lanes open, not make a line. Put more bodies there and Whitehart sees a front."

"Leave it empty and they walk through if they panic."

"Then we mark a retreat lane and put unarmed watchers at the first turn."

"And if armed men come down?"

"Then the bad day arrives. I am not giving it a name early to make us feel prepared."

Corven's jaw tightened.

At the water trough, Sela watched Corven lose the smile.

He looked younger without it, and more tired.

What bothered her was how everyone around him waited for the smile to come back.

"Do it your way," Corven said.

Roan nodded once.

It should have ended there.

Instead a camp speaker who had heard only the first half of the exchange sent six men with staves to the upper turn before Roan's instruction reached their row.

Whitehart guards saw them arrive in a group.

One lowered his crossbow from shoulder to hand.

The six men stopped.

Nobody attacked.

Nobody retreated.

For almost a minute the entire future of the valley became six frightened men with staves looking uphill at four frightened men with better weapons.

Sela walked between them.

She did not command.

Not yet.

"Move the water carts," she told the row behind her.

The carts needed moving. The work broke the line without anyone admitting there had been one.

By breakfast the six staves were gone.

The crossbows remained.

Perrin stood beside Wren above the elbow.

"I told nobody anything false," he said.

Wren did not look at him.

"I know."

"That is not comforting."

"It wasn't intended to be."

Below them, a man who had carried a shovel the day before leaned it against a shelter wall and picked up a spear for his watch.

Another man did the same.

Nothing had declared war.

The camp simply acquired people whose work now included being ready if war arrived.

Chapter Twenty-Six

The Agreement That Almost Worked

The agreement failed because a woman would not leave her cart.

That was not the whole reason.

It was only the reason people could point at afterward.

The cart belonged to Hessa Morn, who had walked from the western plain with three grandchildren, a milk goat, two sacks of barley and the iron-bound chest in which her husband had once kept shoeing tools. Her shelter stood beside the upper supply lane because she had arrived before anyone knew there would be an upper supply lane. Whenever anyone spoke about moving the cart, Hessa laid one hand flat on the chest lid and pushed her chin forward a fraction, as if ownership were a thing the body could keep from being administratively carried away.

Signe's permanent pegs put the lane through her sleeping ground.

Hessa moved the shelter.

Then the guards widened the turn.

She refused to move the cart.

"The chest stays with me," she said.

Aren Lethren stood in mud opposite her with Corven Serenel three paces away and Roan between them holding a board no one had asked him to bring.

The argument was almost comic.

That was why it was dangerous.

"We can move the cart twelve paces," Aren said.

"You can move your own grandmother twelve paces."

"Mine is dead."

"Then she has better sense than you."

Corven coughed into one hand.

Aren looked at him.

"Do not."

"I said nothing."

"Your face did."

For a moment the people watching laughed.

Hessa did not.

"The chest stays."

Aren crouched beside the wheel.

"Why?"

"Because my daughter died on the road and my son went back for her body and did not return. The tools were my husband's. The cart was my son's. That chest is the last thing I own that belonged to someone who is not here. You keep asking me to put it where I cannot see it."

The laughter ended.

Aren stood.

"Then the chest stays where you can see it. The cart moves."

"No."

"Hessa."

"You learned my name after you wanted my ground. Do not spend it like we are kin."

Corven looked away.

Aren took the blow without answering.

Roan said, "What if we shift the lane around her?"

Signe, who had been waiting with a coil of cord, said, "Then the retreat lane narrows to one cart width."

"For twelve paces."

"Twelve paces is enough if people run."

Wren, standing beside the upper marker, said, "She is right."

Hessa looked at her. "Which she?"

"Both."

"Useful woman."

Wren accepted that too.

This was the meeting that had almost worked.

Aren and Corven had spent the morning in Whitehart's long hall producing a practical settlement neither side liked enough to claim victory.

The upper stores would keep armed guards, but crossbows remained unstrung except during issue or alarm.

Camp lane watches kept staves. Spears were stored at three marked shelters rather than carried on routine rounds.

No banner could be raised over the camp without a represented-row vote.

The retreat lane remained open from the upper stores to the lower road.

Food distribution would use two points so people did not gather beneath the gate.

Whitehart would not treat the camp guards as an army unless they formed ranks against the house.

The camp would not treat store guards as preparation for attack unless they moved below the old wall.

Corven had objected to *old wall* because work crews crossed it daily.

Aren had objected to *army* because nobody agreed when a crowd became one.

Roan had objected to almost every noun.

Wren wrote the objections in the margins.

Sela watched from the back and thought adults could spend three hours arguing over a word because everybody knew bodies would eventually be asked to prove what the word meant.

Then they walked the route together.

That was when they found Hessa's cart.

Aren would not leave the retreat lane obstructed.

Hessa would not surrender line of sight to her chest.

Corven offered six men to move the chest with the cart and rebuild her shelter beside it.

Hessa said six men were how people stole politely.

Sela went to her.

"May I look inside?"

Hessa stared.

"Why?"

"Because everyone is arguing about the chest and nobody knows how heavy it is."

That earned the smallest change in the old woman's mouth.

She opened it.

The shoeing tools were rusted. Hammer. Pincers. Two knives. A narrow rasp. Beneath them lay folded cloth, a child's wooden cup, and a pair of men's gloves stiff from old sweat.

The chest could be carried by two strong people.

"You can see the new ground from here," Sela said. "If we put the chest on the slope first, you watch it while the cart moves. Then the cart goes beside it. Nobody takes it out of your sight."

Hessa looked at Aren.

"Your men?"

"Yours," Sela said. "Choose them."

Hessa chose Sela and Corven.

Corven looked delighted until the chest lifted.

"Your husband collected iron."

"My husband worked."

"I withdraw the criticism."

They carried it twelve paces.

Aren moved the cart himself with Roan and two grandchildren at the wheel.

Signe shifted the cord.

For perhaps ten minutes the agreement existed in the world rather than on paper.

Then a young retainer at the upper store saw Corven carrying the iron chest toward the camp and concluded that Serenel was removing material from a Whitehart-controlled lane.

He stepped down and put one hand on the cart rail.

"Stop."

Hessa hit him with the flat of her palm.

The sound was very loud.

The retainer caught her wrist.

Corven dropped his side of the chest.

The iron corner struck his boot.

One of Hessa's grandsons shouted.

A lane watcher came forward with a stave.

Another retainer lowered a spear.

Aren said, "Hands down."

Corven said, "Let her go."

Both commands landed at once.

The retainer released Hessa.

The lane watcher did not lower his stave quickly enough.

The spear point moved.

Not far.

Enough.

People behind the watcher saw the point.

People behind the retainer saw the raised stave.

Within a minute twenty bodies had arranged themselves around an event that had already ended.

Wren stepped between the two groups with empty hands.

"Nobody has been struck with a weapon."

Someone shouted, "He put a spear on her."

"He lowered it. He did not thrust."

"They grabbed an old woman."

"One man caught her wrist after she struck him."

Hessa shouted, "I hit him because he is a fool. Leave me out of your war."

That helped for half a breath.

Then someone farther down, who had not heard her, yelled that Lethren men had beaten a grandmother.

Corven closed his eyes.

Aren looked at Perrin.

Perrin had arrived without anybody noticing.

"Do not write that," Aren said.

Perrin's notebook remained in his coat.

"I didn't."

"Then find where it came from."

"That is not the same work."

"Today it is."

Perrin went.

The agreement survived the afternoon.

Technically.

No crossbows were strung. Spears returned to the marked shelters. The cart moved. Hessa's chest remained in view. Two food points opened.

But people had seen weapons move because a hand moved.

By dark, every row had its own account.

One said Lethren guards tried to seize refugee property.

One said Corven staged an old woman's defiance.

One said Sela had ordered the cart protected.

She had not.

One said Aren backed down when the Called arrived.

He had already ordered hands lowered.

The facts were still present.

They were simply no longer arranged in a shape capable of calming anyone.

At the upper store, a young guard tied a strip of cloth around his spear shaft so his own people would know him in the dark.

Below, a lane watcher saw the cloth and told Roan the Lethren men had begun marking units.

Roan went uphill and made the guard remove it.

The guard obeyed.

By then three camp spears had acquired strips of their own.

Nobody could remember who tied the first.

That night Aren and Corven stood beneath the same eave while rain worked through a hole between them.

Neither moved away from the drip.

Sela passed close enough to hear.

"We were almost there," Corven said. He turned so the people nearest could hear him without feeling addressed. "Ten minutes is not nothing. Remember that before somebody important explains why peace was impossible."

Aren looked into the yard.

"There is no there."

"That is a very Lethren thing to say."

"You mean unpleasant and correct?"

"I mean built to survive disappointment."

Aren almost smiled.

Then he said, "Tell your people not to raise a banner."

"They are not my people."

"Then tell the people who listen to you."

Corven's face hardened.

"And you tell the men who eat from your stores not to point weapons at old women."

"I did."

"Good."

"Good."

They stood in silence.

Sela walked on.

Behind her, Corven said, "If this breaks, you know they will say one of us wanted it."

Aren answered, "Then let us disappoint them."

The line was later quoted by both sides.

Neither account included the rain dripping between them or the old woman's chest twelve paces below.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Before the Field

Brem had learned to run badly.

The old rescue bruise stiffened in cold weather, so he compensated by swinging the leg wide and pretending the motion was deliberate. At twelve he considered admitting pain a form of cooperation with adults.

Sela caught him carrying water down the upper lane at a speed that made the bucket strike both knees.

"Give me that."

"No."

"You are spilling half."

"Then it weighs less."

"Brem."

He grinned and kept going.

She followed because murdering a younger brother in public would produce exactly the sort of account Perrin liked.

The camp felt wrong.

Not violent.

Prepared.

That was worse.

Spears were no longer visible on routine watches, just as the agreement required. Everyone knew exactly which shelters held them.

Whitehart's crossbows remained unstrung. People had begun counting how quickly strings could be fitted.

Work companies still moved waste, water and bread. They also knew which two lanes could take a cart abreast and which roofs offered a clear view uphill.

Nobody had planned a battlefield.

They had planned a camp so carefully that a battlefield was now possible.

Brem set the bucket beside the lower trough.

"Tam says the west row needs line."

"Tam says many things when he wants people to carry rope for him."

"He says I tie faster than Pell."

"Pell is eight."

"Still counts."

Sela took the empty bucket.

"You are coming home with me tonight."

Brem looked at her as though she had suggested he become a goat.

"Why?"

"Because Mother asked."

"No she didn't."

"She will when I tell her what a good idea it was."

"I have water shift."

"Someone else can carry."

"That's what you tell Fen when you want him angry."

The accuracy of it annoyed her.

"You are twelve."

"I was twelve when Roderick came down the rope."

"That is not a qualification."

"Everyone else acts like it is."

Sela looked at the patched jacket. Roderick had saved one boy and the valley had spent years turning the rescue into a job for him.

People asked Brem about the rope. Some touched the sewn cloth inside his jacket. A row had once tried to make him guarantor because an injured man had saved him.

Sela reached for his shoulder.

He stepped away.

"I am not leaving because people might fight," he said. "If they fight, the water still needs carrying."

"If they fight, water is not the thing I need you to be."

Brem looked at her.

The sentence landed.

He was young enough to show hurt without choosing it.

"What do you need me to be?"

Sela had no answer that did not sound like ownership.

"Alive," she said.

Brem looked away.

"That's not work."

"No."

He picked up the bucket.

"Then I have work."

He left before she could stop him without making a scene.

Sela stood beside the trough and understood why parents used authority badly.

Love made the reasons enormous.

Tam was at the west row replacing a guy line that did not need replacing.

He had become very good at work nobody could argue with.

Sela watched him pull the old rope, inspect a section no one else could see damage in, and cut it into shorter lengths that would be useful elsewhere.

Harl would have approved of the economy.

Tam knew this.

That was part of the problem.

"Brem says you need line."

"We did."

"You have enough to moor a ship."

"Then tell the sea to come up."

He did not look at her.

Since Harl's burial they had moved around each other according to tasks. Sela brought pegs. Tam took them. Tam sent a coil to Whitehart. Sela returned the short end. Neither touched the question of what Harl would think of the camp because both had already weaponized him enough.

Sela said, "Come home tonight."

Tam laughed without humor.

"Your mother adopting strays?"

"She has experience with goats."

That almost got him.

His mouth moved and stopped.

"I am on west watch."

"Roan can replace you."

"Roan can replace everyone. That's his gift."

"Tam."

He pulled the new line tight.

"If I leave, somebody else stands here. If everybody leaves because they are frightened, the only people remaining are the ones who like this."

He pointed uphill without looking.

Whitehart.

Then down.

The camp.

"Which side?" Sela asked.

"Yes."

For the first time since Harl died, she heard her own old humor in him.

It hurt.

"Do you have a weapon?"

Tam held up his rope knife.

"That is a knife."

"Very observant."

"Do you have a spear?"

He looked at her then.

"No."

She believed him.

Not because Tam had become reliable.

Because Harl had taught both of them the particular insult of lying badly about tools.

"Keep it that way."

"You don't get to tell me what Harl would—"

"I didn't say Harl."

Tam stopped.

They stood with the rope between them.

"Good," he said finally.

It was not forgiveness.

It was a boundary.

Sela accepted it.

Ivet found her near the healer shelters at dusk.

She carried three rolls of bandage, a pot of rendered fat and half an apple tucked inside one sleeve. The cuff of that sleeve had been repaired with three uneven blue stitches after she caught it on a byre nail and refused to let Sinnet redo the work.

"I stole this," she said.

Sela looked at the apple.

"From whom?"

"Serenel."

"Then it is redistribution."

"That is what Corven said when he gave it to me."

They split it with Sela's work knife.

The fruit was soft and brown at the core. Ivet ate her half anyway.

"You are making a face," she said.

"It tastes like a cellar remembered an apple."

"It is still an apple."

"Faith."

Ivet laughed too loudly.

Three people turned.

She covered her mouth.

Sela began laughing because of that.

For a few breaths they were girls again, not Called and novice, not witness and worshipper, not people whose friendship had been made public by other people's need.

Ivet wiped her eyes with the back of one hand.

"I missed you."

Sela stopped laughing.

Ivet looked at the bandages.

"I know you were still here. That is not what I mean."

Sela picked apple skin from her teeth.

"I was angry with you."

"You still are."

"Some."

"Good. I was getting worried you had become holy."

Sela threw the apple core at her.

Ivet caught it badly and dropped the bandage rolls.

They both bent to gather them.

"I meant it," Ivett said.

"Which part?"

"I thought believing you was loving you."

Sela rolled one strip tighter.

"Sometimes it was."

"And sometimes?"

"Sometimes it was wanting me to be useful to your fear."

Ivet nodded.

No defense.

That was new.

"I am trying to know the difference."

"Tell me when you do."

"You'll be first."

They carried the bandages to the east healer shed.

Dova was not there; Serenel's bone woman was. She had arranged splints, linen, boiled tools and two buckets of clean water along the wall.

"Why so much?" Sela asked.

The woman looked at her.

"Because everybody says there will be no fighting tomorrow."

Ivet made a face.

The healer shrugged.

"I have treated weddings. Preparation offends nobody after blood arrives."

Sela helped stack the linen.

At the door Ivet said, "Tomorrow I have ration work until noon. Then here."

"Go home tonight."

Ivet looked surprised.

"You too?"

"Brem refused. Tam refused. I am collecting failures."

"Then I cannot ruin your sequence."

"Ivet."

The smile faded.

"My place is here."

Sela nearly said *that is what everyone says before the story makes them noble.*

She did not.

Ivet had earned the right to mean an ordinary thing.

"Then stay away from the upper lane if people gather."

"Yes."

"Promise."

Ivet looked at her.

"I promise I will not go looking for danger to prove anything about you, Whitehart or myself."

It was carefully phrased.

Sela noticed.

"That is not exactly what I asked."

Ivet smiled.

"I've been learning from Tomas."

Sela shoved her lightly with one shoulder.

Ivet shoved back.

The healer told them both to leave if they intended to behave like children near clean linen.

They went out laughing again.

Later, Sela would remember that more clearly than the first arrow.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

The First Arrow

Wren saw the first bolt.

Years later, people would call it the first arrow anyway. That would annoy her for reasons nobody telling the story found important.

The Gate would give them mystery enough.

Lower Field did not.

Wren stood on the low stone wall above the supply turn with her board under one arm. The morning had begun with bread distribution and a dispute over whose cart held the retreat lane.

No army had formed, and Wren refused to let later language manufacture one.

Whitehart had forty-two people visible on the upper slope who could reasonably be called guards or armed retainers. Most carried spears. Eight had crossbows. Three wore partial plate pieces inherited or purchased for road duty, none matching. The rest wore layered wool, leather and whatever helmets existed in store.

Below, perhaps ninety camp watchers were on organized duty across several rows. Fewer than thirty carried spears. Most

had staves, axes used for work, long knives, or nothing more useful than a mallet.

Around them stood thousands of other people trying to eat, carry water, argue about carts and decide whether the visible weapons meant they should leave.

That was the field.

Wren had written the numbers with larger uncertainty than usual because people kept joining and leaving the edges.

At midmorning Aren came down with two clerks and six guards to inspect the second distribution point.

Corven met him with Roan, three row speakers and no armed escort except the people who happened to be near him.

They spoke for twelve minutes.

Wren timed it because later she would hate herself if she could not.

The argument concerned flour.

Not sovereignty.

Not Faith.

Not Serenel against Lethren.

Flour.

Aren wanted the lower issue reduced by one eighth until the west road delivery could be confirmed.

Corven wanted the mold loss replaced first because the affected rows had already eaten below ration.

Roan proposed a two-day equal cut followed by review.

Ansel, arriving late, said this was merely moving hunger around the board.

A woman behind Corven shouted that Whitehart had grain hidden uphill.

A Whitehart guard shouted back that his own children ate from the same board.

Neither statement answered the other.

Wren saw the crowd thicken.

She stepped off the wall.

"Move the speakers back five paces."

Nobody listened because she had not been introduced as someone to obey.

Good, she thought automatically.

Then regretted the thought.

Aren saw the same problem.

"Back five," he told his guards.

They moved.

Corven turned to the row speakers.

"Give the lane room."

They moved too.

Wren looked at the sun mark she had scratched on the top edge of her board.

Later people would say the agreement never worked.

They were wrong.

It worked for seven minutes.

In the first minute Roan's compromise became a number both ration clerks could enter without changing the total flour count. The lower rows would receive the mold loss back over two days. Everyone else would take the smaller cut. Aren disliked it. Corven disliked it. Ansel disliked the arithmetic for reasons he explained to nobody.

They signed anyway.

In the second minute a wheel on Hessa Morn's cart slipped off its board. One Whitehart guard and two camp watchers lifted the axle together while Hessa insulted all three equally. The guard laughed first.

In the third, a child crossed the speaking space carrying six bowls stacked against his chin. Nobody stopped him.

In the fourth, a camp woman dropped half a loaf in the mud. A Lethren retainer picked it up, scraped the worst dirt away with his knife and handed it back. She looked at his knife. He saw her look and sheathed it before she took the bread.

In the fifth, one of the upper crossbowmen lowered his weapon and flexed the hand that had been holding the stock too long. A row speaker sat on an empty barrel because her knees hurt. Aren and Corven were both talking to Ansel rather than to each other, which made the arrangement look almost ordinary.

In the sixth, Sela appeared at the edge of the crowd with Ivet. Nobody asked Sela what the flour meant. Nobody asked her which side was right. Ivet said something Wren could not hear and Sela laughed once.

Wren almost stopped timing.

That was what she remembered later.

Not hope.

The temptation to stop observing because the thing she wanted had become ordinary enough not to require proof.

In the seventh minute Hessa Morn's youngest grandson pushed through with a bundle of kindling.

He was fourteen. Wren knew because she had entered his household during the count.

A guard put one hand out to stop him crossing the speaking space.

The boy pulled back.

The bundle shifted.

One long piece of split ash rose above his shoulder.

It had a strip of red cloth tied near the end so his grandmother could identify her firewood from the common stack.

Wren saw the crossbowman on the upper left.

His name was Jeren Tesk.

Twenty-two. From below he looked younger than the number in Wren's count had made him sound, his road-watch coat wet at the hem and the crossbow held too carefully against his body.

Valley-born.

Second season on Whitehart road watch.

He had strung his bow because someone had thrown a stone at the store wall an hour earlier.

His left foot slipped half a pace on wet turf.

He recovered.

The boy with the kindling turned toward a shout behind him.

The red strip moved.

Jeren raised the crossbow.

Wren opened her mouth.

She did not know what word she intended.

The bolt left before it mattered.

It struck the boy below the collarbone.

For perhaps half a second no one understood.

The kindling fell.

The boy looked down at the shaft.

Then Corven moved toward him.

A camp watcher saw Corven run and raised his stave.

A Whitehart guard lowered a spear.

Someone threw something.

Wren never established what.

A stone struck a guard's helmet.

Another crossbow fired.

This bolt missed everybody and entered a shelter post.

Then the crowd became sequence too fast for one witness.

Wren climbed back onto the wall.

Not to escape.

To see.

That was what she told herself.

Below, Roan was shouting for the retreat lane. Aren had both arms out, pushing his own guards uphill. Corven knelt over the boy with one hand pressed against the wound.

The boy was alive.

At that moment.

Wren saw a camp spear appear from the marked shelter.

She saw a Whitehart man strike a woman with the haft of his weapon.

She saw the woman pick up the man's dropped knife.

She saw a horse break from the upper tether and run downhill through two rows of people.

She saw a man in a blue hood deliberately turn his body so a child could pass behind him and take a spear in the side from someone who may never have seen the child.

The first arrow remained perfectly clear.

Everything after it became responsibility without overview.

Wren jumped down.

Perrin caught her arm.

"Where are you going?"

"Closer."

"That is not a method."

"Neither is dying on a wall."

"You saw it."

She looked at him.

He knew.

"Yes."

"Who?"

"Later."

"Wren—"

"Later."

She pulled free.

The fact already felt heavier than the board under her arm.

She had spent her life wanting the first reliable observation in a disputed chain.

Now she had one.

The answer was smaller than she had expected.

Jeren Tesk fired first.

She still did not know what had frightened him.

She knew only that he had come armed.

The boy's red cloth had become a unit mark somewhere inside other people's fear, and Wren could not date the change.

Rows, companies, watches, guarded stores: each step had an owner. Together they had made a field where one frightened crossbowman could matter too much.

She had his fingers on the string. The rest remained crowded.

Wren shut the notebook.

Rain spotted the cover before she got it under her coat.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Lower Field

Sela lost Brem before she understood there was a battle.

One moment he was beside the lower trough carrying two empty skins. The next there were bodies between them and a horse without a rider coming downhill with white foam at its mouth.

Someone shouted, "Get down."

Everyone did something different.

Sela stepped toward Brem.

The horse struck a water yoke, broke one shaft and threw a woman into the mud. Brem disappeared behind the animal's shoulder.

Sela ran.

A man caught her around the waist.

She drove an elbow backward and heard breath leave him.

"Sela!"

It was Tam.

He dragged her behind an overturned cart as a crossbow bolt struck the upper board and came through far enough for the metal point to show.

For one stupid second Sela stared at it.

The bolt had feathers.

She had never thought about crossbow bolts having feathers.

"Brem," she said.

"I saw him go east."

"With who?"

"I don't know."

"Then you didn't see him."

"I saw his coat."

"Everyone has coats."

Tam seized her shoulder.

"Grey. Roderick's blue patch inside. He went east."

Sela looked over the cart.

The Lower Field had never been a field in the proper sense. It was sloping pasture cut by shelter lanes, drainage ditches, the new runnel and the old cart track. Signe's pegs made rectangles through it. Roan's companies gave those rectangles names.

Now the rows broke sightlines.

People fought in pieces.

Three Whitehart guards held the upper turn while camp workers threw stones from behind a bread shelter. Farther down, two men in the same row were hitting each other because one wanted to flee uphill and the other thought the way blocked. A woman with a split lip knelt beside the first wounded boy and screamed for linen nobody could reach.

There was no front.

There were places where fear had found weapons.

Beyond the rows came more shouting, too layered to belong to one lane. Company marks rose and vanished over shelter roofs. Valley shields appeared where Sela had never seen shields stored. Lethren men moved downhill above the stores; people below saw them and began pointing upward.

Whatever had begun near the upper turn was larger than anything Sela could see from behind the cart.

Arrows began crossing the upper pasture in both directions. Most struck roofs, mud or nobody. That did not make them less effective. Every miss made another person crouch, run, return fire, or mistake the direction of danger.

"East," Sela said.

Tam heard the word differently now.

"Do not."

She looked at him.

"Do not what?"

"Say it like that."

The old First Command lived between them.

Sela understood.

Then a shelter roof caught fire.

Not from magic. Not from some great weapon. A cooking brazier went over when people hit the wall.

Smoke changed the movement more quickly than any order.

Children ran from the row. Adults followed. A Whitehart guard thought the rush was toward him and lowered his spear.

Someone struck him before he used it.

The spear vanished into the crowd.

"Brem!" Sela shouted.

No answer.

Tam climbed over the cart.

"Where are you going?"

"East."

"You just told me—"

"I am allowed to say directions to myself."

He ran crouched along the drainage ditch.

Sela followed.

At the next crossing a powder charge went off.

The sound flattened the field.

Sela did not see the weapon first. She saw birds rise from the lower trees and people drop because sound had become evidence of death before anyone knew where the shot landed.

Then smoke appeared beside a Whitehart supply cart. A small wrought tube had been mounted on a wooden fork, something more useful for frightening horses and breaking a gate brace than fighting people in open ground. Whoever fired it had loaded scrap rather than ball.

The blast shredded the side of an empty cart and put iron into three people standing behind it.

One screamed.

Two did not.

The gun crew began reloading.

Aren's voice came from uphill.

"No second fire!"

The crew stopped.

Someone below saw them with powder and shouted that
Whitehart had cannon.

The word moved.

Cannon.

Sela had seen the tube. It barely reached her waist.

The word made it enormous.

She and Tam reached the east sheds.

Ivet was there.

For one instant relief hit Sela so hard she nearly laughed.

Ivet had a bloodied apron and both sleeves rolled. She knelt
over a man with an arrow through the flesh above his hip.

"Brem?" Sela asked.

Ivet shook her head.

"Not here."

"You promised to stay away from the upper lane."

"This is east."

"That is not funny."

"I know. Hold him."

Sela knelt automatically.

The wounded man was a Whitehart guard.

His hand closed on Sela's wrist.

"Don't let them take me."

"Who?"

He looked toward the shelter entrance.

A camp watcher stood there holding a spear and staring at the guard.

The watcher was seventeen, maybe. No helmet. Mud to the knees. He looked more frightened than the wounded man.

Ivet said, "We are treating him."

The watcher swallowed.

"He killed Renn Morn."

"No," Sela said.

"Whitehart killed him."

"Renn is alive."

The watcher stared at her.

Wrong Renn.

The first-arrow boy was Hessa's grandson, but not the missing child Renn. Sela understood the confusion as soon as she heard it. Names had collided in the field.

"Different boy," she said. "Renn from the shed is alive. The one shot is—"

She did not know his name.

Wren would.

That failure felt obscene.

The watcher lowered the spear slightly.

"Move," Ivet told him. "If you want to help, bring boiled cloth. If you want to kill him, do it where I don't have to clean around you."

The boy left.

Sela looked at Ivet.

"You are very bad at staying safe."

"You are sitting beside me."

The guard began shaking.

They worked until the bleeding slowed.

Then somebody screamed Brem's name outside.

Sela ran.

He was fifty paces downhill near the old firebreak.

A group of children had become trapped between a collapsed shelter and two horses pulling opposite directions against the same trace. Brem was cutting leather with a kitchen knife.

"Brem!"

He looked up.

Alive.

Then one horse fell.

The other lurched sideways.

The trace whipped across Brem's leg above the ankle and pulled him off his feet.

Sela saw the joint go where joints did not go.

He did not scream at first.

The silence from him was worse.

Then the horse dragged.

Sela reached the line with Tam.

Tam's rope knife opened the trace in two cuts.

Brem rolled into the mud.

His lower leg lay wrong.

Sela touched it and stopped.

She knew goat legs better than human ones. The knowledge transferred enough to frighten her.

"Do not move it."

Brem's face had gone white.

"I wasn't planning to."

He tried to laugh and began screaming instead.

Tam looked toward the east healer shed.

Between them and it, the lane had become a crush of people moving both directions.

"We can't carry him through that."

Sela stood.

The old sensation came before she chose it.

People saw her.

Not all.

Enough.

She climbed onto the fallen horse cart.

"STOP!"

The word tore her throat.

Some stopped.

Others stopped because the first people did.

A space opened in attention, ragged but real.

Sela pointed.

"Clear this lane to the east sheds. Wounded only. Everyone else off it. Off it now."

People moved.

Not gracefully.

A man shoved a woman into a wall to clear faster. Two boys lifted a body they should perhaps have left still. A group on the lower end heard only *east sheds* and began moving uphill toward Sela.

"No! Outward!"

Her correction collided with the first order.

For several seconds the lane became worse.

Then Roan appeared at the lower crossing.

He did not repeat Sela.

He turned the instruction into work.

"Wave company, left side! Waste markers to the lower turn! Two abreast only! If you can walk, you are not wounded enough for this lane!"

People knew the company names.

They arranged themselves.

Sela hated the relief she felt when his system caught her command and made it usable.

Together they opened the lane.

Tam and two others carried Brem on a door.

Sela walked beside his head.

People touched her sleeve as she passed.

One thanked her.

One called her Called.

One asked where to go next.

She said, "I don't know."

The words vanished beneath shouting.

At the east shed Ivet took one look at Brem's leg and swore.

"Good?" Brem gasped.

"No. I save gentle words for people who are dying. You are going to be annoying for years."

He laughed once and nearly fainted.

They splinted the leg.

Outside, the battle continued without Sela.

A man was stabbed in the lane she had opened.

She never saw him.

Chapter Thirty

The Line That Held

Tomas struck a man with a stool.

He had never imagined the first person he hit in anger would be wearing Whitehart grey.

The man was called Osken. Tomas knew this because he had tested Osken for road service six years earlier and entered him fit, patient under instruction, prone to shame after public correction.

The test had not asked what he would do while frightened with blood on his face.

Osken had a camp boy on the ground beside the upper bake shelter.

The boy held no weapon.

That was what Tomas saw first.

What he did not see was the moment before: the boy had thrown a stone that split Osken's eyebrow, then reached for a dropped spear. Another guard kicked the spear away. The boy fell.

By the time Tomas arrived, Osken was kneeling on his chest with both hands around his throat.

"Enough."

Oskén did not hear.

Or did not obey.

Tomas caught one shoulder.

Oskén swung backward.

His elbow struck Tomas's mouth.

The world flashed white.

Tomas tasted blood.

He saw the stool beside the shelter wall.

He took it by one leg and hit Oskén across the back.

The man rolled off the boy.

Tomas hit him again.

That was the part he would remember.

The first blow saved someone.

The second was because it had worked.

Oskén curled with one arm over his head.

Tomas stopped.

The stool remained raised.

He looked at his own hands as though they belonged to an account he had been asked to test.

The camp boy coughed and crawled away.

"Brother," Oskén said.

Tomas lowered the stool.

There were tears in Oskén's eyes.

Not pain alone.

Recognition.

Tomas had tested him. Tomas had entered him. Somewhere in Whitehart a line existed stating he had been fit for this work.

"I saw him reach," Osken said.

"I know."

Tomas did not know.

Not yet.

He hated himself for using the sentence anyway.

A crossbow snapped from the upper turn.

The bolt struck the ground.

Tomas threw the stool aside and pulled Osken behind the shelter. Three other bodies were within reach. He had chosen one before he knew he was choosing.

Aren Lethren had lost control of his right flank.

Nobody called it a flank until later.

At the time it was the upper path where twelve Whitehart guards, eight Lethren retainers and perhaps thirty frightened household men had been pushed sideways by a crowd below. A crossbowman fired without order. Two camp watchers charged the nearest spear line because retreat behind them had closed.

Aren ordered his people uphill.

Most obeyed.

Captain Joric Vale did not. He was already pitched forward in the saddle, reins shortened in one fist, his whole body aimed downhill before Aren had given him anywhere to go.

"They are breaking," Joric shouted. "Now."

Aren caught his bridle.

"No pursuit."

"If we stop they reform."

"Then they reform."

"They attacked the stores."

"They are not at the stores."

Joric pointed downhill.

People were running.

Some carried weapons.

From a horse, from that angle, it looked like a routed formation.

Aren had studied enough old battles to know the danger of recognizing history while it happened.

"No pursuit," he said again.

Joric pulled the reins free.

"Narrow Fields."

The old insult.

He said it softly.

Aren heard.

So did three riders behind him.

He waited at Narrow Fields.

Cowardice, to one tradition.

Wisdom, to another.

Aren looked at the people below.

He thought of every Lethren ancestor whose caution had been praised by descendants who never had to decide under moving bodies.

"Yes," he said. "Narrow Fields."

Joric stared.

Aren drew his sword.

For half a breath Joric thought he had won.

Then Aren turned the blade across the path.

"Any rider who passes me downhill is disobeying under witness."

Joric's face changed.

"You would hold us while they kill ours?"

"I am holding you because ours are still alive."

Below, a camp spear entered a Whitehart guard's thigh.

Joric looked at it.

Then at Aren.

He kicked his horse forward.

Not a charge.

One step.

Aren struck the horse across the muzzle with the flat of his blade.

The animal reared.

Joric fell.

The riders behind him stopped.

Aren dismounted.

He put the sword point in the mud.

"Up the path," he said.

One rider obeyed.

Then another.

The line began moving backward.

People below saw Whitehart retreat.

A shout rose.

Some camp fighters surged uphill.

Aren had prevented a pursuit. The camp read restraint as weakness. He understood Joric's argument in the same moment he rejected it.

"Shields! Hold here! Do not advance!"

His men formed across the path.

The first camp group hit them.

Wood struck wood.

A spear broke.

A man went down between both lines and was stepped on by people who might have saved him separately.

Aren held.

Not because holding was morally clean.

Because advancing was worse.

He did not see Joric again until the lower cart lane began to close.

Joric's horse was gone. He came out of the smoke on foot with mud across one side of his face and a split lip where the

fall had opened him against a stone. His sword was missing. He carried a round store shield that belonged to no one Aren knew.

He did not look at Aren.

That was probably wise.

The lower cart lane ran between the bake shelter and a stack of winter boards. It had become a wound passage without anyone deciding it should. Camp people and Whitehart people moved through it in both directions carrying bodies on doors, blankets and grain hurdles. A little girl with blood on both sleeves walked backward because she would not let go of the hand of a man being carried uphill.

Then the upper line bent.

Someone shouted to block the lane before the next camp surge reached it.

A Lethren retainer seized one end of a handcart and dragged it across the opening.

Joric caught the other end.

"Leave it," the man said. "Those below aren't ours."

Joric looked past him.

Behind the cart were wounded people from both sides, three unarmed workers, the little girl and a camp man carrying a Whitehart novice whose grey coat had gone black at the shoulder.

Joric shoved the cart back against the boards.

"They are behind me."

The retainer stared.

Joric took his spear.

Not politely.

"Move them."

The next group hit the mouth of the lane before the first hurdle cleared it.

Joric did not charge.

That was the part Aren would remember.

The man who had called *Narrow Fields* at him twenty minutes earlier planted one foot beside the cart wheel and gave away every pace he had wanted to take. He used the spear short because the lane was narrow. He struck hands, shafts, shoulders. When somebody fell beyond the point he did not follow.

"Move them!"

A camp watcher came through behind him carrying the Whitehart novice. Joric saw the man's row cord. He also saw the body in his arms.

He made room.

The retainer who had wanted the lane closed began pulling wounded through by their coats.

A thrown stone opened Joric above the eye.

He stayed.

A spear point came around the cart and entered beneath the lower rim of the store shield. Joric folded once, caught the shaft under his arm and broke it against the wheel.

He stayed.

The little girl passed.

The last hurdle passed.

Only then did the lane behind him become empty enough to block without trapping anyone on the wrong side.

Joric stepped backward.

His heel caught the handcart.

He sat down hard against the wheel and did not get up.

Aren reached him while the retainer hauled the cart across the gap.

Joric's eyes were open. His breath was too small to carry speech.

Aren crouched.

There were things available to say.

You disobeyed me.

You were wrong.

I was right.

All of them had become obscene.

The retainer said, as if defending the dead man from a charge nobody had made, "He wouldn't let us close it. Said they were behind him."

Aren looked at the mixed trail of blood leading uphill.

Joric Vale died before the next horn.

He had wanted a pursuit.

His last command had been to hold a door open.

Tomas reached the path after the first collision.

He had blood on his mouth and no idea whose side had put it there anymore.

Aren saw him.

"Get the wounded behind the wall."

Tomas laughed.

Aren looked offended.

"What?"

"Everyone keeps finding an office for me."

"Can you move wounded people?"

"Yes."

"Then I have found the correct one."

Tomas almost liked him.

He hated the timing.

They pulled bodies from the edge while the line held.

Tomas found Osken again, this time carrying the camp boy he had nearly strangled.

The boy's feet dragged.

"He cannot breathe right," Osken said.

Tomas took the boy's shoulders.

Together they carried him behind the wall.

No apology passed between them.

No absolution.

Osken had tried to kill him.

Then saved him.

Or perhaps had not known he was killing him.

Tomas no longer trusted verbs that made a person's moral state cleaner than the body in front of him.

A horn sounded below.

Roan's, perhaps.

The camp surge slowed.

Aren's line did not advance.

For the first time since the arrow, a space appeared between armed groups.

Aren stepped into it.

His sword was still muddy at the point.

Corven appeared below with no helmet and blood on one sleeve that was not his.

They saw each other across perhaps twenty paces.

Someone could have shot either man.

Nobody did.

Aren raised one empty hand.

Corven raised his.

It was not peace.

It was two recognizable people giving hundreds of frightened strangers something simpler to imitate than killing.

The space widened.

Behind Tomas, Osken began vomiting.

The camp boy coughed until he could breathe.

Tomas sat beside them with his split lip and looked at the stool lying broken where he had left it.

He picked it up. One leg was still sound.

Across the gap, people who had not heard a command were still raising empty hands.

Chapter Thirty-One

The Man Under the Banner

Fen entered the battle carrying clean cloth.

This seemed appropriate to him later.

Everyone else had arrived carrying something they intended to use.

He had a basket from the east healer shed and six rolls of linen boiled that morning, before people learned what morning was for.

Ivet sent him toward the lower lane because the wounded had begun coming from there faster than the shed could tear more cloth.

"Do not become useful somewhere stupid," she told him.

"That narrows the valley."

"Good. Stay in the remainder."

He went.

At the second row a roof burned.

At the third, a man with half an ear tried to take the basket because he thought Fen belonged to nobody and therefore the cloth belonged to whoever could hold it.

Fen hit his hand with the bone scraper.

The man stared.

"That is healer cloth."

"Who says?"

Fen pointed at the blood already on it.

"The people leaking."

The man let go.

Fen continued.

He found the lower lane blocked by a group moving uphill and another trying to move down. Neither group intended to fight. They simply could not occupy the same six feet of ground while believing the other direction was safer.

A spear appeared above shoulders.

Fen ducked under a cart axle.

The cloth basket caught.

He pulled.

Someone stepped on his hand.

He shouted.

Nobody heard.

For a moment he lay in mud beneath the cart while feet crossed on both sides and understood that an Unwritten body crushed in a crowd would create exactly the sort of record his life had trained him to expect.

Unknown male. Whitehart work clothes. Effects none.

He laughed.

The sound came out wrong because his cheek was against dirt.

Then someone above shouted:

"Leren!"

Fen went still.

Again:

"Fen Leren! Under the cart!"

A hand came down between the wheel and the board.

Fen knew the hand.

Bryn Corr's eldest mill son, Darel, who had spent ten years pretending not to know which side of Fen's shoulder to thank in public.

"Take it."

Fen did.

Darel pulled while another man lifted the cart shaft. Fen came out without the basket and with two fingers bleeding where the boot had opened them.

"Who told you?" Fen asked.

"Told me what?"

"The name."

Darel stared at him as if battle had made him stupid.

"I grew up with you."

Of course.

The name had not been lost from people.

It had been lost from permitted use.

That difference saved his life.

Darel shouted to three others, "Leren's with healers. Clear him through!"

The lane opened by inches.

People who would not have moved for Fen the Unwritten moved for Leren because the name carried a shape they understood: valley family, mill obligation, old lease, somebody's son.

Fen hated every step of the passage.

He used it anyway.

"Healer cloth!" he shouted. "Leren, east shed!"

He made the name a tool because refusing it would strand bandages behind a cart.

By the time he reached the next crossing, three people had begun calling him Leren who had never used the name in his adult life.

A woman with blood down one arm grabbed him.

"My boy is there."

She pointed toward the upper line.

"I am not a healer."

"You have cloth."

Fen looked at the empty place where the basket had been.

"I had cloth."

The woman began crying.

He went with her anyway.

The boy was not hers.

He was sixteen or seventeen, pale-haired, wearing a Lethren household belt and no helmet. A spear had entered high through the shoulder and broken off against bone. He lay under a banner pole that had fallen across two bodies.

The banner itself was not Lethren.

It was a supply marker, plain white cloth used to show the second ration point.

Nobody looking from below would know that.

"That is him," the woman said.

Then she saw the face.

"No."

Fen knelt anyway.

The boy's eyes opened.

"Marek?"

"No."

"Where's Marek?"

"I don't know."

"Tell my father—"

"No."

The boy blinked.

Fen put one hand over the wound around the broken spear shaft.

"You tell him."

It was a foolish sentence.

The boy was losing too much blood.

Fen had heard healers lie like this and despised them for it.

He said it anyway.

The woman who had brought him knelt on the other side.

"What do I do?"

"Press here. Not the wound. Around it."

She obeyed.

The crowd moved above them.

Somebody struck the fallen banner pole.

It shifted.

Fen looked up.

Corven Serenel was there.

No cloak. One sleeve torn. Blood at his hairline.

Two camp men followed him.

One recognized the Lethren belt.

"Leave him."

Corven looked at the man.

"Lift the pole."

"He's Lethren."

"Yes. He is also under a pole."

"Their men shot Jeren."

"Lift the fucking pole."

The charm was gone.

The man lifted.

Together they rolled the timber aside.

Corven crouched.

"Can he move?"

Fen said, "Not without making it worse."

"Then we make something that moves around him."

They found a door.

The Lethren boy was heavier than he looked. When they lifted him, he screamed once and bit through his lower lip.

Corven took the shoulder end.

Fen took the feet.

The woman walked beside them though the boy was not hers.

They reached a crossing and found the lane blocked by camp fighters.

One shouted, "Who is it?"

Corven answered, "Wounded." He raised his voice toward the people behind him. "If you can stand, make room for someone who cannot. If you can carry, take weight. If you can do neither, stop apologizing and breathe."

"Whose?"

Corven stopped.

For half a breath Fen thought he might lie.

Instead he said, "Lethren."

The line changed.

Not closed completely.

Changed.

A man spat in the mud.

Another stepped aside.

A third said, "Let him bleed."

Fen heard himself answer before Corven could.

"Then move and let him bleed somewhere with room."

The man looked at Fen.

"Who are you?"

Someone behind said, "Leren."

Again the name opened a small space.

Fen wanted to scream.

They carried the boy through.

At the east shed, a Lethren retainer saw Corven Serenel arrive with the heir-nephew of one of their stewards bleeding on a door.

By sunset the story became Corven carrying a Lethren child from the battle.

He had carried one end.

Fen had carried the other.

The woman who had first mistaken the boy for her son had held pressure on the wound the whole way.

No later account remembered her name.

Fen did not know it either.

That failure stayed with him longer than the praise.

When he returned for the cloth basket, it was gone.

He found only one strip of boiled linen trampled into mud.

Fen picked it up.

The cloth was ruined.

He folded it anyway and put it in his pocket.

Perrin found him there after the fighting had begun to thin.

"Fen."

Fen looked at him.

Perrin's left cheek was bruised and he had lost one glove.

"People are calling you Leren."

"I noticed."

Perrin said nothing.

Fen waited for the apology.

It did not come.

Good.

"It saved me," Fen said.

Perrin's face changed.

"I am glad."

"I am not."

"No."

Fen took the muddy linen from his pocket.

"That is the problem with making a thing useful. Afterward everyone asks why you would want to lose it."

Perrin looked toward the healer sheds.

"Do you?"

Fen thought of the cart pressing above him.

Darel's hand.

The lane opening.

Nessa in the dark passage after flour deliveries.

"I want to decide when it is mine," he said.

Perrin nodded.

This time he did not write it down.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Who Won

The battle ended in pieces.

No horn stopped it.

No commander looked across Lower Field and decided enough people had died.

One group ran out of stones.

Another lost the man who knew where their spare spearheads were stored.

A Whitehart line withdrew ten paces and discovered the people below were too tired to follow.

Roan opened the west lane and people used it first to carry wounded, then to leave.

Aren refused pursuit.

Corven told three camp speakers to stand down and two obeyed. The third had already been hit in the mouth and could not speak clearly enough to command anyone.

Rain returned.

That helped.

It is difficult to sustain glory while cold water enters the back of your collar.

By late afternoon the field contained more people looking for someone than fighting anyone.

Sela moved among them calling Brem's name even though she knew exactly where he was.

The mistake frightened her.

Her body had learned the search before her mind accepted it had ended.

She went back to the east healer shed.

Brem lay on a door with his leg bound between two split boards. The foot below the splint had swollen. Two toes had gone pale.

Dova Sen had arrived from the lower road during the fighting and now knelt beside him with Serenel's bone woman. Both sleeves were rolled past the elbow despite the cold, and a strip of clean linen was looped twice around her left wrist, ready before anyone had asked for it.

"Move the binding," Dova said.

The healer loosened one strip.

Color returned slowly.

Brem watched both women.

"Will I keep it?"

Sela stopped in the doorway.

Dova looked at him.

"The leg?"

"Yes."

"Probably."

"That sounds bad."

"It sounds like I do not lie to children because they are frightened."

"I'm twelve."

"Then you are old enough to be frightened accurately."

Brem swallowed.

Dova put one hand over his knee.

"The lower bones are broken. The ankle has been pulled badly. We can set it. You may heal straight. You may not. You may run again. You may run differently. You will hurt before we know."

Brem looked at Sela.

She wanted to tell him he would be fine.

She had heard enough adults use that sentence as a prayer they expected children to believe.

"I will stay," she said.

He nodded.

That was what he needed.

Not prediction.

Presence.

Sela sat beside him while Dova set the leg.

Brem screamed into Harl's old work cloth.

Tam held his shoulders.

When the bone moved, Tam's face went grey.

Sela nearly told him to leave.

Then she saw his hand locked around Brem's sleeve and remembered that Harl had once put a hook through the same boy's belt on a wet slope.

She let him stay.

Outside, people began naming the event.

Whitehart's first written notice called it *the disorder below the upper stores*.

Someone crossed out *disorder* and wrote *battle*.

The correction appeared on three copies before the first was taken down.

By evening people said **Lower Field** without needing to explain which field.

Perrin heard the name at a cook fire.

Wren heard it at the body line.

Tam heard it from a boy who had not been on the field at all.

Each understood that the name had won before any side had.

Aren came down after dark with one clerk and no guard.

Someone threw mud at him.

It struck his coat.

He did not stop.

At the east shed he asked for the Lethren boy Corven had carried.

"Alive," Dova said. "For now."

Aren looked at Corven across the room.

Corven sat on an overturned pail while Elya stitched the cut at his hairline.

"You brought him out," Aren said.

"Fen did too. And a woman whose name nobody asked."

Aren looked around.

"Which woman?"

"Exactly."

Aren took the correction.

"Thank you."

Corven's mouth twisted.

"Do not make me noble while I am tired."

"I was thanking you for a specific act."

"Worse. Those are how legends start."

Aren almost smiled.

Then he looked at the rows of wounded.

"How many?"

Dova said, "Do not ask me that yet."

Aren nodded.

It was the first time Sela had seen a Lethren accept an uncounted thing without immediately building a board around it.

She liked him for the effort.

That irritated her too.

Wren counted later.

Not victory.

Bodies.

Her reconstruction put more than a thousand people into some organized part of the violence before noon - fighting, holding lines, carrying ammunition, pulling wounded, guarding stores, breaking barriers, or trying to keep lanes open. Several thousand more had been trapped inside the movement without ever taking a side.

By the seventh day, sixty-four deaths could be tied to Lower Field with enough evidence for Wren to defend the number. Some died where they fell. Others died after treatment from crushed chests, infected wounds, blood loss or head injuries. More than two hundred people remained under active treatment. Several would never return to the work they had done before the battle.

The number was large enough to become history and small enough that every row still knew exactly who was missing.

She refused a single total until she could separate dead at the field from people who died after removal, missing persons, duplicate names and people who had simply left before the count.

Perrin sat nearby gathering accounts.

Tam stood at the edge and listened to both of them.

"How many did Whitehart kill?" a camp man asked Wren.

"I do not have that count."

"You saw who fired first."

The question moved through the people around them.

Perrin looked at Wren.

Tam looked too.

Wren said, "I saw the first discharged weapon I can presently identify."

"Whitehart?"

"Yes."

A sound went through the group.

Wren raised her voice.

"That does not establish that Whitehart caused the battle."

The sentence was already too late.

A man said, "They shot first."

Another repeated it.

Tam looked toward the upper slope.

"Who?"

Wren said, "I am not giving the name in a crowd."

"Why?"

"Because by supper his name will be used to answer a question I have not answered."

"Maybe blame belongs somewhere."

"Yes."

Tam seemed surprised.

"Then where?"

Wren looked at Lower Field.

Burned roof.

Broken water yoke.

Blood worked into mud.

Whitehart spears stacked uphill under order.

Camp spears stacked below under another.

Aren and Corven had both saved lives.

Both had helped create the conditions under which people arrived ready to kill.

Perrin's information had been true.

Sela's lane had saved wounded and created movement others misread.

Jeren Tesk had released the first bolt.

"More than one place," Wren said.

The camp man spat.

"That is how educated people keep everybody innocent."

Wren looked at him.

"No. It is how I keep guilt from becoming simple enough to use before it becomes accurate."

He walked away.

Tam remained.

"Harl would have hated this."

Perrin said, "Which part?"

Tam turned on him.

"Do not."

Perrin went still.

Tam pointed at the field.

"Do not ask me which Harl."

Then he walked back to Brem.

Perrin closed the notebook.

Wren continued counting.

By midnight the first songs had begun.

Not good ones.

A camp singer made Corven's rescue into a charge through Whitehart steel.

He had crossed no Whitehart line to reach the boy.

A novice made Aren's refusal to pursue into a deliberate peace order issued before the battle began.

It had come after hours of violence.

Someone said Sela stood on a cart untouched by arrows while both sides obeyed her.

A bolt had passed through the cart board inches from her before she climbed it.

Every story found the shape it wanted.

Brem slept under poppy preparation and exhaustion.

Sela sat beside him.

His lower leg would heal.

Dova believed it would remain slightly shortened and the ankle less flexible. He would walk. He would probably always know when rain was coming.

Sela touched the edge of the splint.

Outside, someone shouted that Whitehart had lost the Battle of the Lower Field.

Another voice shouted that Whitehart still held its stores.

A third asked what winning meant if everyone was still hungry.

Rain found a seam in the roof above Brem's splint.

Sela moved the basin under it before the third drop.

Chapter Thirty-Three

The Dead Have Owners

The dead acquired owners before sunrise.

Families came first.

Then Houses.

Then stories.

Whitehart laid its dead in the cold room because the stone floor could be washed. Camp families refused to send theirs uphill and used the east shelter where Ivet and Fen had already worked through the night.

The division lasted three hours.

Then a mother whose son had died wearing a Whitehart road belt arrived from the fourth row and demanded him from the cold room.

"He slept below," she said. "He ate below. You do not get him because he worked your gate."

Ansel asked whether she wanted Whitehart burial.

"I want my son."

They gave him back.

After that every body became a jurisdiction.

A man from the camp had a sister in Whitehart service. A Lethren retainer had married a woman from the lower row. Two

brothers had fought on different parts of the field because one guarded stores and one belonged to a waste company.

People who had spent weeks insisting the two communities were distinct discovered their dead had failed to respect the boundary.

Tomas helped enter names.

He hated the work because it was easier than testing.

A dead person could not become more or less truthful under pressure. The difficulty belonged to the living.

"Cause?" a clerk asked.

Tomas looked at the body before him.

A woman, perhaps thirty. Deep wound at the side. Mud in her hair. One shoe missing.

"Spear."

"Whose?"

"A spear does not retain allegiance after entering a body."

The clerk looked exhausted.

"The form means side."

"Unknown."

"Whitehart or camp?"

"Unknown."

"She was found below the upper path."

"So were both."

The clerk wrote *unknown* hard enough to tear the paper.

Good, Tomas thought.

Let the page show pressure.

Compensation began before burial.

That shocked Sela until her mother came up and asked why it should.

"Dead people still leave hungry people," she said.

She had come for Brem and brought clean shirts, goat cheese and the expression she wore when the world had become too foolish for visible panic.

Brem slept.

She touched his forehead, checked the splint without pretending knowledge and asked Dova what work he would still be able to do.

Not whether he would be whole.

Work.

Sela loved her for that.

Below, boards were set for claims:

burial cloth,

lost tools,

broken carts,

animals killed,

work owed to households missing an adult,

children requiring food,

medical supplies,

damaged roofs,

the cost of returning bodies to villages.

Aren provided clerks.

Corven provided coin.

Both acts were immediately interpreted as buying the narrative.

Aren nearly withdrew the clerks when someone accused him of pricing the dead.

Tomas stopped him.

"The accusation remains true whether the clerks leave or not."

"That is not helpful."

"No. The clerks are."

Aren kept them.

Corven heard that Serenel money would be read as hush payment and laughed once.

"If people refuse it, tell me."

Some did.

He made no speech about dignity.

He kept the money available.

Sela watched intelligent adults discover that doing the necessary thing did not protect them from becoming guilty in someone else's account.

She had less sympathy than she expected.

Welcome, she thought.

Then disliked herself.

Tam found the first Harl story at midday.

It had been written on a board near the west lane:

*Remember Harl, who warned Whitehart what happened
when pride held men above wet ground.*

Tam read it twice.

Sela was beside him before he spoke.

"He didn't say that."

"I know."

"He wasn't at Lower Field."

"I know."

"He died because the shelf broke."

"I know."

Tam turned.

"Do you?"

Sela felt the old argument arrive already sharpened.

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Every time somebody uses him you correct the words and then tell them what he really meant."

"Because I knew him."

"So did I."

"I didn't say you didn't."

"You act like you got the true Harl and the rest of us got copies."

The board stood between them.

People passed, slowing without appearing to listen.

Sela lowered her voice.

"I am trying to stop people making him into something he wasn't."

"You made him into something too."

"What?"

"The man who didn't obey you. The proof you weren't in charge. You tell that story every time somebody says he followed you."

"Because he didn't."

"I know. I was there."

"Then why are you angry?"

Tam laughed.

It sounded like Harl for one terrible instant.

"Because you always get to use the true thing."

Sela stared at him.

"What do you want me to do? Let them lie?"

"I want you to stop saying *Harl would*."

"I don't."

"You do without the words."

That struck because it was true often enough.

Sela looked at the board.

"Then take it down."

Tam did not.

"Why?"

"Because the woman who wrote it lost her brother yesterday. Harl guided him over the low road two winters ago. She remembers him saying something like it."

"Did he?"

"I don't know."

The answer frightened Sela more than certainty would have.

Tam touched the board.

"Maybe he said it to her. Maybe he didn't. Maybe she remembers the only thing he could have said that helps now."

"That doesn't make it true."

"No."

"Then—"

"I am not Wren. I am his son."

Tam's voice broke on the last word.

He turned away.

Sela caught his arm.

He pulled free so hard she nearly fell.

"Do not use me to keep him," he said.

She let go.

The words made no complete sense and perfect emotional sense.

"Tam."

"You have everybody else."

"I don't."

"They listen when you speak."

"That isn't having them."

"It is more than I have."

He walked away.

Sela stood beside the board.

The Harl sentence remained.

She did not remove it. She simply no longer knew which right belonged to her.

At dusk they buried seven of the Lower Field dead on the burial rise.

Others had been taken home or held for distant kin.

No single rite covered everyone.

Whitehart prayers were spoken for three.

One family used no prayer and named tools the dead man had owned.

A woman from the coast poured salt into a grave and refused to explain it to the curious.

A Lethren clerk stood beside a camp widow because they had discovered during compensation that their dead husbands were cousins by marriage.

Sela watched dirt close over people whose battle already had a name.

Harl's grave stood farther uphill.

Nothing about it had changed.

Everything around it had.

When the last shovel stopped, Tam was gone.

Sela did not go looking.

For once she let someone else's grief remain outside her reach.

Chapter Thirty-Four

The Account That Could Start Another War

Wren wrote Jeren Tesk's name on a separate sheet.

She did not seal it.

She did not destroy it.

For three days she kept it beneath the board on which everyone else argued about the battle.

The fact was simple enough to fit in one line.

Jeren Tesk, Whitehart road watch, discharged a crossbow bolt into Darel Morn before any other weapon discharge observed by this witness.

Darel Morn survived until the second night.

That complicated the politics and not the sequence.

He died of blood loss and lung injury after speaking twice to his grandmother.

Hessa Morn wanted the name of the shooter.

Of course she did.

Aren wanted it because withholding the name from the family while Whitehart possessed it would make every later defense of procedure obscene.

Corven wanted it because the camp already believed Whitehart had fired first and rumor would choose a worse man

if evidence remained absent.

Whitehart's guard captain wanted it because he needed to know whether Jeren had obeyed any shouted order.

He had not.

Perrin wanted the sheet because this was what records were for.

Wren wanted everyone to stop wanting it until they could say what question the fact answered.

No one obliged.

They met in the old store room because the long hall still smelled of wet clothing and anger.

Jeren sat outside under guard.

He had confessed to firing.

That was not the dispute.

"Give Hessa his name," Aren said.

"Yes," Wren replied.

Perrin looked at her.

Corven looked too.

Aren's impatience showed for the first time.

"Then why are we here?"

"Because that is not the same as publishing *Whitehart fired first*."

Corven leaned back against the wall.

"It did."

"A Whitehart guard fired the first weapon discharge I observed."

"You hear yourself?"

"Yes."

"That is why people hate clerks."

"I am not a clerk."

"Today you are the worst kind. One with the correct sentence."

Wren felt the insult and let it remain useful.

"If I publish that Whitehart fired first, what will people understand?"

Corven said, "That Whitehart fired first."

"No. They will understand Whitehart began the battle."

"Perhaps it did."

"Perhaps. That is not what I saw."

Perrin spoke for the first time.

"You saw the bolt. You also saw the week before it."

"Yes."

"Then write both."

Wren looked at him.

"Including you?"

The room changed very slightly.

Aren stopped rubbing flour dust from one cuff. Corven's eyes moved from Wren to Perrin and stayed there.

Perrin did not ask what she meant.

He took the small field notebook from inside his coat and placed it on the table between Jeren's sheet and Wren's board.

He opened to the first marked page.

"Before anyone decides which of them lied," he said, "read what I told them."

Nobody reached for the book.

So Perrin read.

"To Aren: Corven has organized armed lane watches below. Staves. Some spears. Knives already present. No banner. Roan is organizing the shifts."

Aren's face did not move.

Perrin turned one page.

"To Corven: Lethren is doubling the upper store guard. Four at grain. Two at flour. Gate watch unchanged. Aren knows the watches are armed."

Corven said, "Both true."

Perrin said, "You sound disappointed."

"Truth should occasionally have the courtesy to simplify a room."

"Yes."

"Neither complete."

"No."

Aren looked at Perrin. "Did you know I would double the guard?"

"No."

"Did you think I might act?"

Perrin's thumb remained on the page.

"Yes."

Corven asked, "Did you know I would answer the guard with more watches?"

"No."

"Did you think I might?"

"Yes."

The quiet that followed was not accusation yet.

It was worse.

It was room being made for one.

Perrin pulled a clean half-sheet from Wren's unused stack.

"Give me your char."

Wren did not move.

"Why?"

"Because if this sequence survives only in my notebook, Blackcrest gets to decide later whether the collector was part of what he collected."

Wren gave him the char.

Perrin wrote slowly.

Perrin of Blackcrest, commissioned collector, carried the above reports separately between Aren Lethren and Corven Serenel during the formation of armed watches and doubled store guard. He knew both reports might alter conduct. He did not know the conduct that would follow.

He stopped.

Then added:

He continued.

Corven read over his shoulder.

"That last part is doing a great deal of work."

"Yes."

"Why include it?"

Perrin looked at the page.

"Because I liked being useful."

No one spoke.

That admission did not absolve him.

For once Perrin did not try to make sure everyone understood that.

He signed the sheet and pushed it toward Wren.

"When you write the sequence," he said, "put me in it."

Wren took the page.

"You are already in it."

Perrin's smile did not arrive.

"Good."

"In how many words?" Wren asked.

"As many as it takes."

"People will quote eight."

Perrin had no answer to that because his own profession existed on the fact.

Aren said, "Jeren's family will be attacked if the name spreads."

Corven turned on him.

"That is not a reason to hide him from Hessa."

"I just said give Hessa the name."

"And then what? She must swear silence?"

"No."

"Then the name spreads."

"Probably."

"So why mention his family?"

Aren looked tired.

"Because they exist."

The room quieted.

Jeren had fired.

Darel had died.

Jeren's mother had not.

His younger sisters had not.

If Hessa's grief became retaliation, innocent people would pay for an accurate fact.

If the fact was withheld to protect them, Hessa would pay for their innocence with her right to know who shot her grandson.

Wren thought of every method she had ever trusted.

None supplied permission.

She took the separate sheet from under the board.

"Hessa receives this now. Full name, witness basis, limit of claim. The guard office receives a copy. Jeren's household

receives notice before public release because retaliation risk is material."

Corven opened his mouth.

Wren raised one hand.

"Not permission. Notice."

He closed it.

"The public field report states: *the first weapon discharge presently established came from Whitehart road watch; this does not establish the first threatening act, the first physical contact, or sole causal responsibility for the battle.*"

Aren said, "People will remove everything after the semicolon."

"Yes."

"Then why write it?"

"Because a record is not excused from being accurate because people may misuse it."

Perrin said quietly, "That sounds like the Wren I met at Crown-watch."

She looked at him.

"I am not finished."

She took a second sheet.

"The source sequence, including Jeren's name, is stored separately from the public summary. Any later Chronicle use must retain the distinction between first observed discharge and causal initiation."

Perrin smiled without pleasure.

"You are designing a record to fight its future editor."

"Yes."

"I admire the optimism."

"You shouldn't."

Hessa received the name in the east shelter.

Wren gave it to her alone except for one woman Hessa chose to remain.

She read the line aloud because Hessa's reading was slow when angry.

When Wren finished, Hessa asked:

"Is he alive?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"Under Whitehart guard."

"Will he be judged?"

"Yes."

"By Whitehart?"

"Initially. Other standing may be requested."

Hessa laughed.

"They guard him, judge him and tell me not to call that owning the answer."

Wren said nothing.

"Did he know Darel?"

"No evidence of it."

"Did Darel have a weapon?"

"He carried split kindling."

Hessa's face folded.

For the first time Wren understood that the red cloth on the stick would become a family object forever.

Not because it had meaning.

Because meaning had killed around it.

"Why?" Hessa asked.

Wren could have described fear, recent weapon marking, wet footing, crossbow readiness, the movement of the red strip.

All true.

None answered what Hessa meant.

"I don't know," Wren said.

Hessa looked at her for a long time.

"Good," she said finally. "At least one of you doesn't."

She took the paper.

The next morning Jeren Tesk's name was written on a board in the lower row.

Wren never discovered who copied it.

By noon somebody had added:

FIRST BLOOD OF LOWER FIELD.

By evening the word *blood* had been crossed out and replaced with *WAR*.

Before supper Wren found Jeren's mother outside the lower stores with two rolled blankets, a cooking pot, and his younger

sisters standing beside her.

"Your row moved you?" Wren asked.

"Asked us to sleep elsewhere until anger passes."

"There has been no public release."

The older girl looked at her. "You warned us."

Wren said nothing.

"Whitehart came to our place before anyone else's," the girl continued. "People saw. They knew there was a name before they knew the name."

"The notice was meant to give you time."

Jeren's mother lifted one of the blankets.

"It did."

Enough to pack.

Wren had separated notice from publication because the distinction was real. The household had received exactly the protection her method required: knowledge of foreseeable danger before the wider account moved.

The warning had become the first public sign that there was something to fear.

On the walk back, Wren went through the sequence twice.

Notice first. Source identified. Household warned. Publication later.

She could not find the bad step.

Jeren had still fired first.

His mother had still packed.

Chapter Thirty-Five

The Price of Mercy

Tomas waited until Fen's fingers had healed enough to hold a cup.

He told himself that was why he had waited.

Fen did not believe him.

"You could have come yesterday," Fen said.

They sat in the north passage after second meal. The camp below had quieted into the exhausted industry of people repairing things they did not yet know whether they intended to keep.

Fen's right hand was wrapped across two knuckles where the cart had opened them.

Tomas's lip was split.

Neither injury deserved the solemnity both men brought to the meeting.

"Yesterday you were working," Tomas said.

"I am working now."

Fen held up the taper cup.

Tomas looked at it.

"May I interrupt?"

"You did that nineteen years ago. The precedent is established."

Tomas sat.

Fen continued scraping wax.

The joke gave Tomas a route into the subject and made him hate himself for using it.

"I want to speak about your trial."

"No."

The answer came without anger.

Tomas stopped.

Fen looked at him.

"You see? It still means something when I say it too."

"Yes."

Fen scraped once more.

Then set the cup down.

"Ask the question you came for."

"You said no."

"I said no to speaking about my trial. You may ask why I think you're sitting here."

Tomas almost smiled.

"Why do you think I am sitting here?"

"Because Lower Field made you hit somebody and now you have discovered consequences are not limited to red ink."

Tomas touched his mouth before he could stop himself.

Fen saw.

"Was I wrong?"

"Not entirely."

"The useful part, then."

Tomas looked down the passage.

A child ran through the far end carrying three candle stubs and was shouted after by a novice. Ordinary life persisted with offensive efficiency.

"I believed I showed you mercy," Tomas said.

Fen's expression did not change.

"There."

"What?"

"You have already begun."

"I am trying to tell you what I believed."

"Then say *I believed*. Do not say *I showed*."

Tomas felt the distinction cut exactly where it should.

"I believed I was showing mercy."

"Better."

"I could not support a false judgment. I could not support a true one. Closing the page either way would have created certainty I did not possess. So I left it open."

Fen waited.

"I did not condemn you."

Fen laughed.

Not loudly.

Tomas closed his eyes.

"I hear it."

"Do you?"

"Yes."

"Then tell me what happened after you did not condemn me."

Tomas knew the formal consequences.

He had reviewed them.

Fen watched him reach for them.

"No," Fen said. "Not the list."

Tomas stopped.

"Nessa," he said.

Fen's face changed.

"Perrin told you?"

"No. I asked Ansel what an open page prevented. He named marriage. I asked who you had intended to marry."

"Good. The house found her after nineteen years."

"I am sorry."

Fen stood abruptly.

The taper cup fell and broke.

Both men looked at it.

Fen swore.

Tomas bent to pick up the pieces.

"Leave it."

He stopped.

Fen breathed hard through his nose.

"You are sorry because now you know her name. I was still unmarried before you knew it."

"Yes."

"I still lost the north house."

"Yes."

"I still stood at the third bench while people asked the air beside me questions."

"Yes."

"I still ate after crews whose work I did because nobody could guarantee me."

"Yes."

"And you were correct."

Tomas looked at him.

Fen's eyes were wet with anger.

"That is what I want you to understand. You may have been correct. There may have been no honest line you could put on the page."

Tomas had prepared to defend himself against accusation.

He had no defense against permission.

Fen continued.

"You think if I prove you wrong, then you can fix it. Perhaps you test me again. Perhaps you decide the younger man made an error. Perhaps Brother Tomas learns and Fen gets his life back in a better edition."

"I don't think that."

"You wanted to."

Tomas said nothing.

"I am not your evidence that the system failed," Fen said. "I am what the system did when it worked exactly as honestly as you could make it."

The passage seemed colder.

Tomas looked at the broken taper cup.

"Then what should I have done?"

Fen laughed again, exhausted now.

"There. You still want me to finish your test."

Tomas felt shame rise hot in his face.

Fen sat back down.

For a while neither spoke.

Then Fen said, "Maybe there was nothing you could do inside the page."

Tomas looked up.

"That is not mercy for me either," Fen said. "Do not look grateful."

"I am not."

"Good. Maybe the failure was that everybody treated the page as if it could answer the rest of my life. Maybe your honest uncertainty became everyone else's permission not to decide anything at all."

"I could have entered a limitation."

"Could you?"

Tomas thought about the rules as they existed then.

"Not with force."

"Could you have said my labor remained recognized?"

"Yes."

"Marriage?"

"No."

"Inheritance?"

"Not alone."

"Public address?"

"Custom, not lock. I could have objected."

Fen nodded.

"There."

The word held no triumph.

Tomas looked at Fen's bandaged hand, the broken cup between them, and the passage he had walked for years without stopping.

"I should have stayed," he said.

Fen looked at him.

"Yes."

That answer hurt more than accusation.

Tomas let it.

After a while he said, "I called it mercy."

Fen looked at him again. "You make confession sound like inventory."

"It is easier to correct inventory."

"That may be the saddest thing you have ever said."

Tomas considered it. "No. There are competitors."

He returned the next evening with a replacement taper cup.

Fen inspected it.

"Wrong stone."

"The store gave it to me."

"The store is wrong too."

"That is becoming a difficult week for institutions."

Fen almost smiled.

He took the cup anyway and showed Tomas how the oil channel differed.

They worked without discussing the trial.

When Tomas left, the repaired cup sat slightly crooked in the wall.

Fen did not correct it.

Tomas noticed.

He did not ask whether that meant anything.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Perrin Leaves Whitehart

Perrin packed badly when other people could see him.

Lower Field had added mud to the habit. Three of his notebooks were drying open above the guest-cell brazier, their pages weighted with spoons, stones and one bent buckle taken from the field. He had spent two days interviewing wounded people and one night refusing to call any of the accounts complete. Leaving now felt indecent. Remaining felt worse.

Alone, he had a place for every paper, strap, needle, and half-stick of sealing wax. With the yard full of Whitehart people pretending not to say goodbye, he put his road gloves into the document case, tied his spare shirt around the writing boards, and spent ten minutes looking for a purse hanging from his own belt.

Sela watched from the stair with a bundle of rolled dispatch copies against her chest.

"Those go in the left case," he said.

"You said the right."

"That was before Ansel changed the weight of my provisions."

"He added one loaf."

"A dense loaf. Blackcrest lost two couriers at Treven Ford because of less."

Ansel, passing with another parcel, said, "A Blackcrest courier unable to survive bread is no concern of mine."

Perrin put the dispatches in the right case.

Since the first snow he had occupied the guest cell, the lower workroom, two shelves in the store office, one corner of Tomas's table, and more space in other people's decisions than anyone could count. Removing him took most of a morning.

It also produced six payment errors.

Bryn Corr arrived with three route slips and claimed Perrin still owed for a mule he had never hired. A stable boy had been paid twice for the same winter week because Perrin's first receipt recorded him as *Tarin* and the second as *Taron*. A kitchen girl refused the last four marks for copy work because her mother said Blackcrest coin carried an obligation. Perrin told her all coin carried an obligation, which did not help. Sinnet discovered that two jars of preserved onions had been entered as travel expense without her permission and stood in the guest-cell door until he amended the line to *gift received after complaint*.

"I didn't give them," she said.

"You put them in my bag."

"To keep Ansel from putting in another loaf."

"Then what wording would satisfy you?"

"Theft by Herald."

Perrin wrote it.

Sinnet leaned over the entry, suspicious. "You'll change that when you're down the road."

"Almost certainly."

She laughed despite herself. Perrin did too, and for half a breath the room became what it had been in Month Two: a cramped cell, wet boots, bad onions, people who disliked one another enough to be easy.

Then Sinnet took the jars out of his bag.

"You can steal your own," she said, and left.

Tam came after her with Harl's old rope coiled across both arms.

The rope had been cut on the mountain and joined again with a knot too large to pass through a pulley. Tam placed it on Perrin's bed, directly over the road map.

"That is not mine," Perrin said.

"You paid for the rescue line."

"I paid Bryn for two new ropes after the rescue."

"She entered three."

Perrin found the account. Bryn had charged him for a length taken from Harl's yard, a new length bought for Roderick's climb, and a replacement promised to the valley watch. The three lines used the same mark.

"She has a gift," Perrin said.

"She has cousins."

Tam did not smile. Since his father's burial he had grown into the coat without filling it. The sleeves ended correctly now. The shoulders still folded when he stood still.

"Do you want payment?" Perrin asked.

"I want the account to say it was his."

Perrin changed the line to *Harl's yard rope, cut during recovery and returned knotted.*

Tam read his father's name. "Returned to who?"

"You."

"Then write me."

Perrin added *received by Tam.*

Tam put one hand on the rope. "He would have hated that knot."

"It held."

"He would still have hated it."

Sela expected Perrin to offer a sentence about men and the things that outlived them. He only sanded the wet ink.

Tam carried the rope away.

The kitchen girls had made him a wool cap. It was black, badly shaped, and small enough to sit on top of his head without reaching his ears. He put it on at once.

"You look ill," Sela said.

"I look honored."

"You look like a boiled plum."

He bowed to her in the cap. The girls at the door broke into laughter and one had to sit on the step.

The sound surprised Sela. Fear had not left the yard; it made room for the laughter and waited. Lower Field lay below with new roof patches and old blood dark in places the rain had not reached. The stores had continued downward. Perrin's horse stood saddled beneath a sky the color of old tin.

At the noon meal, Perrin sat where visitors sat and kept the small cap on. Sinnet served him no onions. Ivet tried to repair one side while it remained on his head, jabbed him behind the ear, and apologized so earnestly that he began laughing again. Sela laughed with him until barley went down the wrong way and Tomas had to strike her between the shoulders.

For several minutes nobody asked what Sela had heard, meant, or decided. Tam complained that the bread was smaller than last week. Ansel said the bread was precisely the entered size. Tam produced yesterday's heel from his pocket and set it beside today's. The table divided over whether a heel counted as representative evidence.

Perrin refused to rule.

When the meal ended, the cap leaned farther left and the bread question had not been solved. Sela carried the ordinary warmth of it up the stair and resented how quickly the gallery wind took it.

She carried the dispatches into the guest cell.

His road things lay on the bed: a waxed cloak, two shirts, a knife that folded into its own handle, dried apples, spare boot cord, a stitched route strip, and a narrow tin of grease. They

looked light enough to lift and complete enough to survive weather.

Sela touched the route strip with one finger.

It named towns she had never seen. One road went west to Crown-watch. Another ran south toward Duskport. A thinner line turned east beneath a mark for the neck, then stopped at the edge of the parchment.

"How long before nobody knows you?" she asked.

Perrin looked up from the saddle account.

"On a road?"

"Yes."

"That depends who is looking."

"How long before an innkeeper sees a person who needs a bowl and not a story?"

He considered. "Two days, if you change your coat. Five if you keep answering honestly."

She pictured it before she could prevent herself: a room smelling of boiled roots, wet strangers, a bench where nobody shifted away or made space, payment counted from her own hand. She wanted the road tin. She wanted the ache of walking for a reason no one else had supplied. She wanted to sleep badly somewhere that did not know which direction she faced.

Perrin watched her touch the map.

He said nothing about it then.

At noon he found her on the gallery.

Below, smoke rose from the planned rows. The camp had four common ovens now, though two belonged to rows that disputed each other's firewood measure. Halvard's line made a pale timber stroke across the flat. Beyond it, the fields that should have held grain held roofs.

"I'm not going to ask you for anything," Perrin said.

"You are leaving."

"The two conditions often occur together."

He placed a thin packet on the rail. Its outer sheet read *Whitehart sequence, provisional*. Sela did not touch it.

"Do you hear anything?" he asked.

"No."

"Nothing at all?"

"I don't know." She kept her eyes on the smoke. "Something happened in the pass. Something happened in the room. It may have been wind and frightened people. It may have been me learning what makes a room move and not knowing I learned it. I cannot call it. I cannot stop it. I know less now than when Tomas burned his note."

Perrin nodded.

"What will you write?" she asked.

He told her.

The girl brought back from the winter pass. The trial Whitehart could neither complete nor condemn. The opened grave. Her denial in the hall. Harl taking nine travelers by the east-shoulder road after her warning. The nameless keeper

defended before the whole house. Four thousand fires below a clapperless Bell. The command that found a child. Lower Field, where people obeyed her and did not, where a lane opened and a boy was crippled and no account could decide whether she had saved the crowd or taught it to move.

He did not call her saint, prophet, fraud, or Called. He did not have to.

When he finished, Sela's hands were gripping the rail.

"Every part happened," she said.

"Yes."

"It isn't what happened."

"No."

"Then leave me out."

Perrin rubbed the seam of one glove with his thumb. "Two villages already sing that you cursed Harl for taking the road. A third says he died because he doubted you. If I leave a gap, those versions enter it."

"Your version makes me holy."

"It may keep you alive."

"That is not the same kindness."

"I know."

She looked at him. "Do you?"

"Better than I would like. Worse than you need."

He turned the packet over. "There is a Jubilee in four years. The Crown-watch copy will be read against a hundred accounts

written by people who were not here. I can keep some claims out. I cannot write you free of use."

"You used Fen."

"Yes."

"You used me after I said no."

"Yes."

"And you bought beds and bread."

"Yes."

"You kept people alive."

Perrin's face altered, not toward relief. "Some of them."

The answer angered her more than a defense would have.

"You get to admit everything," she said. "It makes people think there is nothing left to accuse."

"There is plenty left."

"Then stop making the list for us."

He closed his mouth.

For a while they listened to a hammer below the gate strike at a regular, irritating pace.

Sela wanted him to go. She wanted him to remain long enough to repair what he had done. She wanted the road things on his bed and hated him for having shown, without offering, that a life could fit into two cases.

"Tell me one thing that is useful to me," she said. "Not to your Chronicle."

Perrin looked toward the east shoulder.

"Go," he said.

She did not pretend not to understand.

"They would follow."

"Some. Fewer after the first cold night."

"And the others would make the leaving mean whatever they wanted."

"Yes."

"You would too."

"Yes."

He took off the ridiculous cap and turned it in his hands. "A girl who remains here becomes Whitehart's proof, whether Whitehart wants that or not. A girl who leaves becomes available to everyone. I will write the second ending well. It may be the best ending I ever receive."

"So this advice serves you."

"It does. It may also save what is left of your life. I have no honest way to separate those facts."

She thought of an unnamed bench and a bowl paid for with her own coin.

"Which road?" she asked.

"That part has to be yours."

He put the cap back on and left her at the rail.

His farewells took an hour.

Osric held his hand too long. Ansel gave him the extra loaf after all. The stable boy returned the duplicate pay and Perrin made him keep half for noticing. Wilda came into the yard,

spoke six words too quietly for Sela to hear, and received a full Blackcrest bow. Ivet cried openly. Wren did not; she handed Perrin a sealed packet with the limits written on its face and made him read the limits before he packed it.

At the horse, Perrin looked toward the passage door.

Fen stood there with a candle box against one hip.

The yard was crowded. Nobody spoke to him. Nobody asked him to move.

Perrin crossed the yard.

He stopped in front of Fen.

Fen did not put down the candle box.

"Will you write what you did?" he asked.

Perrin had spent months asking people questions whose answers became dangerous after they left the mouth. For once he understood the cost before answering.

"Yes," he said.

Fen's expression did not soften. "All of it?"

"No account contains all of anything."

"That is a Blackcrest answer."

"Yes."

"Will you write that you told Aren the watches were armed?"

"Yes."

"And Corven that the stores were doubled?"

"Yes."

"And that both things were true?"

"Yes."

"Will you write that you liked being useful?"

The yard seemed to move away from them.

Perrin looked at Fen. "I will try."

Fen gave one tired laugh. "That means no."

"It means I do not yet know how to write it without turning confession into another way of making myself look honest."

Fen considered him.

Then he set down the candle box and held out his hand.

Perrin took it.

"Four years," Perrin said.

Fen's fingers tightened once. "Do not make that a promise until you know what it promises."

Perrin let go.

Nobody in the yard knew whether four years was threat, commission, debt, or simple arithmetic. Fen bent for the candle box. Perrin returned to the horse.

The valley cheered him from Whitehart to the ford.

They knew the man who had paid for winter shelter, named workers, separated bread from the gate, recorded their losses, and made their presence legible beyond the valley. They did not know which of those acts had been care and which had been acquisition. Most had no reason to care that morning.

Perrin raised one hand. The black cap sat crooked on his head. He was still wearing it at the lower bend.

The cheer followed him beyond sight.

Late that day Ansel brought Sela into the store office.

Every wall held boards. Flour. Barley. Dried peas. Salt meat. Lamp oil. Seed grain already eaten or reassigned. House ration. Camp ration. Water-company allowance. Sick-row addition. Loss to damp. Loss to mice, which Ansel had entered in a hand angrier than any other.

Across the final board ran a descending set of chalk marks.

"Perrin promised a road purchase," Sela said.

"Perrin promised to attempt one."

"Nella's factor has credit."

"Credit is not grain."

"The valley harvest—"

"Is roofs and mud."

Ansel rubbed chalk from his thumb. "I have kept the camp ration going because once you stop a ration, stopping becomes its own event. I can shorten it. I can thin it. I can move it outward. Each choice changes who reaches the next board. None puts food back."

Sela followed the marks to the blank wood.

"How long?"

"The seniors will hear the whole count in the morning."

"I asked you."

Ansel looked older than he had at first snow. "Not to the cold."

Outside, one of Perrin's forgotten straps hung from a yard peg and knocked against the wall in the wind. Ansel took it down, carried it to the empty guest cell, and returned without removing Perrin's unanswered grain request from the store board.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Nine Days

The debate began with nine objects on Ansel's board.

Three of the original store ledgers had been damaged at Lower Field. One cart axle lay broken below the second row. Two grain sacks had been cut during the fighting and trampled into mud before anyone understood what they were losing. The battle had not created the shortage. It had removed the lie that time remained generous.

They were not grain. The grain count required more marks than the table would hold, and Ansel no longer trusted marks that could be nudged by a sleeve. He used one object for each day the combined population could eat if Whitehart opened every store and continued the present ration.

A button. A bent nail. Two cherry stones. A copper mark worn smooth. A sheep's tooth. A black game piece with no matching set. A ring cut from a broken harness. One of Sela's old goat counters, white stone with a grey stripe.

Nine.

The senior table had been moved into the long hall because too many people had standing. Halvard arrived with sawdust in his beard and a split thumbnail. Maren carried treatment sheets tied in a cloth. Roan brought the company list. Signe leaned her

cord plan against the wall. Roderick stood because sitting tightened the old rescue damage in his right shoulder. Wren had three copied conditions and the single line Whitehart had taken from them.

Sela sat beside Ivet on the third bench.

Nobody called her forward.

On the first day they discussed movement.

Roan proposed taking the camp out in companies rather than rows: water first, then the sick, then households whose guarantors had carts, then everyone with no cart but a confirmed destination. Each group would carry rations to the next hand point and surrender the empty company marks there so the rear knew the road was clearing.

"To which destinations?" Ansel asked.

Roan touched three places on a route board. "South valley. West relay. Lower coast."

"Capacity?"

"The south valley can receive perhaps six hundred before its stores turn. West relay, two hundred if they strip the pack sheds. The lower coast—"

"Is sixteen loaded days away," said Nella's factor from the wall. "Longer on foot with children."

"Then we stage them."

"On what food?"

Roan looked at the nine objects.

His proposal was not withdrawn. It remained on the board because moving eight hundred people was better than moving none. The argument changed from whether it worked to what happened to those left after the first companies departed.

Signe unrolled the plan.

The cord grid had become ink. She showed four ovens, the water spine, waste lanes, burial ground, company sheds, the goat track that no one had authorized, and more than seven hundred marked shelters. Lines revised after consultation were darker where several hands had corrected them.

"This is not a camp that can fold," she said. "If you order movement, people must choose between roofs they built and roads without stores. The sick cannot be lifted in rows. The water line cannot travel. The ovens cannot travel. The graves will not."

Osric said, "No one was granted permanence."

"They were granted timber on credit, fittings, cart access, ration priority for work, and permission to drive pegs while a ruling traveled. Whatever word you refused, the acts supplied it."

Signe's voice was rough from the smoke below. She did not look triumphant. Her plan had worked. That was the problem she had brought into the hall.

Halvard put a timber joint on the table.

It was the first Ironvale fitting delivered to the valley, warped by its early leak and stained dark where Fen had found the overflow route.

"Dismantle the runnel," Osric said, "and the camp has less reason to remain."

Halvard turned the joint so the split showed.

"You can dismantle timber," he said. "You cannot dismantle thirst."

"Could it be moved south?"

"In pieces. Half the troughs crack when lifted. The good iron goes back to Nella's factor because it is held on credit. The spring intake belongs above the proposed movement route. While we move it, the low rows return to the wells Maren closed."

"How long?"

"Ten days if every company obeys and no cart loses a wheel. Longer than nine if they do."

He pushed the warped joint beside Ansel's objects.

"I will take it down if ordered," Halvard said. "I will not put the word *safe* beside it."

Sela went below with Ivet after the hall emptied.

They carried no message. Sela had said she wanted to see whether the south rows were packing, and Ivet had taken a lamp without asking permission. At the wicket the watch let them pass because the gate was not yet closed and because nobody had made a rule against the Called visiting a town Whitehart still refused to name.

The cord lanes were soft with evening mud. In one shelter a household folded blankets into a cart while three neighbors

argued over who owned the cart's left wheel. The woman packing said they would join Roan's south company.

"Where will you sleep?" Sela asked.

"At the first hand point."

"After that?"

"The second."

"And after that?"

The woman pressed both palms on a blanket to force it flat. "We will have walked far enough that someone up there will have found the rest."

Her husband, repairing the wheel pin, said, "She means we don't know."

"I mean Roan knows the road."

"He knows where it goes. That is different."

They argued without stopping work.

At the water line, Fen was clearing leaf rot from the settling trough while Halvard's crew fitted a cover for frost. No one spoke to Fen. A boy held nails for him and turned his palm whichever way Fen looked. The work required six people and moved like one task. On Roan's board, only five of them existed.

Ivet caught Sela watching.

"You kept your promise," she said.

Sela turned on her. "Do not praise me for that."

Ivet flinched. Sela regretted the sharpness and did not know how to take it back without making Fen notice them both.

They ate at the fire-company shed. The stew contained two pieces of turnip and an argument about which one was larger. Roan broke both pieces with the side of his spoon and gave the halves to two children who immediately traded them.

"South movement can begin in three days," he said.

"And finish?" Sela asked.

"No."

The simple answer settled among the bowls.

Roan rubbed his thumb over a crack in his company mark. "We can move the people with places to receive them. We can move some who have strong guarantors. Every person moved makes the ration smaller for those who remain. Every early departure also tells the rest that the road may close behind them."

"So your plan helps."

"Yes."

"And makes fear."

"Yes."

One child dropped a turnip piece in the ash and began to cry. Roan washed it with a mouthful of water from his own cup and returned it. The child ate it with ash still in the split.

On the climb back, Ivet carried the lamp. Sela carried the smell of smoke in her hair and the knowledge that eight hundred possible departures had faces, blankets, and a wheel that belonged to three different households.

On the second day they discussed disease.

Maren did not make a speech. She untied the cloth and laid three treatment sheets on the table. One belonged to Lio, the child whose body she had examined over his aunt's refusal. One belonged to a woman from the north row who had recovered after the low wells closed. One belonged to a water-company worker whose illness began when he drank from a private pit after missing the ration line.

"If the camp disperses without controlled water," she said, "we lose where they drink, where they empty, and which cases follow which row. The flux moves faster than walking households. If they remain and the ration stops, the first crowd forms at water. If they climb, thirst comes with them."

"How many die if we close?" Wilda asked.

"I don't know."

"If we open?"

"I don't know."

"Then what use is this?"

Maren tapped the three names. "It tells you which ignorance has already killed people."

Roderick shifted his weight near the door.

"Give them a thing they can see," he said. "A ration carried down in daylight. A lane kept open. Somebody at the turn telling the front to hold while the rear moves."

Wren lifted one of her pages.

"That is part of the closure sequence I gave you. Notice before the bar. Rations released outward rather than carried

inward behind the gate. Separated approaches. A retreat lane maintained before assembly. Visible negotiation below the narrowing. Sela kept out of sight."

Osric had copied only one sentence onto Ansel's board:

At present density, abrupt closure while inward rations continue will cause massing on the gate path.

"We can stop inward ration movement," he said.

"That is not the same as releasing it outward," Wren said.

"We cannot carry nine days of grain into a camp that may take it by force."

"Then do not use my line to certify the rest."

Osric put both palms on the table. He had not slept. Chalk had worked into the cracks beside his nails.

"Your line describes the danger."

"My conditions describe how not to add to it."

"And if we cannot satisfy every condition?"

"Then you know the line is incomplete."

Roderick asked how wide a retreat lane had to be.

Wren gave him the smallest measure she could defend. He took a cord outside and marked it on the gate yard with two rows of flour. It looked generous inside the walls. From the gallery Sela could see that it narrowed to nothing at the first turn.

Roderick stared at it, then moved one line farther from the gate.

"Still nothing below the rock," Sela said.

He heard her. Everyone did.

"I know," he said.

After the second day's meeting, Sela found Roderick below the gate with Brem, Wren, and the flour sack. Wind had scattered the first line across the yard. Wren measured from the inward swing of the left gate leaf while Roderick held the cord at the turn.

"The gate has always stood open," Sela said.

Wren glanced at the hinges. "Then nobody here has practiced opening it under load."

Roderick set his boots and pulled the cord tighter. "We can practice tomorrow."

"With what outside it?" Wren asked.

"Water barrels."

"Barrels do not become afraid when the rear pushes."

"No. They still show the hinge."

Brem brought four empty casks. They filled two and left two dry. With the leaves half closed, Roderick and the novices tried to reopen them while the casks leaned against the outside. The wet casks rolled into the seam. The dry ones skidded aside. The right leaf caught on its lower stone.

Sela put her shoulder against the oak from inside. Cold passed through her coat. On Roderick's count they pushed together. The leaf moved a handspan and stopped.

"Again," he said.

Wren marked the resistance point. They tried with the casks farther down, then with rope pulling from the path. Each attempt taught them something true about timber and almost nothing about people.

When they finished, Roderick's palms were blistered.

"You went up for Harl when every count said not to," Sela said.

"Yes."

"What do you do if the count says stay inside?"

Roderick coiled the rope. "I try to make the lane."

It was an answer about work. Sela was grateful he did not make it larger.

By the end of the second day the proposals filled two boards. None was foolish. None produced grain.

The Oath-hold summons still had not returned. Until it did, Whitehart knew what hunger was asking and did not yet know exactly where law permitted the answer to stand.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

The Lawful Thing

Witness Orla Darun arrived after the permanent pegs had begun to lean and two days after Lower Field had given every argument a body count. She had already been on the road when the battle happened. By the time the news reached her, turning back would have been easier than arriving. She came anyway.

The summons had gone from Whitehart to the valley carrier, from the carrier to the west road, from the west road through two flooded crossings, and from the last relay to Oath-hold. The answer came back by a different road because a bridge had lost one of its middle supports. By the time Orla rode into the Light Heights, the cord plan below the house had roofs on it, the roofs had smoke holes, and children used the firebreak as a running course.

Her horse was old, dun, and angry at slopes. Orla dismounted before the last turn and walked beside it with one hand under the bridle.

Tomas met her at the yard.

"Witness Orla Darun?"

"Brother Tomas?"

"Yes."

"Then we have both survived the road and the introduction. The road was longer. Where is the loft?"

He had prepared the guest cell.

She listened while he explained this, then asked what accepting guest-right would mean while she read a boundary grant in which Whitehart was a party.

"A bed and three meals," Tomas said.

"Also protection, deference, freedom from toll, and an obligation on me not to injure the house while I am under its roof."

"We don't collect a toll."

"That removes the least interesting part."

The byre loft cost four marks for six nights. Ansel refused the first payment. Orla put the coins on his tally board. He moved them to the table. She moved them to the flour bin. He found them there after supper and carried them back to the loft.

On the second morning Orla paid the stable girl directly. Ansel complained to Tomas that Stonebear procedure had found a way around honest hospitality.

"It has found a way around you," Tomas said.

"Same thing in my store."

Orla heard him and laughed once through the open door.

Tomas carried a lamp to the loft after dark. Orla had arranged her bedroll between two roof braces and set the grant tube on an overturned milk pail. The horse shifted below, making dust move through the lamplight. She was sitting with

one boot off and the other still on, rubbing the swollen ankle above her stocking.

"Road injury?" Tomas asked.

"Road age. It improves when nobody mentions it."

He set the lamp beside the pail.

"The guest cell has a chair."

"The guest cell also has guest-right."

"You have made that clear."

"Good. I dislike repeating myself almost as much as your steward dislikes accepting money. In Oath-hold we call repetition evidence that the first promise was poorly made."

Below them the dun horse struck one hoof against its stall board.

Orla asked who had cut the new path around the dry spring. Tomas said no one remembered it as new. She asked when water carts first began using the traverse, whether the lower shepherds still paid a grazing portion to Whitehart, who repaired the elbow after rain, and whether Merta had ever been moved by force.

Tomas answered what he knew. The list of what he did not know lengthened.

"We have lived above that line for four hundred years," he said.

"People rarely measure the ground beneath a custom until someone wants to use the edge."

Tomas said, "That sounds like Blackthorn."

"Blackthorn measures the ground before breakfast. Stonebear waits until somebody swears on it."

Orla pulled off the second boot. A blister had opened across one heel. She washed it from her own flask, wrapped it, and asked Tomas to bring the shepherd payment boards in the morning.

He left the chair unmentioned.

She was smaller than the old Darun portraits suggested a Darun ought to be, but the family face was unmistakable: broad jaw, deep-set dark eyes, a nose built in one decisive line. Her iron-grey hair was cut close enough that rain could not make much of it. The skin across her nose had the permanent red of road wind. Her riding coat had been mended at both elbows with leather of two different browns. She did not look like a person arriving to settle a question. She looked like someone who had carried the question too far to put it down carelessly.

She asked for the three grant copies before she asked for food.

Whitehart kept one beneath waxed cloth in the Ledger room. Orla had brought Oath-hold's copy in a wooden tube. The third had traveled from a valley owner whose grandfather had bought a disputed strip and kept the papers because distrust lasted longer than land.

The wording agreed.

The hands did not. One copy wrote *bend* with the old hooked form. Another had a later clerk's mark above it. The

Whitehart copy carried smoke damage along the lower edge and a repair thread through the margin.

Orla laid all three on separate boards.

"Nobody touches them together," she said.

Tomas brought stones for the corners.

"Clean ones."

He changed the stones.

For six days she read.

She read in the byre loft until the cattle heat made her eyes water. She read in the yard with a cloak over her shoulders while rain struck the boards. She asked Tomas to speak the grant aloud and stopped him when he gave modern value to an old road word. She asked Alaine for the oldest account of the spring. She asked three shepherds where the path had run in their grandmothers' time and accepted none of their answers until each had drawn it without seeing the others.

Then she measured.

Signe's cords had made measurement fashionable below the gate. Children offered Orla pegs. A camp boy followed her for half a morning carrying a coil twice his size and correcting her whenever she called the lower path a road.

"A road takes a cart," he said.

"I came on it with a horse."

"The horse didn't like it."

"Neither do I."

He considered this and let her keep the word.

The route had changed in four hundred years. It had changed again since first snow. Feet had cut off two corners. Water carts had widened the lower traverse. Halvard's runnel crossed the old foot line on a raised cradle. Above the camp, where the grant described the approach bending toward a spring, Orla found a dry basin under hazel roots and a scatter of stones too regular to be natural.

On the third day she ate her noon bread beside the water line. She asked the company workers who cleared ice from the upper cradle. They pointed to one another until a girl named Ros admitted that Fen had shown them where to wedge a board and that nobody had entered his part because the maintenance sheet no longer carried his name.

"Bring him," Orla said.

Ros looked at Tomas.

That was enough to interest Orla.

"Why are you looking at him?"

Ros lowered the bread. "Fen cannot give house testimony."

"Can he speak?"

"Of course he can speak," Tomas said.

"Those are different permissions here?"

"Yes."

Orla took another bite and chewed it before asking the next question.

"If he tells me where he placed the winter board, can I rely on what I observe afterward?"

"Yes."

"Can I record that he told me where to look?"

Tomas's face became careful.

"You may record what was said to you. Whitehart will not admit the statement as Fen's testimony in its hearing."

"But it will admit mine."

"You have standing."

Orla folded the remaining bread into its cloth.

"Then spend mine."

Ros stared.

Tomas did not.

He knew immediately what Orla was doing and, perhaps more importantly, what she was not doing.

She was not restoring Fen.

She could not.

She was making herself responsible for carrying words Whitehart refused to let stand on their own.

Fen came from the wall with wax on one sleeve and suspicion already prepared.

He stopped when he saw Orla.

"They said you wanted me."

"I want the person who knows the upper cradle."

"Then you want Halvard."

"Halvard's sheet says Ros cleared the ice."

Ros said, "I did."

"Ros says you showed her how."

Fen looked at Tomas.

"Am I allowed to answer?"

The cruelty of the question lay in how ordinary he made it.

Orla stood.

She was a head shorter than Fen. The old Darun portraits would have lied about that. They would not have lied about the face.

"He tells me you have no standing in Whitehart's hearing," she said.

Fen's mouth bent. "He tells it more politely than most."

"I have standing."

"Congratulations."

A few workers looked away.

Orla did not.

"I am asking under mine."

Fen's expression changed.

Not gratitude.

Something harder.

"That still makes it yours."

"Yes."

The answer came without defense.

Fen looked at her for a long time.

Then he pointed uphill.

"The board you are measuring is wrong."

Ros inhaled sharply.

Orla said, "Good. Show me."

They walked to the cradle. Fen did not touch the measurement cord. He showed her where thaw water had lifted the winter wedge, where he had moved the brace after the first hard freeze, and where the old maintenance line disappeared beneath newer footing. Orla made him repeat nothing until she had looked for herself.

At the dry basin he stopped beside the hazel roots.

"The spring used to run there."

"You saw it?"

"No. Merta did. I saw the old trough stones when we dug the company drain."

"That distinction matters."

"Apparently."

Orla crouched and scraped mud from one stone.

Tomas stood behind them with Ros and three company workers. More people had gathered farther down without admitting they were watching.

One of the valley owners arrived late enough to hear only the end.

"You cannot enter him," the man said.

Orla straightened.

"I am not entering him."

"Then none of this has standing."

Orla picked up her cord.

"I do."

The owner looked at Tomas.

Tomas said nothing.

Orla continued, "Challenge the observation and you challenge me. Challenge the source and I will name the source. But do not pretend the ground changes because your procedure dislikes the person who showed it to me."

Nobody answered.

Fen looked furious.

Later people would say Witness Orla Darun gave Fen standing.

She corrected the first three people who said it.

"No," she told them. "I spent mine."

Fen heard the correction once.

He did not thank her.

Orla did not ask him to.

She asked Ros to show her the maintenance sheet.

Ros said Halvard kept it.

"Then I am not asking you to produce what you do not hold," Orla said.

The girl relaxed enough to eat. Orla watched two households take water under different company marks from the same trough. One had a guarantor. The other borrowed a mark from its neighbor and paid in firewood. Nothing in the grant described that exchange. Nothing about its absence made the water less real.

On the walk back, Tomas asked whether the camp's lived use could affect the boundary.

"Use may create other claims," Orla said. "It cannot make this grant say a sentence it does not contain."

"So you can see the town and still rule as if it were cord on someone else's land."

"No. I can see the town and rule where this particular line lies. If you want the town decided, summon the people who can decide the town."

"Before winter?"

Orla looked at the darkening sky. "Probably not."

Her honesty made the hill steeper.

She put one end of a cord there.

The other end reached thirty paces above the stone everyone called the elbow.

She measured again the next day.

Wren went with her. Wren carried two boards, chalk, a measuring cord of her own, and the copied risk line Whitehart had requested in Month Six. The cold made two fingers of her left hand stiff. She kept flexing them against her coat.

At the dry spring Orla asked, "If the gate closes, what happens here?"

"That depends on notice, the direction of ration movement, whether people believe the closure is temporary, and whether anyone visible to the camp appears above the gate."

"Likely harm."

Wren looked down the path. "Massing at the narrow approach. Pressure against an inward-opening gate. Loss of footing if the surface is wet or frozen. Competing instructions if the rear cannot see the front."

"Can your commission make the camp a party to this grant?"

"No."

"Can your observations alter where the line was entered?"

"No."

"Can they tell me whether I should rule today or wait until the road is empty?"

Wren pressed her thumb into the numb fingers. "The road may not be empty before winter. Waiting is also use."

Orla nodded. "That is an answer to a question I did not ask. It may be the more important question. It is still not mine."

Wren's mouth tightened.

"The harm is probable," she said.

"I believe you."

"Belief without standing changes nothing."

"It changes me," Orla said. "It does not change the grant."

They finished the measurement in rain.

On the fourth evening Orla stopped Merta on the path.

Merta had the coat over her arm though first snow was weeks away. Since the permanent pegs went in, she had begun climbing more often. Sometimes she stood at the stone. Sometimes she went no farther than the lower oven and

watched strangers bake bread in a valley where she had once known every roof.

Tomas saw Orla speak to her from the gallery. Merta answered without looking up. Orla asked another question and held out the cord.

Merta took them to the stone.

She set her boot below it and her palm on its wet top.

They remained there until the yard lamps were lit.

That night Orla ate in the small store office because she would not enter the senior table while the ruling was unfinished. Ansel gave her barley, onions, and the heel of a cheese that had acquired a blue edge. She cut off the blue and ate the rest.

"You'll want to know what she told me," Orla said.

Tomas was copying two damaged ration lines onto a clean board. "If it belongs in the ruling."

"It does. For sixteen years Merta has stood below that stone because Sister Wilda told her it marked the house line. Merta has never put a foot above it."

"No."

"Not even when the path washed out below and everybody else stepped around. She went home."

Tomas put down the chalk.

Orla turned the heel of cheese in her fingers. "The stone is not the line."

He waited.

"The grant says the bend where the approach leaves the spring. The spring failed in Mother Ilse's time. The path was cut below it, then cut again. Everyone kept the old name and applied it to the largest stone beside the new turn. The true grant line is thirty paces above where Merta has stood."

"Then she could have come higher."

"Yes."

"For sixteen years."

"Yes."

He thought of the coat darkening in snow. "Will you tell her?"

"I did."

"What did she say?"

"She asked whether Col had known."

Tomas's hands stopped over the boards.

"I told her I could not rule on what a dead boy knew," Orla said. "She said that was the first sensible answer anyone from a House had given her."

On the sixth day Orla called the parties to the grant table.

Alaine came with Tomas and Osric. Two valley owners came for the ground below. Signe stood behind them with the cord plan rolled under one arm, present because her pegs now occupied the land in question and not accepted as an owner of it. Wren sat at the end of the table. Merta refused a place and stood outside the open door.

Orla placed the three copies apart. Beside them she put the shepherds' drawings, the dry-spring measurements, the path-change marks, and Merta's statement.

She read the ruling without ceremony.

The grant line followed the former approach to its bend at the old spring. The present elbow stone did not mark that bend. The true line lay thirty paces higher. All occupied camp ground, including the marked settlement, waterworks, and lower path, lay outside Whitehart's grant.

Whitehart had no grant duty to house, feed, police, or disperse the people below.

Whitehart had no grant right to seize their shelters or command them off valley land.

Whitehart could close its gate.

No oath in the grant required the gate to remain open.

One valley owner began speaking before Orla had finished. She lifted a finger and he stopped.

"You will have the full copy," she said. "Your objection will be attached. It will not be attached in the middle of my sentence."

She completed the reading.

Wren asked to enter probable material harm.

Orla allowed it as a separate observation and refused it as a condition of the boundary ruling.

"If the lawful option predictably produces deaths," Wren said, "the separation will be used to make each page innocent of

the other."

"Then label the use," Orla said. "Do not alter the line to prevent a dishonest reader."

"A dishonest reader does not require permission."

"No. That is why neither of us may improve the evidence for him."

The room held for a moment. Tomas saw that both women would have continued if either believed victory possible. Neither did.

Alaine asked the only question she had brought.

"Does your ruling order closure?"

"No."

"Does it advise closure?"

"No."

"Does it absolve the house if we close?"

Orla looked directly at her. "No."

The word did not move.

"I was asked whether you may bar a gate on your own ground against people camped beyond the grant," Orla said. "You may. I was not asked what you owe them as human beings, what your own teaching requires, what your stores can bear, or how many will die. No wording I enter today can carry those questions away for you."

She signed all three copies.

The valley owners signed receipt, not agreement. Signe signed only for the plan's measured position. Wren attached her

observation. Tomas entered custody. Alain  did not touch the pen.

Outside, Merta remained below the stone.

Orla went to her before leaving. She stood at the true bend and lifted one hand, inviting nothing more than the distance itself.

Merta looked at the thirty open paces. Then she shifted the coat higher on her arm and stayed where she was.

"She has the right now," Tomas said.

"She had it before I came," Orla said. "I only proved that nobody had noticed."

Tomas walked beside the horse as far as the water cradle. The animal placed each hoof with open dislike.

"Did you know the answer before you arrived?" he asked.

"No."

"Did you expect it?"

"I expected every party to have remembered the line in the shape most useful to them. Your house remembered it against itself. That is less common, not more virtuous."

"You think Alain  will close."

Orla adjusted the reins. "I think your store boards will ask her to."

"And you?"

"I will be three valleys away."

"I asked whether you'll go."

She stopped beside the runnel. Water traveled through the timber with a hollow knocking sound.

"If you want me to say the gate must remain open, I cannot. If you want me to say closing it is lawful and therefore clean, I will not. You paid for the first answer. The second is not for sale."

Orla put her boot in the bad stirrup while Tomas held the leather. Her injured heel made her jaw tighten. The horse resisted the slope. She mounted on the second attempt and turned it down through the camp.

At the first permanent oven, a woman moved a bread board aside so the horse could pass. At the water line, two children ducked beneath its belly and were shouted back by a guarantor. Nobody knew the rider had spent six days deciding where Whitehart ended.

Tomas carried the house copy to Alaine's room. She set it beside Ansel's store boards, aligned their lower edges, and asked him to close the door.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Unless You Stop It

Alaine asked Ansel to bring the count again after Orla Darun's ruling had been copied and sealed.

The law had answered one question. The stores had not changed.

The nine objects had remained in place overnight under an upturned tray. He uncovered them one by one. Sela recognized the goat counter only after it was already on the wood.

"House ration alone?" Alaine asked.

"To the hard end of the cold, if nothing else fails."

"Combined ration?"

Ansel touched the objects.

"Nine days at the current thin issue. Seven if fear increases the line. Perhaps ten if Maren removes the sick allowance and the water companies take no work ration. I will not recommend either."

"Expected grain from the road?"

Nella's factor answered. "Negotiated. Not loaded."

"Valley purchase?"

"Nothing that changes the board."

"Room inside Whitehart?"

Ansel looked toward the galleries. "Four hundred sleeping. Fewer with safe fire."

They argued about the four hundred until the winter lamps were lit.

Children first. The sick first. Company guarantors. People already entered in Whitehart's ration book. Valley residents before distant arrivals. Those with useful skills. Those nearest the gate. A draw by mark. Households divided or kept whole.

Every method saved someone. Every method placed another body outside.

Tomas asked that any final order name Whitehart as its maker.

"The grant permits closure," he said. "It does not close the gate. Orla was exact. We must be exact too."

Wilda agreed.

That agreement frightened Sela more than their disputes.

The meeting ended after midnight without a spoken order. Alaine gathered the store boards herself and told Sela to follow.

Her room was smaller than Sela had imagined. One bed, one narrow table, a wash bowl with a crack repaired in white resin, and a single window facing the wall rather than the valley. The chair used in the listening room was not there.

Alaine lit two lamps. She placed the boards between them and sat on the bed.

"Count," she said.

Sela remained standing.

"I have counted."

"Count with me."

They began with the house store. Sela could not read Ansel's words, but he had made the marks for hands that could count without letters. She moved beans from one cup to another. House mouths. Camp portions. Work allowances. Loss. Days.

The first count ended at nine.

Alaine swept the beans back.

The second ended at nine.

Sela found the small error she had hoped for: one camp row entered twice. She removed it. Alaine showed her the water-company ration omitted from the same board. It restored more mouths than Sela had taken away.

Nine.

"There should be another store," Sela said.

"There isn't."

"Perrin sent messages."

"A message does not arrive as grain."

"The credit line—"

"Not grain."

"Roan can move some."

"Some."

"Signe can fit more inside."

"Not four thousand."

Each answer was quiet. Alaine did not hurry her toward the end of them.

Sela sat on the floor because her legs had begun to shake.

"What if I say open?"

Alaine placed the white goat counter in Sela's palm.

"The house will obey you."

"You won't fight me?"

"No."

"You think opening is wrong."

"I think opening gives us nine days before there is nothing in the Light Heights. I think four thousand hungry people and a hundred hungry people will then be inside one wall. I think I know what follows, and I may be wrong."

"But you will open."

"If you tell me to."

The transferred weight was almost nothing. A white stone. A child's counting piece. Her own from before people watched her hands.

"Which four hundred?" Sela asked.

"If you choose four hundred, the house will admit them."

"Don't."

"I am not asking you to choose."

"You are making every answer mine."

Alaine's face tightened. For a moment she looked tired enough to be ordinary.

"No," she said. "I am telling you where your power reaches because hiding it would be another use of you. The order is mine unless you stop it. If you stop it, that choice is yours. There is no clean division available to us."

Sela closed her fist around the counter.

She wanted to give it back. She wanted Perrin's road case. She wanted an ordinary morning with a goat refusing the north pen. She wanted Harl alive and Fen loud in the kitchen and Alaine certain enough that no one needed Sela's mouth.

"When?" she asked.

"First light."

"Notice?"

Alaine looked at the copied risk line. "The seniors believe notice will bring the crowd before the bar is set."

"Wren said notice."

"She did."

"Rations outward."

"We cannot move enough safely."

"Retreat lanes."

"Roderick will mark them."

"Below the rock they vanish."

"Yes."

The two lamps made four shadows of the store boards.

Sela did not tell Alaine to open.

At the trial, silence had happened to her. Here she chose it and watched Alaine understand.

She hated the steadiness it gave her.

At first light the whole house stood in the yard.

Alaine wore no ceremonial cloth. She named the store limit. She named Orla's ruling as permission and not cause. She said Whitehart would close its gate by Whitehart authority until supply made reopening possible. She did not call the choice merciful. She did not call it clean.

Tomas entered the words as she spoke.

Roderick and six novices took the oak leaves. The hinges had not carried both together in years. The right leaf scraped the stones and had to be lifted with a pry bar. The left came inward against the wind. When they met, a dark seam remained between them.

Sela stood in the third rank.

The counter pressed a crescent into her palm.

Roderick dropped the bar into its brackets. The sound struck the yard once.

From the other side a man asked, "How long?"

Nobody had prepared an answer that could pass through oak.

Chapter Forty

Five Days

On the first day the camp waited for the gate to open again.

The morning ration queue formed below as usual. Water-company workers came up with empty carriers. A fire guarantor brought the board for oven flour. Two children chased each other around the line until an adult pulled them close.

At the shut leaves, Roderick read Alaine's order through the wicket.

The words *until supply made reopening possible* traveled down the path as *three days, after the next cart, and when the Mother finished counting*. By noon people were cooking the food they had held back for evening. At dusk the gate remained shut.

Inside, the house ate its first closed-gate meal.

Ansel issued the ordinary portion. He had refused Wilda's proposal to reduce it on the first day because a sudden cut would look like secret shortage and because the people doing gate watch needed to stand. The bowls were full enough to shame everyone and too small to satisfy anyone.

No one took the seat beside Sela.

Ivet carried her bowl there, hesitated, then sat across instead. The mistake was small. Sela felt it more sharply than she expected.

Ivet turned her empty bowl between both hands.

"When this opens, remind me Sinnet owes me a morning."

"For what?"

"For covering Pell's dawn rota three times."

Sela looked at her. "What are you going to do with a morning?"

"Sleep until the sun reaches the wall."

"That is your great ambition?"

"No. After that I intend to eat something nobody weighed first."

Sela snorted.

"I asked yesterday," Ivet said. "Sinnet told me to ask again when the gate opened."

"Then ask again."

"I will forget."

"So will I."

Ivet pointed the bowl at her. "That is why I told you."

A shout rose below the wall. Sela turned toward it, and by the time she looked back Ivet was carrying both bowls to the wash pot.

At the kitchen door two watch novices argued over whether a heel of bread could be passed through the wicket to a cousin

below. Sinnet took the heel from them, cut it into four equal pieces, and made both boys eat one.

"If you begin private mercy," she said, "you will have private war before morning."

She put the remaining pieces back in the bread bin. Her hands shook afterward. She hid them under her apron.

Sela swallowed three spoonfuls and could not take a fourth. She carried the bowl to the waste pot.

Ansel blocked her with one arm.

"Eat or keep it," he said. "Nothing goes in there today."

She took the bowl to the concealed gallery and ate cold barley while the last cooking fires below went out early.

Sela watched from a narrow window above the yard where the wall concealed her body. Wren had insisted on that one condition and Whitehart had followed it exactly.

She could see the elbow but not the lower turn. Voices rose from below the rock without faces attached to them.

"They'll open tomorrow."

"The Herald bought grain."

"Sela won't let them."

"Sela ordered it."

The last sentence returned in three voices.

Sela stepped back from the opening.

On the second day the represented rows sent speakers.

They came in groups named on Roan's company list: water, fire, store, waste, watch. Signe's plan had taught them which

row could claim to speak for which shelter. The lists prevented the whole camp from climbing. They also gave every group a reason to believe someone inside must receive them.

Roderick met the speakers below the narrowest turn with four novices and no stave in his hands.

Sela could not hear the beginning. Wind carried pieces upward.

"—children's ration—"

"—not an answer—"

"—open to the table—"

Roderick pointed downhill. He opened both arms, showing the width of the lane he wanted kept clear. People shifted. The front moved back six paces. Below them the path remained full.

After an hour the speakers returned to the camp with no grain and a promise that Alaine would answer written terms. Alaine wrote before midday. The camp could not read one answer as an answer to all its questions. Three speakers came back before dark.

The water speaker asked for guaranteed access to the upper intake. The fire speaker asked for flour already earned by oven work. The store speaker asked whether Nella's promised carts would be admitted if they arrived after the closure. Each question could be answered alone. Together they required the gate to behave as open and shut at the same time.

Tomas read Alaine's replies through the wicket. He used names when he had them. The speakers corrected two. A woman from the seventh row asked why the house had

accepted her name for waste duty and not for a share of grain. Tomas lowered his page.

"I don't have an answer entered for that," he said.

"Then enter the question."

He did. The people nearest the gate watched the chalk move although they could not see the words.

On the third day it rained.

The flour lines in the yard disappeared first. Roderick replaced them with rope. Below the gate the path darkened under feet and water ran in the worn center. Halvard's runnel continued along the slope, carrying clear water toward rows that could still maintain their company turns. From the gallery it looked like proof that the settlement was functioning. At the gate it meant the camp could wait another night.

Maren moved between the lower treatment shelter and the wicket. She sent sheets in with names and requests: salts, dry cloth, lamp oil, more boiled water vessels. Whitehart lowered what it could in two baskets from the side wall.

When the first basket descended, the crowd shifted toward it. Roderick shouted for the rope crew to lift again. A clay bottle fell, struck the wall, and broke. Nobody fought over the pieces. They stared at the dark stain spreading in the rain.

Whitehart moved the basket point farther from the gate.

The camp moved with it.

At night Sela heard axes below. She thought people were breaking shelters for fuel. In the morning she saw that a row

had dismantled its company shed to make barriers guiding the basket line.

She had been wrong. The correction did not comfort her.

On the fourth day the wind turned north.

Rain hardened on the upper stones. The oak seam whitened. Roderick walked the inner yard scattering grit, then sent sacks down through the wicket to the first turn. The sacks went empty before reaching the elbow.

Near noon a woman climbed alone.

She carried a lidded willow basket against her chest. She did not join the speakers. She walked inside the rope lane while people made room without being told.

At the gate she placed the basket on the ground.

A sound came from it.

Sela's hands went cold before the rest of her understood.

The woman knocked once on the oak. She stepped back. Roderick spoke through the wicket. The woman shook her head. He spoke again. She turned and walked down.

No one followed her.

The infant wore two shirts, both wet at the hem, and a knitted cap with one loose yellow thread. Whitehart did not open the gate. Sinnet tied a grain basket to the wall rope. Roderick went over far enough to fix the second line around the willow handles. They lifted the child up the outside face while every person on the path watched.

The basket turned once. A novice reached too early and missed it. Sela heard the baby's thin cry against stone.

When the basket came over, Sinnet took it to the kitchen without looking toward the gallery.

Below, the empty rope rose.

The infant would not drink goat milk from a cloth. Sela held the cup while Sinnet tried a carved spoon. The child turned its head and cried until its breath caught. Ivet warmed the wet shirts by the oven and found a row mark stitched at the neck.

"We can send word that she is alive," Ivet said.

"To whom?" Sinnet asked.

No one had taken the woman's name. The basket held no note.

They sent a kitchen girl to the wall to call down the row mark. Several people answered. None could say which household the infant belonged to. By evening three women had claimed to know the mother, and each named a different shelter.

Sela kept the loose yellow thread wound around one finger while the baby finally drank. She wanted to go below and find the woman by the way she walked. Wilda had put two novices outside the kitchen door.

The child slept against Sinnet's chest. On the other side of the wall, the mother remained a story with three addresses.

By sunset nobody was calling the closure temporary.

Chapter Forty-One

The Gate

On the fifth morning Sela woke to feet moving in rhythm.

Not marching. Climbing.

She went to the concealed gallery before Wilda came for her. The window was already crowded with seniors standing back from the slit. Wren knelt beneath it with one board on the floor, recording times. Tomas stood beside her. Neither spoke to Sela.

The path filled from edge to rock.

Roderick's count stopped once near the east edge. Hessa Morn stood there with an empty grain sack under one arm. A woman stood there with two younger girls beside her.

The two women saw each other.

The woman drew the smaller girl against her coat. Hessa turned back toward the food line. Roderick moved on.

Company marks showed above heads: blue cloth for water, a split board for store, red cord for fire. The marks rose and dipped as people climbed. Row speakers walked near the front because they had spoken before. Behind them came households who believed the speakers would be received. Farther down, Sela could see only compressed color and faces turned uphill.

Roderick was outside the gate.

He had gone down before the crowd reached the elbow. With Brem and twelve company workers he opened a lane along the rock side. They linked arms at first, then used a rope when the front thickened.

"Back to the turn," Roderick shouted.

The wind tore half the words away.

He faced uphill when he spoke. People below saw the red rescue cloth at his shoulder and moved toward it.

Brem pulled at his sleeve. Roderick turned and faced downhill. He raised both arms and pushed the air away from himself.

For a moment the front stopped.

Sela could see the pause travel badly. The first ranks leaned back. The ranks behind continued. A company mark tilted. Someone laughed or screamed; at that distance she could not separate the sound.

Inside the yard, novices stood with staves. Osric told them to keep the wicket clear. One boy shifted his grip so often the wood tapped the stone.

The gate leaves bowed inward at the seam though nobody at the front appeared to be striking them.

Roderick moved down the lane.

He bent to a person on the ground. Sela saw a grey sleeve, one boot, the back of a bare head. Roderick shouted over his shoulder. His arm pointed down.

People followed the direction of his body, not his hand.

The lane closed behind him.

"No," Brem shouted.

Sela heard that word.

Roderick got both hands under the fallen person's arms. He lifted. The body rose halfway. A second person reached to help. Then five. From below, the movement looked like an advance.

The crowd came forward.

The seam struck shut with a flat wooden sound.

A row speaker at the front turned sideways. Her cheek pressed against the oak. Her mouth moved. The man behind her had both hands above his head, palms against the gate, not pushing so much as keeping his chest free. A child vanished between two coats.

Sela lost the child.

The view through the slit gave her pieces. A red cord snapping. Roderick's face below the turn, teeth bared with effort. Ice breaking from a boot heel. A stave thrust through the wicket and pulled back before it touched anyone. The yellow cap of the infant, still caught on a kitchen girl's apron behind Sela.

The pressure changed.

People near the edge turned their shoulders toward the drop. One went down out of sight. Another caught the rock with both hands. A company worker climbed over the rope rather than under it and tore his coat from neck to waist.

"Open," someone inside said.

Roderick had reached the gate. He put his back against the outer leaf and tried to make space around the fallen person. His right arm disappeared between bodies. Brem caught his wrist.

The two men pulled in opposite directions.

Roderick's shoulder moved where a shoulder should not.

He made no sound Sela could hear. His mouth opened. Brem's face changed.

The press eased one pace and came on again.

Tomas was beside the wicket now, shouting that the gate opened inward. Osric had the peg out. Four novices lifted the bar. The leaf did not move. Weight held it in place from the other side.

Wren's chalk broke. She continued with the shorter piece.

Then the rear began to understand.

The company marks turned. A voice below repeated *back* until other voices took it. The word arrived unevenly, water to store, store to fire, one row after another. People at the elbow pressed into the rock to make half a body of space. Brem and the rope workers dragged Roderick sideways. The fallen person came with him, then did not.

The path emptied by inches.

Sela looked for the child again.

She found a small boot without a leg in it. Farther down, someone held a child above the crowd with both arms. She could not tell whether it was the same one.

The whole crush lasted under a quarter of an hour. Wren's broken chalk marks fixed that much. Inside it, Sela lost every measure except the next foot, hand, face, or body disappearing from view.

When the gate could finally open, nobody charged it.

The front ranks had moved back below the turn. Bodies remained against the oak and along the edge. The house opened the left leaf only wide enough for Maren, stretchers, and water. Roderick came through on his feet with Brem holding him around the waist. His right arm hung low and forward. Maren cut his sleeve away.

Ivet was inside the swing of the left leaf with a basket of dry cloth against one hip. Sinnet had sent her for linen and then kept her because hands were needed wherever a body appeared. A novice outside pushed a small boy through the opening. Ivet set down the basket and reached for him.

Something changed at the gate.

Later, Wren could not establish whether the remaining crowd pressure increased, whether one of the men at the leaf pulled too hard, whether a body slid away from the lower edge, or whether the hinge simply released after carrying weight it had never been built to carry.

The oak moved inward another two feet.

Too fast.

Ivet had the child under both arms. She turned him toward the yard. The outer edge of the leaf struck her across the back

and drove her into the stone return beside the passage. The boy fell clear.

Sela saw only pieces from the gallery: a novice dropping his stave, the basket overturning, white cloth across wet flags, a sleeve against the wall with three uneven blue stitches at the cuff.

Then bodies hid the place.

Someone shouted for Maren.

Someone else shouted to hold the leaf.

No one shouted Ivet's name where Sela could hear it.

Sela left the gallery despite Wilda calling after her.

The inner stair was slick with grit carried by watch boots. In the yard the air smelled of wet wool, vomit, blood, and the resin from the forced gate. A novice sat beneath the wall staring at two broken fingers. Another held a stave he had never swung and could not make himself release.

At the opening, a man outside passed in a girl with a split lip. She remained standing and tried to turn back for someone behind her. Tomas caught her shoulders.

"Name?"

She gave one.

"Row?"

She gave two.

Maren shouted that both should be written.

The yard filled with partial people: one shoe, one sleeve cut away, names without households, households searching for

names. Sela lifted a water bucket and was told to carry it to the breathing. She stepped around a body covered to the chest and did not see the old man's face until her return.

No one asked whether she had ordered the gate. No one had breath for it.

"Feel this," she said.

"Two fingers."

"This?"

"One."

"Lift your hand."

His hand moved. The shoulder did not.

"Put it back," he said.

"It is back."

"Then why—"

"Because it is broken in more than one way. Sit down."

He tried to turn toward the gate.

Maren put her knee against his thigh and tied his arm to his body. "You opened the lane. Let someone else carry from it."

Below, counting began.

Whitehart counted bodies brought into its cold room: nine.

Eight had come from outside the gate. The ninth was Ivet, carried from the inner stone after Maren had worked on her long enough that nobody in the yard could pretend the outcome had been immediate.

Maren wrote each on a treatment sheet before Fen received them. Two had no name at first. One was the old man in the

grey coat. One had gone over the edge and been raised by rope. Another died after breathing when the count had begun and was entered by the house. Ivet's name required no inquiry.

The valley counted at the lower treatment shelter: twelve absent after company and household checks.

They checked by row, then by guarantor, then by sleeping place. Two of the absent had no company entry. One sleeping place held cousins who used the same name. A woman believed her brother had been carried into Whitehart; his name did not appear on Maren's house sheets. The house believed three of its dead belonged to those missing lines. The valley could not confirm it before dark.

Both counts were made again.

Nine.

Twelve.

Tomas wrote both and drew no line between them.

Sela found him at the cold-room passage with the two count boards under his arm.

"Which is right?" she asked.

"Both counts record what their keepers can support."

"That is not what I asked."

"I know."

His voice was raw from names.

"If I choose nine, three people vanish from the valley record. If I choose twelve, I enter three deaths without bodies I

can identify. Maren is still checking the treatment shelter. Roan is checking company marks. We may know more tomorrow."

"And if we don't?"

Tomas shifted the boards so their edges no longer rubbed.

"Then I keep both."

Tomas heard how feeble it sounded. He kept both boards.

Chapter Forty-Two

The Washing

At full dark Sela went to the cold room.

She knew Ivet was there before anyone told her.

Not because of a voice.

Not because of the Bell.

Because the basket of dry cloth still lay overturned beside the left gate and one strip had a smear of blood at the edge where no wounded person had been lying when Sela came down from the gallery. Because Sinnet would not look at her. Because Maren had answered three other names and then stopped when Sela asked who had been hurt inside.

Fen had one lamp, two buckets, and nine bodies laid in a row.

Ivet was fourth from the far end.

A cloth covered her face.

Sela did not lift it first.

The left sleeve had been cut open above the elbow. At the cuff, three uneven blue stitches crossed the old tear from the byre nail.

Ivet had refused to let Sinnet redo them.

It holds, she had said.

Sela touched the stitches.

They held.

Something inside her did not.

Maren came through the door with a narrow treatment sheet, a cord and a char nub. She had been moving down the row one body at a time.

She stopped beside the fourth.

"Name?"

Sela knew it.

That was not the problem.

Her mouth would not make the name into something that could be tied to a wrist and counted with the others.

Maren waited.

She did not look at Fen for help.

She did not cover the silence with a description.

"Name?" she asked again, more quietly.

Sela's thumb remained on the three blue stitches.

"Ivet."

Maren wrote it.

One word.

No title. No Called relation. No explanation of what Ivett had believed or whom she had loved.

She tied the sheet to the wrist above the repaired cuff.

Sela almost told her to take it off.

Then she imagined the body carried to burial as *unknown novice, inner gate*.

"Leave it," she said.

Maren nodded and moved to the fifth body.

Sela sat on the floor.

Fen continued wringing a cloth because stopping would have made the room about Sela and he had learned what public grief did to other people's dead.

For a while Sela heard only water.

Then she said, "She promised."

Fen did not ask what.

"She promised she wouldn't go looking for danger."

"Was she?"

Sela looked at the body.

Ivet had been carrying clean cloth.

A child had needed hands.

The gate had moved.

"No."

The word hurt more than blame.

If Ivet had broken the promise, Sela could have been angry.

Instead she had kept it and died anyway.

Sela pressed both hands over her mouth until the first sound passed.

Fen set down the cloth.

He did not touch her.

That was kindness from him.

After a time Sela stood.

"What do I do?"

Fen pointed to the far body.

"Start there."

"Not her?"

"Not unless you want to make the first thing you do the hardest."

Sela hated the practicality and obeyed it.

They washed mud from faces the gallery had shown her only in pieces. The row speaker's cheek carried the grain of the oak. The old man's bootlaces had been knotted with blue thread. A young woman had a fire-company mark sewn inside her cuff. The person Roderick had tried to lift had grit embedded in both palms.

The work was slower where injury had changed the shape of a body. Fen showed Sela how to support a jaw without forcing it closed. At the body from the edge, they cut away a sleeve rather than pull the arm through. Sela found a child's carved game piece in one pocket and placed it beside Maren's wrist sheet.

They reached Ivet last.

Fen lifted the cloth from her face.

There was less damage than Sela had imagined and more than she could bear.

Ivet looked tired. Her mouth was slightly open. One side of her face had gone dark where blood settled. The body had been washed enough for treatment but not for burial. A line of mud remained at the temple.

Sela wet the cloth.

Her hand shook.

"I can do it," Fen said.

"No."

He waited.

Sela cleaned the mud.

She had seen Ivet's face smeared with dung in the byre. Red from laughing. White with fear at first snow. Solemn with a reverence Sela had mistaken for distance because both were easier than understanding what love did when it needed belief.

Now the face did nothing.

Sela wanted Ivet to open her eyes and say the knot was not wrong.

The wanting had no power.

Good, she thought savagely.

At least death did not listen to her.

Then she was ashamed because the dead were not there to receive the thought.

"She laughed too loud," Sela said.

Fen's cloth stopped.

"Yes."

"Everyone looked."

"Yes."

"She hated that."

"No. She pretended to."

Sela looked at him.

Fen's mouth changed.

"I worked near kitchens. She liked being heard."

A laugh escaped Sela and broke halfway out.

Fen looked down.

"There."

"What?"

"Something the Chronicle won't get."

Sela's anger arrived so quickly she nearly struck him.

Fen saw it.

"Not because I will hide it," he said. "Because it is too small for them to know to ask."

The anger fell apart.

Sela looked at Ivet again.

"Good."

They finished washing her.

Sela folded the repaired cuff over Ivet's wrist so the three blue stitches remained visible.

Footsteps came to the door.

Mother Elaine stood there.

For a moment Sela did not recognize her as Mother anything.

Just Alaine Serenel, an old woman holding a walking stick with both hands because one was not enough.

Her eyes found Ivet.

She made no sound.

Sela had wanted this moment since the gate. Some bitter part of her had wanted Alaine to see a body and understand what her order meant.

Now that it came, the wish felt childish and cruel.

Alaine crossed the room.

She stopped beside Ivet.

"I gave her first office," she said.

Sela knew.

Ivet had told the story badly three times.

Alaine touched the blue stitches with one finger.

"She could never mend cloth."

"She thought she could."

"Yes."

Alaine's hand closed over the cuff.

Sela waited for an explanation.

None came.

No defense of closure.

No statement that the gate might have killed more if opened earlier.

No reminder that Ivet had chosen service.

Alaine simply stood beside the body of a novice she had known.

After a long time she said, "I am sorry."

Sela answered, "For what?"

Alaine looked at her.

There were too many possible answers.

For once she did not choose one.

"I don't know where to stop," she said.

Sela believed her.

She still did not want Alaine to touch her.

For the next breath, that was enough.

Alaine left before dawn.

Fen and Sela remained.

When the last bucket became too red to use, Fen carried it out and returned with clean water.

He moved one hand aside at the rim, leaving room for Sela's cloth.

Five months earlier he had asked her never to say his name again.

She had kept the promise until other people gave him another one.

Now they worked without names.

Outside, Whitehart and the valley continued counting nine bodies and twelve missing.

Inside, Ivet remained one person.

Chapter Forty-Three

The Keeper

At dawn the lamp had burned down to a blue-rimmed pool.

Fen trimmed it without asking Sela to move. She had fallen asleep sitting against the far wall, her sleeves still rolled, both hands red from cold water. When the wick caught again, she opened her eyes.

Nine bodies remained between them.

Washing had made them recognizable. It had not made them ready.

Fen went to the treatment sheets. Maren had tied one to each wrist with narrow cord, using names where she had them and physical marks where she did not. *Jorin Pell, coast row, grey coat, received without breath. Lessa Marr, fire company, left cuff red cord. Ivet, Whitehart novice, inner gate stone, crush injury. Unknown man, perhaps west relay, old break of little finger.* The sheets recorded crushing, cold, broken ribs, loss from the edge, and the few treatments attempted before death was certain.

One name had been corrected twice.

Sela came to stand beside him. She pointed to the last spelling and then toward the young woman with the fire mark.

Fen shook his head. He showed her the company sign inside the cuff, then the different row mark sewn into the hem. Two records. One body. Maren had kept both and drawn no conclusion.

Sela took the chalk. On the slate above the table she copied both forms as carefully as she could from Maren's letters. She wrote slowly, tongue caught against one tooth. When she finished, she looked to Fen.

He added a line between the names and the two marks. Not an answer. A way not to separate them.

Sela nodded.

They dressed the dead in dry cloth from the house store. There were not nine complete sets. Fen cut two torn shirts into binding strips. Sela mended one sleeve with black thread and another with white when the black ran out. On the old man, the only clean coat was too short. Fen left his blue-threaded bootlaces visible so the valley could know him by something it had seen.

By second office, Tomas came to the door.

He did not enter. He set a burial board on the floor, along with nine small wood tags and a jar of ink. His eyes passed from Fen to Sela and then to the finished row.

"Maren will return before noon," he said to Sela. "The names must not be entered from one count only."

Sela looked at Fen.

Tomas followed the look. Pain crossed his face, quick and private, and still he did not address the man who held the

names.

Fen picked up the burial board and shut the door.

Sela stayed until the last tag was tied. Before leaving, she washed the two buckets, wrung the cloths, and placed them on the shelf in the wrong order. Fen changed them after the door closed.

He found a heel of bread beneath her folded cloak.

It might have been Sinnet's. It might have been Sela's untouched portion from the first closed-gate meal. No mark identified the giver. Fen ate half standing at the table and wrapped the rest for later. Anonymous food had become the house's most practiced way of caring for him. He could resent it and still be hungry.

Maren arrived before noon with ink frozen thick in its vial. She warmed it under her arm and compared every wrist sheet against Fen's slate. When she needed the body turned, she showed the motion with both hands. When she needed a mark located, she touched the same place on her own sleeve. They completed the work without her addressing him.

At the corrected fire-company name, Maren read both forms aloud to Tomas in the passage.

"Which one do you enter?" he asked.

"Both until her row comes."

"Fen's slate has a joining line."

"Then preserve the line."

They discussed his work one pace from him as if the distance were a wall. Fen kept trimming cord. When Tomas thanked Maren, he looked toward Fen and stopped short of the second name.

Fen had believed five months would dull that pause. It had made him better at predicting it.

The room smelled of wet wool, lamp fat, and the bitter leaf Maren used on skin that would not heal.

Fen had not been spoken to in five months.

Bread appeared. Tools were left where he could find them. Work entered the day through glances, gestures, doors held open, and objects placed at the edge of his reach. He had learned which novice wanted the north lamps and which forgot the wax. He had learned the difference between a person looking through him and a person looking at him with no lawful way to begin.

He had also begun saying names in his head while he worked.

Three hundred and more, row by row. He never omitted Col. On bad nights he put his own name into the missing span and listened to the silence around it.

That evening he carried the nine treatment sheets to the wall of the dead. None of the bodies belonged in the niches. Whitehart would bury them below the gate after the valley and house counts had been read together. Until then, the sheets remained in Fen's custody because the cold room remained his.

He placed them beneath a stone weight on the listening table.

Sister Wilda entered after the lamps were lowered.

Fen heard her stop in the arch. He continued wiping old wax from the north row. She stood there long enough that the rag dried in his hand.

"Fen," she said.

The sound went through him before meaning reached it.

He set the wax knife down. His fingers missed the table edge and the knife struck stone.

"You should be careful, Sister," he said. "There is a rule."

"I know."

"You wrote it."

"Part of it. Turn around."

Wilda had looked unchanged at the gate: upright, clean, hands folded while the yard broke around her. She did not look unchanged now. Her habit was buttoned wrong at the throat. A bandage showed beneath one cuff where a rope had stripped skin from her palm. She had brought no lamp.

"Sit," she said.

She lowered herself to the flags against the wall. Fen remained standing until she looked at the stone beside her. Then he sat far enough away that their sleeves did not touch.

"You are twenty-four," she said.

"Twenty-five in spring."

"At twenty you had lung-fever. I sat with you two nights."

"I remember."

"You have never said so."

"There wasn't a rule yet. I still didn't know how."

Wilda looked at her bandaged hand. "I mention it because I am about to use you, and because I would like you to know that use is not all I have felt."

Fen waited.

"I walked Col to the high line," she said.

"Everyone knows. You keep the rite."

"He did not reach it."

The north draft pressed through the arch.

Wilda described the second bend. Snow above the knees. Col without food for two days because the Given Back fast before the walk, whether anyone orders them or not. Seventeen years old and too light inside his winter clothes.

"He went down," she said. "First to one knee, then both. I spoke the strengthening words. He put his hands in the snow."

Her voice remained level.

"He said, *I don't want to.*"

Fen's own hands closed over his knees.

"Nothing else?"

"Nothing. Not his mother. Not innocence. He said it as if I had asked him to get out of a warm bed. Then he put his face down."

Wilda had been forty-five and strong. She lifted him over one shoulder.

Not upward.

She carried him across the east shoulder and onto the neck. She knew a keeper's path that avoided the visible crest. She crossed bare rock where wind had scoured the snow thin, then descended until the last trees closed around them.

"There is a stream about one mile below," she said. "The path crosses it on flat stones. Beyond that it divides. I have never taken either branch."

She set Col down under the pines. She gave him her cloak and the bread hidden in her rite bag. She told him that if he returned, her life would be forfeit, his mother's house might be punished, and every later mercy in the rite would become suspect.

"I frightened a starving boy after saving him," Wilda said. "I made him responsible for the cost of my choice. Then I told him to go east."

"Did he?"

"He walked until the trees hid him. I did not follow."

She came back alone and told Whitehart that Col had continued into the snow.

Merta began standing below the elbow with his coat.

"You let her," Fen said.

"Yes."

"For sixteen years."

"For one year. Then for another."

Wilda raised her wrapped hand and opened the fingers with care.

"In the second winter I could have told her. In the third I had another chance. She stood close enough to touch. I chose silence each time. Sixteen winters are not one act."

"Why?"

"Because mercy in that rite can make the next judgment easier."

Fen looked toward the unfinished names in the wall.

"Explain."

"A tester writes red only if red kills. That knowledge restrains the hand. If the house learns a keeper may release the child, a kind tester can tell himself the red will not truly kill. He enters it sooner. Later, a less kind Mother appoints a keeper who does not release. The judgment has grown easier, but death has not gone."

"So you made Merta grieve to protect a future rule."

"I made her grieve because I was afraid I had turned a lethal rite into a hidden pardon controlled by one person. I may have been wrong."

"You could have told Alaine."

"And asked her to make one forbidden mercy into procedure?"

"You could have told Merta in the dark."

"She would have gone east."

"Of course she would."

"She would have asked for him at every road house. Within a season the account would return. Col might be found. I might be hanged. More importantly, the next tester would know survival was possible."

Fen stood.

"You do not get to put *more importantly* after her son."

Wilda received the words without moving.

"No," she said. "I do not. I did it anyway."

The honesty offered him no place to strike.

He walked to the treatment sheets and put his palm on the stone holding them. Nine named or partly named bodies. Maren's record gave each a line someone could use. His own line remained unfinished after four words.

"Why tell me now?"

Wilda's eyes moved to his hand.

"You know."

"Say it."

"Because your testimony cannot compel anyone."

The words were delivered in her rule voice.

"You cannot swear before the house. You cannot enter a witness line. Your account cannot reopen Col's page or expose a keeper through ordinary process. If you repeat this, Whitehart may dismiss it without breach."

Fen laughed once. The sound returned from the niches.

"You wanted a hole."

"Yes."

"And the house made one."

"Yes."

"You waited until the hole was old enough to carry your secret."

Wilda's face tightened. "I waited until nine bodies entered your room and understood I had no right to die with another name withheld. Then I chose the safest person for myself. Shame did not prevent it."

"You called me by name to use the part of me the name cannot repair."

"Yes."

Fen turned away from her.

The wall held names he had kept clean, ordered, and lit. He had wanted one person to trust him with something that mattered. Perrin had trusted him as a source. Halvard had written him as a worker and crossed him out. Now Wilda gave him the largest hidden act in Whitehart because no accepted record could carry his voice.

"Under the last trees," Wilda said behind him. "The stream is one mile down. Flat stones. Two branches after."

He heard her rise slowly from the flags.

"I do not know whether he lived to reach the stream," she said. "I know only that he was alive when I stopped seeing him."

She left through the arch.

Fen remained by the treatment sheets.

He went back to the cold room because the secret felt too large for the listening hall.

The bodies did not receive it. They had their own unfinished claims. He checked the tags, moved the old man's coat hem so it covered one bare ankle, and replaced the stone on the paired fire-company names.

Wilda's account offered him several uses.

He could tell Alaine and watch the rule refuse him. He could wait four years, find Perrin at the Jubilee, and trade the keeper's path for the entered line Perrin had once implied might be possible. He could give the route to a singer and make Whitehart deny it in public. He could say nothing and keep one thing the house wanted but could not take.

Each use made Col smaller.

Each also kept Merta below the stone.

Fen unfolded the heel of bread. He ate the second half though it had gone hard. Then he took his small road bag from beneath the work shelf and put in a dry shirt, a cup, and the few marks he had never found a place to spend.

He did not know whether he meant to cross the neck or only reach Merta's door.

For the first time since his trial, the difference belonged to him until morning.

He tried to imagine carrying the account to Perrin, then remembered the empty guest cell. He imagined a public hall stopping for him. He imagined Merta's face if the story were

true, and if it were not, and if there were no remaining difference anyone could prove.

For years he had wanted a truth valuable enough to buy his way back into the world.

The truth was here.

He did not want to own it.

Fen left through the wicket because the list could not decide what to do with him.

The gate order named house members permitted outside on treatment, water, burial, and negotiation work. It named camp representatives admitted to the first yard. It named the dead, after both counts, without reconciling them.

Fen appeared nowhere.

At first light he came to the wicket in his coat with a small bag over one shoulder. Two novices kept the watch. The older was Daven, who had slept in the bed beside Fen's until Fen's trial and had once broken Fen's nose with a practice stave. Daven's novice grey was as carefully arranged as Fen remembered: cuffs turned to the same width, belt knot centered, nothing on him admitting that a rule might arrive crooked.

Daven looked at the list.

Then he looked at Fen.

He could not ask where Fen was going. He could not order him to remain by an authority whose record did not contain him. After a long pause he lifted the bar and stood aside.

Fen passed through.

The gate shut behind him with less sound than the bar.

From the gallery the camp had been roofs, smoke, lines, and movement. At ground level it was people trying to continue tasks whose reasons had changed.

The water company still changed its watches. One trough had cracked in the freeze, and a girl plugged it with wool while two adults argued over whether repair credit would survive the winter. The waste carts moved because stopping them would make Maren's predictions arrive sooner. At the ovens, guarantors cut loaves with cord so no knife could be accused of choosing a larger share.

The settlement was not dying in one visible way.

It was running out of small things. Dry kindling. Salt. Lamp oil. Patience at the water turn. Room on Maren's treatment sheets. Certainty that a cousin missing from one company list was dead rather than sleeping under another roof.

At the firebreak a company meeting had become a funeral argument. One family wanted to burn the empty sleeping mat of a missing man. His guarantor refused because no body had been returned and because the mat still carried a ration claim. A child sat on the rolled mat eating flour paste from two fingers.

Farther on, Brem tried to lift a water barrel alone. Roderick would once have taken the other handle. Now Roderick sat under Maren's shelter with his right arm bound to his ribs, shouting instructions he could not demonstrate. The barrel

tipped. Half its water went into the lane. Six people dropped with cups before the mud took it.

Brem kicked the empty barrel and then apologized to it.

Fen nearly laughed. The laugh stayed behind his teeth.

Nine names had gone up to Whitehart.

Twelve were spoken below.

Jeren Tesk was sentenced on Thursday.

At the lower treatment shelter a woman asked Fen whether he had seen her brother in the cold room. He knew the face she described. The man had been entered under a different family name.

Fen stopped.

The woman saw his leather apron and waited.

He could answer. The rule against speech belonged to Whitehart, not her. But a word from him might move one of the missing lines from twelve toward nine, and he did not know whether Maren or Tomas had already corrected the custody.

"Ask Maren for the wrist sheets," he said. "Both names. Do not let anyone erase one."

The woman stared as if the wall had spoken. Then she ran toward the shelter.

Fen continued down.

Merta's house stood beyond the last planned row. Its roof leaked at the eastern edge. The garden had become a strip of cabbage stalks and black mud. Col's coat hung on a peg inside the kitchen window.

Merta opened the door before he knocked a second time.

"You're the one who brought the Herald," she said.

"Yes."

"Come in. You'll be the first person from that gate to ask."

"I'm not here from the gate."

"That improves you. Not much."

Her kitchen was cold and exact. One chair had a cushion. The other did not. A small fire burned under a kettle with no steam yet. Fen removed his cap and remained standing.

Merta put one piece of wood on the fire.

"Say the first thing," she said.

"I sold Sela to Perrin."

Merta turned.

"Not for money," Fen said. "That would sound better now. He used my name. He asked what the seniors had never asked. I told him Sela was frightened, that she did not believe her own words, what she said at the wall, what Alaine did in the trial room. He built two accounts. In one, her word is law. In the other, she is an uncertain girl the house uses. I gave him what he needed for the second."

"Why tell me?"

"Because the next thing comes from the same mouth."

He told her about Harl's route as he understood his own part in it. Perrin's notes. Bryn's bookings. Harl's pride. Sela's ordinary warning turned sacred. The early thaw. Fen's willingness to trade private fear for a seat at a table.

"I did not push him down a mountain," Fen said. "I still helped make the road he died on."

Merta folded her arms. "You've come to confess to the wrong mother."

"I know."

"Do you?"

"No," he said after a moment. "Probably not."

The kettle began to tick.

"Now the second thing," Merta said.

Fen set his cap on the table.

He told the story in Wilda's order.

The fast. The second bend. Col on his knees. The strengthening words. Wilda lifting him and carrying him across the shoulder instead of toward the high line. The neck. The last trees. Her cloak and two days of bread. The warning that return would destroy more than the keeper. The path down to a stream one mile below. Flat stones. Two branches.

Merta did not interrupt.

When Fen reached the sixteen winters, her face changed.

"She stood in front of me," Merta said.

"Yes."

"Every year."

"Yes."

"She told me not to speak his name."

"Yes."

Merta took the kettle off before it boiled. She did not pour.

"Why should I believe you?"

"You shouldn't."

She looked at him sharply.

"I cannot swear. I cannot enter witness. Wilda chose me because I am the one person she could tell without making the story usable. If you take this to Whitehart, she may deny it. Tomas cannot enter it from me. Alaine need not hear it."

"Would Wilda deny it?"

Fen thought of the bandage, the wrong button, the flat admission.

"I don't know."

"Then give me something. The cloak. A mark. A place Col named."

"I have none."

"A letter?"

"None."

"A witness?"

"Only me."

Merta struck the kettle down on the table. Water jumped from its spout.

"That is not only. That is nothing. You came here knowing it was nothing."

"Yes."

"What do you want?"

Fen looked at the cushioned chair, the coat in the window, and the wet line spreading from the kettle.

"I wanted you to have the choice Wilda kept."

"That is what you tell yourself."

"Yes."

"What do you want?"

He tried to find the answer he had used with Perrin: a name, a place, a person looking at him. All of it was true. None belonged as payment here.

"Nothing you can give me," he said.

"Everybody wants something."

"Then I want not to be the last place this stops."

Merta turned away.

For a while the only sound was water dripping from the table to the floor.

"What did he say?" she asked.

"Who?"

"My son. On his knees. You skipped it."

Fen had not meant to. He had carried the sentence down the mountain and around the treatment shelter and through the door. At the moment of giving it, fear had moved him past it.

"Wilda spoke the strengthening words," he said. "He said, *I don't want to.*"

Merta gripped the table edge.

"Say it as she said he did."

"I don't know his voice."

"Say what she told you."

"He didn't say *I won't*. He didn't beg. He said, *I don't want to*, the way a child says it about leaving a warm bed. Then he put his face in the snow."

Merta sat in the uncushioned chair.

Her hands opened on her skirt.

"That was him," she said.

Fen did not answer.

"Seventeen years I tried to teach that boy to say *I won't*. He never would. I told him wanting was for children and refusing was for men." She pressed the heel of one hand against her mouth. "I was ashamed of him for it."

The fire settled.

Fen moved toward the door.

"Stay," Merta said.

He stopped.

"You've taken my dead son," she said. "Do you understand?"

"No."

"I knew where he ended. I knew who walked him there. I knew what to do each winter. Now he may have died at the stream. He may have taken the north branch. He may have lived one year or sixteen. He may have children who do not know my name."

Her voice remained low.

"A grief has weight. You carry it in one place. This has no place."

She looked toward the window. "Perrin wrote sixteen winters. He can keep the number. I don't know what it counts now."

Fen looked at Col's coat.

Merta followed his eyes.

She took the coat from the peg and laid it across the table. The wool had been patched at one shoulder and brushed thin along the cuffs. Fen had seen it from the gallery, on the elbow, and at first snow. Inside the collar someone had sewn a small black V.

"Would this fit the boy Wilda carried?" she asked.

"I don't know."

"She told you he weighed nothing."

"Those were her words."

Merta lifted the coat with both hands as if testing them. "It was large when he left. He hated the sleeves."

She put it around her shoulders. The hem reached her knees.

"Show me the route again."

Fen used the spilled water on the tabletop. He drew the high line with one finger, then the second bend, east shoulder, neck, last trees, stream. The water broke around old knife cuts in the wood.

"Which branch?"

"Wilda never went past the stream."

"How far to the trees?"

"From Whitehart? A day if the neck is clear. Longer for—"

"For a woman of fifty-two?"

"Yes."

"Say it, then."

"Longer for a woman of fifty-two carrying a coat."

Merta wiped the route away with Col's sleeve. "Good. At least one of you can still answer a question."

"I'm sorry."

"I know. That was the worst part of you in the spring. It remains the worst."

She took two cups from the shelf.

"Sit down."

Fen sat in the cushioned chair before realizing which one she had given him. He stood again.

"Sit," Merta said. "I can resent a cushion without wasting it."

He sat.

She poured the water though it had not fully boiled. The drink tasted of old mint and iron.

"Will you go east?" Fen asked.

"I am fifty-two."

"That was not my question."

"It is part of my answer."

She looked toward the window. "If I go and find nothing, I will have changed sixteen years of standing into years of walking. If I stay, I will know I chose not to look. You think giving a choice is always kinder because you have had so few."

Fen put both hands around the cup.

"I thought it should be yours."

"Perhaps it should. That does not make it kind."

Merta left the coat around her shoulders while they drank. Once she asked what lay beyond the neck. Fen told her only what he knew: pines, a stream, two branches, and land hidden from Whitehart's high line. He did not turn the gaps into hope.

"Did he have boots?" she asked.

"Wilda did not say."

"Did she give him fire?"

"She did not say."

"Was he ill?"

"Only weak from fasting, as she told it."

Each missing detail opened another place where Col might have ended. Merta asked until the questions began repeating. Fen answered the repetition each time.

They sat until the fire needed more wood. Merta did not add any.

When Fen rose, the camp outside had gone grey with evening. He put on his cap and lifted the small bag he had never opened.

"You had nothing to gain by coming," Merta said.

"No."

"Do not agree too quickly. People gain strange things from hurting themselves in front of witnesses."

He waited.

"But you told me what you sold before you asked me to value what you carried," she said. "That matters a little."

Fen reached for the latch.

"Fen."

His hand stopped.

Wilda had used the name as a key to a room where she could unload a secret. Perrin had used it as an offer. Merta said it as if she wanted the person at the door to know she meant him and no one else.

"That is your name?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Go home before the upper path freezes, Fen."

She did not say it again.

She did not need to.

The name did not alter the list waiting at the gate or reopen his unfinished page. Fen knew that before he stepped outside. He also knew he would not carry Wilda's account to Perrin, a singer, or a Whitehart table in exchange for either thing. Merta had received it. He would not sell it onward.

At the gate Daven was still on the wicket. He checked the same list, found the same absence, and lifted the bar.

Fen returned through the gap no office had intended to make.

He went to the listening room and lit the north lamps. The third did not need new oil. He filled it anyway, cleaned the spill with a rag, and began the row from the first name.

Col remained in order.

The story did not enter the book.

Chapter Forty-Four

The Divided Report

Wren began with the gate because timber did not improve its memory.

Six days after the crush, the left leaf still carried a pale oval where the row speaker's cheek had pressed through rain and grit. The right leaf scraped at the bottom. Both opened inward. The upper hinges sat deeper than the lower pair, giving each leaf a small twist before it moved.

She measured the leaves closed, half-open, and held against weight.

Brem supplied water barrels for the last measure. His left hand could manage the rope. Roderick stood nearby with his right arm bound flat against his chest and argued about the placement.

"The weight was here," he said.

"You were outside the gate."

"I could feel the leaf."

"Through which part of you?"

Roderick looked down at the sling. "Mostly that."

Wren marked *Roderick estimates pressure at outer center while his right shoulder was trapped below that point*. She did

not write *the weight was here*.

He read the line upside down.

"You make it sound uncertain."

"It is uncertain."

"My shoulder isn't."

"That is why it goes under harm."

He disliked the answer and helped move the barrel anyway.

At the turn below the gate, rain had washed the flour lane away. Two rope burns remained on the rock. Wren measured the distance from the gate seam to the first narrowing, from the narrowing to the elbow, and from the elbow to the place where one body had gone over the edge. She marked the surviving ice in shadow and did not extend it to places already thawed.

The camp children followed her until she asked one to hold the end of the cord. Then nine wanted the work. She chose two, gave each a separate end, and spent half an hour discovering that they had shortened every measure by moving closer together whenever the cord pulled.

"You said hold it," the older girl protested.

"I did. I failed to say where."

Wren set pegs for their feet and took the measures again.

That correction went into the work note. If she omitted her own first error, the second set would appear more certain than it was.

By noon her left hand had gone numb. She warmed it over Maren's treatment brazier while eating cold barley from a cup.

Maren's table stood beneath an awning at the edge of the planned burial ground. Sheets hung from a line above it, not to dry but to keep them out of the mud. Each carried a name, physical description, treatment, witness, and movement after the gate opened.

"These are medical records," Maren said when Wren asked to copy them.

"They are also the only continuous custody between the path and the counts."

"That does not make them yours."

"No."

Maren waited for an argument. Wren did not give one.

"What do you need?" Maren asked.

"Which people were alive when first examined. Which crossed into Whitehart. Which remained below. Which names changed between the wrist sheets and the burial board. I do not need flux history, prior injury, pregnancy, or household dispute."

Maren untied one sheet from the line. "The prior injury distinguishes Jorin Pell from his cousin. The household dispute explains why Lessa Marr had two row names. If you remove everything that can harm them later, you may also remove what lets their people identify them now."

"Then the separation must be by use, not by fact."

They made two columns.

The first held information required to identify, treat, or return a person. The second held information whose future uses Maren could already foresee: ration exclusion, work fitness, inheritance dispute, blame for contagion, debt collection against a household marked as ill.

Some facts entered both.

Wren disliked that. The paper did not change to accommodate her dislike.

Maren let her copy the custody lines and none of the treatment detail. Wren entered the withheld categories by name so a future reader would know that absence had been chosen rather than overlooked.

The counts remained nine and twelve.

Whitehart's nine were bodies received through the wicket and prepared in the cold room. The valley's twelve were absences remaining after the company, sleeping-place, and household checks. Three missing people might correspond to three of the bodies. One body carried two names. Two missing people had no valid company entry. No surviving witness could join all three lines without using an assumption another careful witness rejected.

Wren wrote:

The counts measure different custody states and cannot presently be harmonized without converting probable identification into observed identity.

She crossed out *presently*. Crown-watch would read it as a promise.

The statement became:

The counts measure different custody states. House count: nine bodies. Valley count: twelve absences. The relation between the counts remains unsupported in three disputed cases.

It was less satisfying and more accurate.

She interviewed the front, middle, and rear separately.

The row speaker remembered asking for the gate to open and then losing the ability to breathe. She remembered no blow. A store-company worker remembered the retreat word reaching him from below and believed the front ignored it. A woman from the coast said the rear did not hear *back* until company marks began turning. One novice remembered a stone striking the leaf. Four people remembered no stone. Two remembered a stave raised. The novice holding that stave said he raised it to keep the wicket clear and never struck. A man with a broken collarbone said a stave struck him. He could not identify the hand or whether the wood came from inside the gate.

Brem remembered Roderick opening the lane.

"He told them down," Brem said. "Then he went up."

"Why?"

"Somebody fell."

"Could the rear see the fallen person?"

"No."

"Could they see Roderick?"

"The red cloth. His shoulders."

"Did they follow him?"

Brem rubbed both hands over his face. "They moved when he moved. I cannot tell you what each thought."

Wren wrote exactly that.

Roderick remembered shouting *back*. Sela had heard Brem shout *no*. Tomas remembered the gate leaf refusing to open after the bar came free. The hinge measures supported him. The pressure marks supported more than one arrangement of bodies. The remaining ice supported loss of footing in the shade and did not prove where any particular person fell.

At the end of four days Wren possessed conditions and sequence.

The clean sentence still refused her.

Her commission wanted a form usable beyond Whitehart: cause, responsibility, preventable condition, precedent. Blackcrest wanted an account that could survive hostile reading. Blackthorn required her not to claim more support than she held. The future reader wanted a single line and would reward whichever writer supplied one.

Wren began four sections instead.

Observation. The gate opened inward. Notice did not precede closure. The camp ration stopped without equivalent outward release. A partial negotiation occurred after the bar was set. The prepared retreat lane did not remain open below the first narrowing. Sela remained out of sight. Rain, north wind, ice, crowd depth, company movement, and limited visibility were separately supported.

Inference. Each condition increased pressure or reduced retreat in ways supported by comparison, not direct sight of the entire crowd. Roderick's forward movement likely changed movement behind him. The evidence did not establish a command to advance or a uniform reason for following.

Use. Whitehart could use Orla's ruling to describe closure as lawful. The camp could use Roderick's rescue history to describe his body as instruction. Blackcrest could select either nine or twelve as proof of the other side's dishonesty. None of those uses became false merely because it was incomplete.

Harm. Nine bodies entered Whitehart. Twelve people remained absent in the valley count. Roderick lost ordinary use of his right shoulder. Named treatment records protected identity and exposed illness, work capacity, kinship, and debt. A closed source key could expose the person whose information made several reconstructions possible.

That last line sent her back to Halvard's maintenance sheets.

He kept them in a waxed packet near the water intake. Each repair had a date, company mark, materials used, and the hand responsible. One line carried a heavy crossing stroke:

Overflow route identified by Fen, keeper of the north wall.

The name remained legible beneath cancellation.

Halvard stood behind her while she read.

"He told me to take it out," he said.

"You crossed it."

"Ink does not unwrite because someone regrets the line."

"Why retain the sheet?"

"Because the overflow works. If it fails next spring, the next person needs to know where the route begins."

"Does the next person need Fen's name?"

Halvard looked toward the upper wall. "No."

"Did you know the cancellation left it recoverable?"

"Yes."

He did not ask Wren to excuse him.

The maintenance line matched a source mark in her own trial reconstruction. In Month Two she had reconstructed Sela's trial after Sela refused to perform it again. Tomas supplied chair direction. Alaine supplied procedure. Fen supplied the location of Sela's seat and the sequence of Alaine's touch. Wren had labeled him *wall source F* in the public working copy and kept the key in the commission packet.

The key could now be solved from Halvard's sheet.

Wren remembered two blankets outside the lower stores and a girl telling her the warning had given them time to pack.

She spent that night in the lower workroom with both documents on the table.

Her first act at Whitehart had prevented the reclosed grave from proving prior knowledge. It had also turned Sela's refusal into a problem of source selection. Wren had measured the benches, marked the sightlines, and built the trial without Sela's consent because the observations were available from other people.

The reconstruction was accurate enough to damage her again.

Perrin had already used Fen. The House had erased him and then retained the erasure. A complete Blackthorn source key would make the use durable.

Wren could remove the maintenance sheet from Halvard's packet. That would break custody and deprive the waterworks of its repair history. She could scrape Fen's name. That would alter an original. She could leave everything and describe the exposure under harm. That would warn the very reader most able to exploit it.

She sealed the trial reconstruction and source key in a separate wrapper.

Across the wrapper she wrote:

Withheld from certified submission because source disclosure repeats refused access and creates foreseeable personal harm. Observation derived from this material is excluded where independently unsupported.

Then she rebuilt every section without it.

The chair measures went. Alaine's touch sequence went. Fen's account of Sela's fear went. Several comparisons weakened. One conclusion about the hall's turning sequence no longer met support and disappeared entirely.

Wren retained Halvard's original in his custody and copied only the maintenance function, with the crossed personal line omitted and the omission named.

At dawn she completed the commission notice.

Withholding the source key meant the report did not possess certified custody from observation to conclusion. Crown-watch could receive it as divided evidence and decline it as a Blackthorn finding. Her remaining expense authority ended with submission. No further travel, copy labor, seal, or witness payment could be charged to the commission. She could not claim the report complete.

She wrote each loss in ordinary hand.

There was no reason to make sacrifice legible as virtue.

Tomas witnessed the package without witnessing the sealed contents. Maren signed only the treatment custody columns. Halvard signed the maintenance copy and added that the original retained a cancelled personal attribution. Roderick made a left-hand mark beside his account and complained that it looked like a dead insect.

"It identifies this copy," Wren said.

"So would a dead insect."

"Then the mark is well chosen."

He laughed and immediately caught his sling with the motion.

The east shelter still stood.

Wren went there with the sentence folded once inside its cover. Hessa was cutting the rotten ends from three onions. She wiped the knife on her skirt before taking the paper.

Wren waited while she read. Anger had always slowed Hessa's reading. This took longer.

At the bottom, Hessa folded the paper along the crease Wren had already made. She held it out.

"Do you want a copy for your papers?" Wren asked.

Hessa shook her head.

Wren took the sheet.

Hessa picked up the knife again. One onion was sound beneath the first two skins. She cut those away and put the good half into a pot.

Wren returned to the workroom and added one line beneath the delivery entry:

The sentence was delivered to Hessa Morn. She did not keep it.

She did not add a reason.

Wren left the report on the outgoing table.

It could prevent the claim that the gate failed because an armed camp attacked Whitehart. It could prevent the claim that lawful closure made the deaths unavoidable. It could show that conditions, choices, tools, weather, and prior acts interacted.

It could not give the commission the precedent it had purchased.

From the road overlook, wheel noise entered the valley.

The first carts appeared below the ford, then a second string behind them. Grain covers were roped high and dry. Riders moved beside the wheels. Camp workers ran toward the road with company marks raised.

Wren counted the carts once and stopped. The number was already changing as another string came around the lower bend.

She put the sealed source packet inside her own coat.

Below, Nella of Duskport walked beside the leading cart with one hand on the brake rope.

Chapter Forty-Five

That's How You Know

The grain smelled of dust, rope, and summer.

People opened the first cover before the cart had stopped. A store-company guarantor struck their hands away, then put both his own palms on the top sack as if checking that it remained real. Children ran beside the wheels. One crawled beneath an axle for fallen kernels and received three separate beatings from three adults who had never met him.

Sela came down through the wicket with Ansel.

The gate remained barred except for issued passage. The path below it held no crowd now. People had gone to the road, the cart strings, and the firebreak where Roan's companies were making distribution lanes from old shelter poles.

Nella walked at the leading wheel. Mud reached the hem of her good plain coat. She kept one hand on the brake rope during the descent and used the other to point drivers toward the marked store ground. Her factor from Month Six rode behind her with a waxed packet under his coat.

"Fourteen days," Ansel said.

Osric had followed them with his tally board. "From Duskport?"

"No."

"The old route count says twelve."

"The old route count is wrong."

Ansel sounded almost pleased. He liked a correction when it increased the world's obedience to arithmetic, even if it made his prior answer useless.

Before he closed the packet, Ansel copied two dates into the margin of his ration board: the empty-store date from the nine-day estimate, and the arrival date from Nella's first cart receipt. He put one beneath the other and went on to the next correction.

He stopped the factor beside the lead cart.

"Loaded days?"

"Sixteen," the factor said. "One wheel replacement, two ford waits, no lost cart."

"Departure?"

"Two days before Whitehart closed."

Osric looked at the grain strings occupying the road. "Then someone predicted the gate."

"No," said the factor. "Mistress Nella staged grain when the water credit proved the settlement could survive to use it. The first purchase orders went out in Month Six. Road stores assembled portions at three points. We loaded when the north market price turned and the weather still allowed the ford."

He handed Ansel the packet.

Inside were Nella's letters to the local factor, the credit note that had paid for Halvard's fittings and worker food, three road-store receipts, six carriage agreements, and a list of carts promised but not yet arrived.

"The gate did not summon this," the factor said. "It nearly made it late."

Ansel read every date. Then he rubbed the old twelve-day count from his board and entered sixteen.

Two more strings came around the lower bend while he wrote.

The camp did not cheer.

It made a lower sound, breath leaving many bodies at once. Some people sat where they stood. A woman from the west row struck the side of a cart with both hands until a driver asked her to stop frightening the mule. At the burial ground, someone began ringing a cook pot with a spoon. Other pots answered.

By afternoon the planned settlement smelled of boiling grain.

The first pot burned because its owner had forgotten how much water barley required after months of thin flour. The second boiled over. Fire-company workers argued over whether cooking loss belonged to the household, the oven, or the grain issue. A child ate dry kernels, vomited, and tried to eat them again before Maren caught him.

Nella ordered three sacks opened for immediate meal and paid the milling company in grain because its marks could not buy food before distribution. She bought the waste company a

new cart wheel at the price already entered in her Month Six letter. She made Roan's guarantors sign for store custody and refused to let Whitehart's seal replace their names.

Then she climbed onto the tailboard and read the price.

Duskport purchase.

Road-store handling.

Carriage for sixteen loaded days.

Loss and spoilage.

Her margin.

Each number stood on its own line in the open ledger. She held the book for Ansel, Osric, Roan, two camp guarantors, and any trader who wished to compare it.

"I will not make my year from a bad winter," Nella said. "I will also not call work charity. Here is what the grain cost. Here is what the road cost. Here is what I earn. If another string arrives cheaper, buy from it first and tell me why."

Someone asked why they should trust her book.

"You shouldn't," Nella said. "Trust the sums after you have checked them."

Her margin was fair.

It was also larger than any store profit made in the valley that year because the quantity was enormous and because no competing grain had arrived.

Nobody mistook the two facts.

Distribution began by represented row and work company. It went wrong before dusk.

One shelter appeared on both the water and waste lists. Because the shelter already stood on the waste list, the first grain clerk marked its ration claim duplicate and pushed it aside for review. Three households shared a company mark. A family that had left for the south hand point returned when the route stores failed and found its sleeping place reassigned. A guarantor hid his sister's ration under a dead man's name. Roan found the line, removed the extra sack, and left the guarantor in place because changing him would collapse two rows' custody.

"You reward theft," Brem said.

"I preserve tomorrow's count," Roan answered.

"With a thief holding it."

"Yes. Stand beside him."

Brem did, angrily, until midnight.

Sela carried grain measures from the cart to the row table. The work was heavy, repetitive, and ordinary enough that people forgot to watch her for several minutes at a time. Her shoulders burned. Chaff stuck to the wet cuffs of her coat. When a sack split, she went down on her knees with five children and swept kernels from the mud using the edge of her sleeve.

A woman kissed that sleeve.

Sela pulled away too fast and knocked foreheads with her. The woman swore. Sela laughed before she could stop herself. The woman stared, then laughed too, one hand over the bruise.

They finished the sack without holiness.

Sinnet kept the infant on the kitchen board under the stitched row mark and three unverified shelter addresses. She would not enter a mother's name.

The yellow cap hung from the peg nearest the kitchen door because, Sinnet said, damp wool molded in drawers. When weather allowed, she left the door open while bread cooled.

No one inside Whitehart could say whether the woman who had left the basket ever saw it.

At the last cart, a line formed for people who had no coin, tool, beast, or secure work share.

Nella sat on the tailboard with the open-name ledger. She did not ask each person to declare poverty within hearing of the next. A canvas screen made from a cart cover stood beside her. One person entered at a time. Sela took water to the writing table and remained because Nella did not send her away.

The fourth person was Halla.

She had a burn running along the inside of her right forearm and kept that arm behind her back. Before the camp she had worked in a kitchen near the lower coast. Her shelter held one blanket, a cracked cup, and two children who slept in another row whenever the roof leaked.

"I have nothing to trade," Halla said.

"I know," Nella replied.

"No labor promise."

"No."

"No bed agreement. No winter house. No—"

"Sit down."

Halla remained standing.

"I know what men call it when they give food now and choose the price later."

Nella closed the ledger.

"So do I. That is not what I am offering. Four months of grain. No sum entered against you. No interest. No payment date. No claim on your children, bed, labor, or shelter."

"Then why the book?"

"Your name. The amount released. The fact that I did it."

"What will you ask?"

"I do not know. I may ask one day. You may refuse."

Halla gave a short, angry sound. "Nobody refuses the person who kept their children alive."

"Some do."

"How many?"

Nella's hand rested on the closed book. "Not enough."

Halla looked toward Sela as if the Called could decide whether the bargain was clean.

Sela moved the water cup between her hands.

"Your children eat," she said. "Your name stays in her book. Both are true."

Halla waited for more.

There was no more.

"Four months," she said.

Nella opened the ledger and wrote the release without sum, interest, or date. She read the line aloud. Halla could not read it herself. She made Nella read it again, then asked Sela to repeat what she had heard.

Sela did.

Nella signed. Halla touched the shape of her own name, lifted the grain ticket, and began to cry without changing her expression.

Nella called the next person only after Halla had taken the ticket out.

The grain was good.

That night children slept with full stomachs for the first time since the closure. The lower treatment line shortened. An old woman who had given her ration to two grandchildren ate until she became ill and complained about being saved incompetently. Maren told her to complain again in the morning.

The work companies began planning winter instead of burial.

Every one of those things happened because Nella had staged grain, paid carts, accepted risk, and come.

Her ledger filled with names.

On the third day Nella asked Sela to sit in the leading cart.

It had a covered driver's box lined with felt. A small coal pan warmed the floor without smoking. Route ledgers filled a

shelf behind the seat. Nella kept dried orange peel in a tin and put one strip in hot water for Sela.

The smell made the cart feel farther from Whitehart than the road outside it.

"Come to Duskport," Nella said.

Sela held the cup under her nose.

"For what?"

"Work."

"What work?"

"At first, road accounts you cannot read. You would sit beside someone who can and tell them when a route description is nonsense. You know slopes, animals, weather, ration weight, and what a crowd does to a path. We can teach letters. I can give you a room with a door that closes."

"And when people find me?"

"Duskport is full of people who have found something and are trying to sell it. You will be interesting for a season. Then somebody will bring in a two-headed fish."

Sela smiled into the orange steam.

Nella placed a single sheet on the narrow table.

"This is not a gift and not a hidden favor. Six months' paid work. Room included as part of wage. No entry in the open-name obligation book. Either of us may end it with ten days' notice. If you refuse, the refusal is recorded on this sheet and creates no debt. Tomas or Ansel may read it before you answer."

"You prepared a refusal."

"A refusal no one records becomes an invitation to ask again."

For a moment Sela wanted the offer.

Not escape as blank road, but a specific room. A coal pan. Orange peel. Work in which saying a path was wrong might change the path instead of changing the speaker. Letters learned badly at a table where mistakes could remain mistakes. Wages that fit in her own hand.

She pictured the cart turning south with her inside it. She would know where the first night lay. She would eat. Someone would expect her at the other end.

"Do you want me because I know roads?" Sela asked.

"Yes."

"Only that?"

"No. Your presence would open doors, frighten rivals, and make people bring me accounts they otherwise hide. I will use that if you come. I will also pay you for it."

"Would you write about me?"

"Not unless the work required your name."

"Would you sell where I was?"

"No."

"Would you trade it?"

Nella looked at her over the ledger shelf. "I would like to say no quickly. I will instead say that I would not trade it

without asking you, and that you should judge whether asking is enough protection."

Sela placed the orange cup down.

The offer was better than Perrin's. That made it harder, not safer.

"No," she said.

Nella turned the sheet. "Say the line after me. It prevents my clerk from calling this undecided."

"I, Sela of the Light Heights, refuse the six-month work offer from Nella of Duskport. No wage, lodging, secrecy, or future consideration is owed by either side."

Nella wrote the refusal and signed it. Sela could not sign her own name. She made a mark and asked Nella to read the whole sheet back.

Nella did.

Then she poured more hot water over the same orange peel and spoke about the broken ford until Sela's hands stopped shaking.

The offer was not raised again.

Roan brought the Garron reports at the evening meal.

He had gathered them from three separate drivers before allowing the cart companies to combine their route accounts.

"First says the Binder is dead and the people nearest him have not announced it because no recognized office receives the announcement," Roan said.

He held up one finger.

"Second says he lives, no longer speaks, and is carried outside each morning to see the horses. Third says he speaks constantly and the people near him write down every word because no one knows which is the last useful one."

"Which driver?" Tomas asked.

Roan named them, their departure points, and the relays where each report entered the road.

"They cannot all be true," Sela said.

"Not at the same time," Roan agreed.

"Then which?"

"We do not know."

Ansel stopped cutting bread.

"If he is dead, who settles the pending grants?"

"No one yet."

"The marriage compacts?"

"No one yet."

"The road disputes?"

Roan spread his hands.

The gesture was not an explanation of Stormrider or the realm. It was one tired traveler admitting that three roads had brought three incompatible conditions and none carried a seal.

The Bell remained silent.

On the sixth night, people gathered at the fire below the elbow.

Grain had changed the fire. There was bread to pass. Someone had found dried apples in a cart store and cut them

into pieces too small to taste. A pot of thick porridge went around, followed by an argument over whether the spoon should move sunwise. For the first time since the gate, laughter reached the upper path without sounding wrong.

Sela sat near the outside of the circle in a plain cloak.

Tam sat across from her in Harl's coat. The sleeves fitted now.

Corrin of the coast stood to repeat the newest verse. His bad leg made him lean on a split staff. He had a voice built for carrying farther than judgment.

The verse named the trial, the grave, the wet hill, and the gate. It put twelve dead below the oak, then nine in the next line because nine held the meter. People corrected him. He said both numbers belonged to the song.

At the end he lifted his cup.

"And the Called said, *Go where you are not certain. That is where the truth begins.*"

The people nearest him repeated it.

Sela had never said the words.

The sentence was too balanced. It turned uncertainty into a road with a promised end. It sounded like something Perrin would reject in conversation and preserve in a book.

"Stop using that line," Tam said.

Corrin looked at him. "You asked me yesterday."

"And the night before."

"People know it."

"She didn't say it."

Corrin found Sela in the circle. Recognition made him smile.

"Then let her deny it."

Sela stood.

The fire snapped between them. Everyone waited for her mouth.

"I did not say it," she said.

Corrin gave a small bow. "The Called refuses the words. That's how you know they're hers."

Tam crossed the fire.

He did not shout. He struck Corrin once in the mouth. Corrin fell against the pot, carrying the hanging hook down with him. Porridge went across the stones. People surged away from the steam.

Tam followed him to the ground.

The second blow broke Corrin's staff. The third landed after Corrin had stopped trying to rise.

Sela caught Tam's coat. He pulled forward and the old shoulder seam tore in her hands. Sinnet came from the other side. Together they dragged him back.

Corrin rolled onto one elbow. Blood ran through his beard. His jaw moved wrongly when he tried to speak.

Tam saw it and went still.

"I asked him," he said. "Three times."

"You broke him," Sela said.

"He would not stop."

Maren pushed through the circle with her treatment bag. She ordered two people to hold Corrin's head and one to fetch a board. No one knew whether the board belonged to fire, store, or burial. Roderick brought one left-handed and stood over Tam while Maren worked.

The false line moved around the fire in whispers.

Sela heard one woman repeat it to another who had arrived after the blow. By the time Corrin was lifted, the woman said Tam had struck because Corrin denied the words. Someone else said Corrin had demanded Sela prove them. The blood on his face made every version important.

Tam sat on the ground in the torn coat.

Sela knelt in front of him.

"Your father took the neck," she said. "He listened to my warning. The ground failed somewhere else. I did not hear a voice. I told him what any goatherd could see."

Tam's hands were open on his knees. One knuckle had split.

"I know what you are doing," he said.

"Do you?"

"You will not take credit even when it costs you."

"No. Listen to the words."

"I am."

"There was no meaning in his death. There was wet ground, weight, and a rock plate that failed."

Tam's face folded once. He recovered it.

"You came down here to tell me that," he said.

"Yes."

"When you could say anything else."

"Because it is true."

His eyes filled.

"That's how you know," Tam said.

Sela closed her eyes.

Behind her, Maren called for more light. Corrin groaned through the hands holding his jaw. Someone righted the porridge pot. Someone else began scraping food from the cleanest stones back into a bowl because grain was still grain.

Nella's open ledger held Halla's name.

Wren's divided report held two death counts.

The fire now held a sentence Sela had never spoken, witnesses to her denial, and an injured man whose blood would travel with the account.

She rose and left Tam with Sinnet and Roderick.

On the climb to Whitehart, she heard the line repeated behind her.

It no longer required Corrin.

By second office Maren's injury note had become a household entry: Corrin could not carry, cut, or lift. One adult hand had disappeared from the coast shelter's work count, and a neighbor's son was covering water and fuel until his own row called him back.

Chapter Forty-Six

The Blank Page

The false line reached Whitehart before Sela did.

Someone had written it on a grain wrapper and fixed the wrapper beside the wicket with a nail:

Go where you are not certain. That is where the truth begins.

Below it, three hands had added *Sela of the Light Heights*.

The gate boy watched her read.

"Who put it there?" she asked.

"It was there when my watch began."

"Take it down."

He pulled the nail. A strip of oak came away with it. For a moment Sela felt relief.

Then he turned the wrapper over. The same line had been copied on the back in a fourth hand.

"Burn it," she said.

He carried it toward the kitchen fire. Two novices coming through the yard asked to hear the words before it went. One already knew them.

Sela climbed to the wall of the dead and sat facing outward until the cold entered her boots.

She tried corrections. *I did not say it.* Corrin had made refusal proof.

There is no truth waiting at the end of uncertainty. That sounded like another teaching.

Stay where the ground is known. Harl had done that and died.

She stopped putting sentences together.

Tomas sent Sinnet for her at second office.

The Ledger room shutter stood open. Wind moved the lamp flame and lifted the corner of a cloth on the table. Tomas sat with both hands empty. He looked as if he had not slept since the gate, but his writing boards were aligned and his coat was correctly fastened.

"Close the shutter," he said.

Sela closed it.

"Did you burn the wrapper?" he asked.

"The gate boy did."

"I copied it first."

She turned on him.

"Why?"

"Because Corrin was injured after speaking it, Tam asked him to stop, you denied the line in public, and several people now remember the sequence differently. If I record only that the line is false, the injury loses its cause. If I record only the injury, the line gains innocence."

"So it stays."

"Yes."

"Everything stays except what I say."

Tomas received that without defense.

"Not everything," he said.

He unlocked the Ledger chest.

The book required both arms. He lifted it onto the table and turned the old pages with a cloth over his fingers. Brown entries. Black. The small number of red lines that had walked children into snow. Working pages prepared by season and test.

He stopped at one ruled page.

The date of Sela's trial stood at the head.

No name followed it.

No observation. No verdict. No closure mark.

The page was blank.

"That is yours," Tomas said.

Sela put both hands on the table. "You never wrote me."

"I wrote one temporary note. You watched me burn it."

"You tested me."

"Yes."

"The house calls me the Called."

"The house has no entered judgment that permits the word."

The page looked newly made despite the year around it. Along the inner edge, the binding thread had darkened. A faint thumb mark lay below the date where someone—Tomas, perhaps—had held it open many times.

"Osric can write it," Sela said.

"No. Only the person who conducted a test may enter its conclusion. Not Alaine. Not Osric. Not a later Mother and not a Crown-watch order."

"Then after you die it stays blank."

"This test stays blank. Osric may test you again from the beginning. New room. New questions. His own observations. His own entry."

"Would he use your trial?"

"He may know that it occurred. He cannot inherit what I saw. My temporary note is ash. Wren's reconstruction is now withheld from certified submission. Alaine's memory is hers. Fen cannot give admitted testimony."

Sela looked at the blank name line.

"You could write black."

"I could."

"Would that keep them from testing me again?"

"It would confirm you. Whitehart would have an entered Called. Every denial would become humility. Every mistake would require interpretation. The false quotation would gain the Ledger behind it."

"You could write red."

"I could condemn you. I have no evidence that permits it and no certainty that would let me survive the act honestly."

"So you do nothing."

Tomas laid one hand beside the page without touching it.

"I refuse both verdicts. That is not nothing."

"Fen would disagree."

"Yes."

The answer came immediately.

"A blank page protected him from a killing judgment and cost him ordinary life. I called it mercy because mercy sounded better than uncertainty. I know what blankness can do."

"And you choose it again."

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because no honest verdict exists."

Sela waited for more. Tomas made himself provide it.

"And because Whitehart's book is a weapon whether I use black or red. Blankness keeps this house from claiming it judged you. Nothing more."

The shutter latch moved under wind.

"That is a poor gift," Sela said.

"It is not a gift."

"Will they take your office?"

"Likely. Osric has already asked when I will finish."

"What did you tell him?"

"That the page will remain blank for as long as I live."

"He thinks you mean not yet."

"He is wrong."

"And when he understands?"

Tomas looked toward the door.

"He is outside."

Sela turned.

"You invited him?"

"I told him he could hear the answer from me while you were present."

Tomas opened the door.

Osric stood in the passage with Mother Alaine.

Alaine's face changed when she saw the Ledger open. Osric's did not.

He came to the table.

"Brother Tomas."

"Brother Osric."

"Have you concluded the test?"

"Yes."

Osric looked at the empty ruled space.

"Then enter the judgment."

Tomas took the pen from beside the ink.

For the first time since Sela had known him, his hand shook where everyone could see it.

He held the point above the page.

Black would make her true.

Red would make her false enough to punish.

Anything written in between would become a road later people could widen.

Tomas lowered the pen.

Not to the page.

Across it.

The shaft lay over the blank lines. His thumb left a small crescent of ink where it had pressed too hard against the shaft.

"It is finished," he said.

Osric looked at him.

"There is no entry."

"Correct."

"An empty page is not a judgment."

"No."

"Then what have you finished?"

"The test."

The room held still.

Alaine said his name once.

"Tomas."

He looked at her.

She had protected Sela with the Serenel name. She had protected Whitehart with words Sela could not forgive. She knew exactly what institutions could do with a man's hesitation.

"You may defer," Alaine said.

Tomas shook his head.

"I deferred Fen and called it mercy."

He looked at the blank page.

"I will not rename this one."

Osric's jaw tightened.

"Then the Ledger key passes."

"Yes."

There was no ceremony ready for a Tester surrendering office because he refused to use it.

Tomas reached beneath his coat, drew the key from its cord and placed it in Osric's open hand.

The metal looked very small there.

Osric closed his fingers around it.

Osric looked from the key to the blank page.

"At the Jubilee they will ask why this is empty."

Tomas said, "Then you will have Orla's ruling, and the duty to say what it does not prove."

"I may test her again."

"You may ask."

Osric looked at Sela.

She said, "No."

Nothing in the room broke.

Osric had received the office. Tomas had lost it. Sela had still not become an answer.

Alaine looked at the blank page for a long time.

Then she left with Osric.

Tomas closed the door behind them.

Sela touched the table below the blank page. She did not touch the paper.

The empty line did not feel like freedom. It felt like a door Whitehart had declined to close while every road beyond it remained open to other hands.

"I'm leaving," she said.

Tomas shut his eyes once.

"When?"

"Before dawn."

"Which direction?"

"East."

"Do you know the road?"

"No."

He nearly smiled. The expression did not complete itself.

"I could tell Alaine."

"Yes."

"I could ask where you will sleep."

"I don't know."

"Food?"

"I will find some."

"That is not an answer."

"It is the one I have."

Tomas closed the Ledger. He wrapped it and returned it to the chest. The lock remained open.

Osric had the key now.

Tomas did not announce sacrifice. He checked the chest twice and asked Sela whether her boots leaked.

"The left one."

"Sinnet has wax."

"She will ask why."

"She will complain about the boot first. Use the time."

Sela left him beside the open chest.

She found Fen at the wall.

He was replacing the north-row candles in the order of death, not height. The upper cups required a ladder. One rung had split and been bound with rawhide.

Sela waited until he climbed down.

"I'm going east," she said.

"Yes."

"Everyone knows before I do."

"Not everyone. Ansel thinks you are going south with Nella because you asked for boot wax."

"I haven't asked yet."

"Then Tomas has."

Fen scraped wax from his thumb.

"There are three ways over the neck. Do not take the middle. It is the one people use and the first place they will look. Take the ugly way above the reclosed grave. Keep the drop on your left until the ground stops pretending to be a path."

"How far?"

"About a mile of bad judgment. Then bare rock."

"And over the neck?"

"East face. It looks like a drop. Go down to the last trees. Under them there is a track and a stream about a mile below. After the stream, the track divides. Merta calls the eastern branch the Vey road."

"Vey Crossing?"

"Her word. I have not walked it."

Sela studied him. "Merta told you."

Fen's hand stopped on the wax knife.

"Part of it."

Fen gave her no more. Sela did not press him.

"Come with me," she said.

"No."

"You would have a name below the elbow. Merta said it."

"A name in one kitchen is not a portion, oath, wage, road paper, or place to sleep."

"I can carry enough for two."

"That is why I will not go."

He set the knife in the candle box.

"You would be carrying me. I would owe you for the road, the food, the first person who agreed to let me work. I have learned what I do when someone buys me a seat with ordinary kindness. I do not want to test the lesson again on you."

Sela wanted to tell him he had not caused Harl's death. She had told Tam the same and watched him turn it into proof. She kept the sentence.

"The wall is not a life," she said.

"It is work."

"For dead people."

"Three hundred and more names. Nobody else has the whole order. If I leave, the stones remain and the relation between them goes."

"Write it."

Fen looked at her.

"Very funny."

She heard the mistake and laughed despite herself. Fen did too, once, looking down at the candle box.

It was not forgiveness. It was the old shape of them appearing for a breath.

"Your bundle will come apart," he said.

"I don't have one yet."

"It will still come apart. Bring it here before you go."

He climbed the ladder again.

Sela went to the kitchen.

Sinnet had already set boot wax on the table. Beside it lay a cloth bundle of bread, cheese, salt, and two dried apples.

"Tomas said the left boot," Sinnet said.

"He talks too much."

"He talks exactly enough to make other people work. Sit."

Sela removed the boot. The split had reached the inner seam. Sinnet worked wax into it, added a leather patch, and

complained that Sela had spent a year walking like a person trying to punish shoes.

"Take the food," she said.

"The camp—"

"Has grain. You have a neck."

"I can't take house ration while the gate—"

"You can take food from Sinnet, who saved two apples from Perrin's theft and has been waiting to give them to someone less irritating."

Sela put the bundle beside her coat.

She left it there when she went to the yard.

Behind the stable, Roderick stood with Tam and a tied bedroll between them. Tam's right hand was wrapped across the knuckles. Sela stopped before they noticed her.

"Corrin's household is short one working hand," Roderick said.

Tam looked at him.

"First light tomorrow. You report there. Water, fuel, roof work, whatever they put before you. One season."

Tam said nothing.

"Take your own blanket. They do not owe you a bed."

Roderick glanced at the roll at Tam's feet. "Good. Saves time."

He walked past Sela without asking why she had stopped. Tam untied the bedroll, added his winter gloves from the stable peg, and tied it again.

Tam waited near the empty stable with Harl's knife.

The sheath had been cleaned and oiled. A new cord passed through its belt loop. Tam's right hand was bandaged across the knuckles. He held the knife by the sheath and offered it hilt-first.

"He meant you to have it," Tam said.

"He meant you to decide."

"I did."

Sela took the knife.

It was smaller than the memory of Harl using it. The handle carried a shallow cut where his thumb had slipped while teaching Sela to trim roof cord. Tam had sharpened the blade.

"Corrin will live," he said.

"That is not the same as mending."

"No."

He looked toward the lower road. "Are you leaving because of me?"

"No."

"Would you say if you were?"

Sela tied the sheath to her belt. "You would hear whatever you needed."

Beyond him, the tied bedroll remained against the stable wall.

Tam flinched.

She regretted it and did not soften it.

"Do not hit him again," she said.

"I won't."

She could hear the rule forming. She left before either of them added to it.

At the wall Fen retied her empty bundle twice because she had crossed the straps wrong. He tucked the loose end under the knot and pulled until it held.

"Food?" he asked.

Sela looked toward the kitchen.

"I forgot it."

"Go back."

"If I go back, Sinnet will know."

"Sinnet already knows."

"Then she will stop me."

"She repaired your boot."

Sela put the bundle over one shoulder. It contained a spare shirt, a cup, cord, flint, and no food.

Fen opened the candle box and handed her one dried apple.

"Perrin left it."

"Then I don't want it."

"Good. I do."

He ate it while she watched, including the seeds.

"Anything else?" he asked.

Sela had several things. None would survive being said. She shook her head.

"Go on, then," Fen said.

She crossed the yard before first light.

Daven stood at the wicket with the list that had failed to classify Fen. Sela's name appeared under no permitted departure. He saw the bundle, the knife, and the repaired boot.

His hand went to the bar.

Sela waited.

The wicket opened.

Chapter Forty-Seven

East

The Order She Did Not Give

The wicket made less sound than Alaine expected.

She heard the bar lift from the upper gallery, a wooden scrape followed by the brief complaint of the lower hinge. The sound entered her room through the open door and ended there. No bell followed it. No watchman called a name.

Her first thought was not mercy.

It was that the girl had chosen the one hour when every stone in Whitehart carried noise.

Alaine put her bare feet on the floor. The cold hurt. She had slept in her shift with the grey outer dress folded on the chair, but fastening it would take longer than crossing the gallery, and she did not want to miss whatever had already begun. She drew the wool cover from the bed around her shoulders and went out.

The gallery looked over the inner yard. Frost silvered the drain channel. Two lamps remained lit: one at the kitchen passage and one beside the wicket. In their divided light Sela stood with a bundle over her shoulder.

Daven had one hand on the door.

The opening was narrow. Sela turned sideways to pass through it. The knife at her belt caught the lamplight and disappeared.

Alaine stopped with one hand on the stone rail.

A little over two weeks earlier the whole gate had moved against its hinges. Alaine still heard the long wooden complaint before sleep: iron grinding, someone shouting for space, then Ivet's name much later.

The new scrape remained on the oak. Frost had settled in it that morning.

Sela stepped outside.

Call her back.

The words came complete. Alaine had used them for children at the cistern, novices at an unsafe stair, a goat boy who crossed the first-snow stone for a dare. They required no explanation. Daven would obey. The girl would turn. By breakfast Whitehart could say it had prevented a departure in darkness until weather, route, purpose, and fitness were examined.

All defensible.

Sela was valuable. Alaine had known that before the unfinished trial and had found better names for it afterward. The Called could stand where competing accounts met and force each one to reveal what it was asking people to surrender. She could hear the soft change in a room when a useful doubt became a permitted truth. Blackcrest wanted her voice. The

camp had borrowed it. Whitehart's own seniors, despite themselves, had learned to wait for it.

Without Sela, other people would speak about the silence more easily.

With her, Whitehart might have to keep changing.

Alaine's fingers tightened on the rail. The stone edge pressed into the joint below her smallest finger. She disliked the girl for choosing before Alaine could finish choosing for her. The feeling was small, hot, and beneath every answer she would have given aloud.

If Sela remained, the page could be tested again. Osric would begin with the proper forms. He would be gentler than Tomas in some questions and harder in others. The house would say the second trial was for Sela's protection. It would gather the old accounts, the copied false sentence, Wren's divided report, Perrin's absent Chronicle, Fen's name where the wall could not admit his body. It would make another room and place Sela at its center.

Perhaps it would reach the same blankness by a cleaner road.

Perhaps not.

Sela was dangerous. Not because she commanded the Bell. Alaine had never believed that with the certainty people gave her. The danger was plainer. Sela had learned where Whitehart required an answer and could still refuse to supply one. She had made silence behave like an act. Other people had seen.

Letting her go could be called mercy.

Letting her go also carried the danger away from Whitehart.

Alaine tried to separate the two and could not. Each time she named one, the other stood inside it.

In the yard Daven turned his head.

He saw her.

His shoulders changed first. His hand left the wicket and moved toward the iron striker hanging beside the lamp. One blow would wake the watch room. Two would bring Osric. The opening behind Sela remained wide enough for a person to follow.

Alaine raised her hand.

Daven waited.

She did not bless the departure. She did not point east. She gave him the ordinary downward motion used when a watchman had left his place: back to your post.

His hand lowered.

The wicket closed. He set the bar.

Alaine stayed at the rail until the dark beyond the wall held no moving shape. Then she returned to her room, put on the grey dress, and fastened every hook before the first kitchen fire was lit.

The first-office living count lay on her desk beneath the lamp.

Sela's name remained where it had been carried forward from the previous morning. Nothing distinguished the line from two novice transfers above it and a kitchen reassignment below.

Alaine sat, sharpened the counting pen, and drew one ordinary correction line through the name.

She wrote:

Departed before first office.

The form had spaces for destination, guarantor, and return order. Alaine entered none.

She checked the previous day's count, reduced Whitehart's living total by one, and carried the new figure into the margin. The arithmetic required no second hand.

The line did not say released.

It did not say expelled.

Alaine sanded the ink, closed the count, and put the pen back in its groove.

No one came to ask what she had seen.

She told no one.

Beyond the wicket, the road fell before it rose.

Sela followed it past the wash slope and the roofless treatment shelter. Frost held the last pieces of straw to the ground. Someone had stacked the shelter boards by length. Someone else had left a single strip of bandage tied to the corner post. It moved when the wind came down from the shoulder.

The new graves lay above the first bend, nine low mounds in ground cut before it had frozen hard. No names stood there yet.

At the first bend Sela looked back once.

The upper gallery was empty.

She stood there for one breath, with the wall above her and the road dropping away below, then turned east and kept walking.

Whitehart's grave had been closed again farther up, the turf replaced in a rectangle that did not match the color around it. The edges had settled after rain. From the road it looked less like a grave than a repair made with the wrong stone.

Sela left the road and climbed to it.

Her repaired boot held. The other admitted cold through a split beside the heel.

She stood at the lower edge of the reclosed ground. She had no words for the person beneath it and no wish to borrow any. The house had counted bone, cloth, angle, depth, custom, error, and use. The earth kept all of those things together without choosing among them.

At the upper edge, Merta sat on the boundary stone.

Col's coat lay around her shoulders. She wore work boots newly greased along the seams. Beside the stone stood a covered basket, a walking staff, and a coil of mended harness. They could have been for travel. They could have been for carrying kindling home.

Merta looked at Sela's bundle.

"You left the food."

"How do you know?"

"Sinnet came to my door with it."

"Did she ask you to bring it?"

"She asked whether I was going up."

Sela waited.

Merta did not offer the basket.

"The high way begins behind you," she said. "The keeper's path starts above the second bend."

"Fen said there was another."

"Fen has not walked it."

"Have you?"

"Part of it. When goats were worth chasing farther than sense allowed."

Merta pointed with the staff toward a cut where runoff had eaten through the shoulder. No path showed there. Thorn and stone filled the bottom.

"That one is uglier," she said. "It joins the neck beyond the exposed shelf. If you lose the red rock, you have climbed too high. If the ground becomes easy, you have gone toward the keeper's path."

"What if it stays ugly?"

"Then you may be right."

Merta shifted the coat higher around her neck. The sleeves hung empty.

"Are you coming?" Sela asked.

Merta looked past her at the closed ground.

"Go before the frost leaves the lower stones."

It was not an answer. Sela did not ask again.

She stepped into the runoff cut.

The third way had no first step. She lowered herself over a shelf, landed in wet leaves, and immediately had to climb around a thorn root thicker than her wrist. The bundle caught. She took it off, pushed it ahead, and followed on hands and knees.

For the first hour she could still hear Whitehart: a bucket against the cistern rim, a door struck shut, one voice calling for lamp wicks. The sounds arrived without their words. Then the shoulder turned and stone stood between.

The cut narrowed. Meltwater from the previous day had frozen in shallow cups. Sela used Harl's knife to clear mud from the cracks before setting her fingers in them. The blade was a tool again. Once she drove it too deep and bent the point. She stopped, put the knife between both palms, and straightened it against the sole of her boot.

The red rock appeared shortly after full light: a face of iron-colored stone under a lip of grey. She kept it below her left hand. Above, the keeper's path crossed a white slope in three neat turns. She saw no one on it.

Below, the road to the gate carried two figures toward Whitehart. They were too far away to name. One leaned on the other when the grade steepened. Sela watched until the runoff cut hid them.

The third way ended at a wall of broken rock.

She tried the left side first. Loose pieces ran under her boot and continued downward long after she caught herself. The right side rose toward the exposed shelf Merta had warned against. In front, a crack split the wall. It was wide enough for one shoulder and too narrow for the bundle.

Sela pushed the bundle through. It fell out of reach on the far side.

She turned sideways and entered the crack.

Stone took her chest and back. She breathed out. The knife sheath dragged. She unfastened it and held it above her head. Two steps farther, the crack tightened.

She pushed.

Nothing moved except her skin against the rock.

She pushed again, harder, and her right boot slipped. Her knee struck stone. The breath left her. For a few seconds she hung with one foot searching below and the knife pressed flat against the wall.

The gap ahead showed daylight.

It was close enough to make force seem reasonable.

Sela stopped.

She put the knife down on a ledge no wider than two fingers. She found her lost foothold. Then she moved backward, one breath at a time, until she could turn her hips. The buckle at her belt had caught on a spur of stone. She removed the belt, passed it forward with the knife, and pulled her coat tight around her body.

The crack admitted her.

On the far side she sat beside the bundle and waited for her hands to stop shaking. Blood showed through the knee of her trousers. She touched it, found the cut shallow, and left it alone.

The mountain did not care whether she continued. Sela found that restful.

She drank from a skin filled at Whitehart's cistern. Her stomach tightened around the water. The dried apple would have helped. She was still glad Fen had eaten it.

Near midday the runoff cut opened onto a slope of grass pressed flat by old snow. There was no path, but goat droppings lay in a dry hollow beneath a rock. Sela crossed toward them and found two hoof-worn steps. A third. Then nothing.

She climbed by what held.

Cloud gathered from the west. It covered Whitehart's high ridge first and then lowered over the shoulder behind her. The wind strengthened. Sela tied her coat at the waist with the cord from her bundle and tucked her hands into her sleeves when she did not need them for the rock.

The neck appeared late in the day as a lower place between two masses of stone. She had imagined a line. It was a field of tilted slabs, some the size of tables, some loose enough to shift under one hand. Snow filled the spaces between.

She crossed twenty steps and sat down.

The wind had begun to move the cloud over the neck. It brought small hard grains of ice. Sela put her back against a

slab and drew the spare shirt over her head beneath her coat. The cloth smelled of the wall room where it had dried.

She could see the next slab. Beyond it, another. She wanted to reach the far side before dark. Wanting did not warm her fingers or make the hidden gaps shallower.

She stayed.

The ice passed. The cloud thinned enough to show a strip of pale sky above the eastern stone. Sela stood and began again.

At the middle of the neck she looked back.

Whitehart was gone. No tower, gate, grave, or smoke rose above the shoulder. She had expected the absence to feel larger. It felt like being unable to see a house after turning a corner.

She faced east.

More mountain stood there.

Ridges crossed one another in blue and grey layers. The nearest descended into a dark fold and rose again. Beyond it, another shoulder blocked whatever came after. There was no plain, no city light, no road drawn by distance. Only more ground.

Sela laughed once. The wind took the sound.

She reached the east side at dusk.

The descent began with bare slabs and low juniper. In the failing light each bush looked like the last one before trees. Then another appeared below. The slope steepened, and Sela went down facing the rock, moving her feet before her hands. Her injured knee stiffened whenever she stopped.

Night reached her above the pines.

She found a hollow under an overhang where needles had blown against the stone. The space smelled dry. It was not. Cold rose through her coat as soon as she lay down.

Sela took the cup from her bundle and set it by her head. She put the knife beneath one hand because there were tracks near the hollow. They were narrow and divided at the front. Deer, perhaps. The knowledge did not make sleep come.

She woke many times. Once to stones clicking above her. Once to thirst. Once because she thought someone had said her name.

No one had.

Before dawn she found frost inside the cup.

She was hungry enough that standing required a plan. First the boots. Then the belt. Then the bundle. For one ugly minute she wanted her mother's onion broth so badly that she resented everyone who had let her leave. Then she used the overhang to pull herself upright. Her knee held after the third try.

The last trees began below.

Wilda's phrase had made them sound like a boundary. From above they were simply pines growing farther apart as the ground fell. One trunk stood below all the others, bent east by years of wind. Past it lay scrub, dark soil, and a narrow stream moving between flat stones.

Sela went down to the water.

The bank held tracks. Deer. Fox. A boot heel softened by rain.

She crouched over the heel mark. It was longer than her hand and pointed downstream. The edge had collapsed. It might have been made three days earlier or thirty. No name remained in it.

She drank, filled the skin, and washed the blood from her knee. The cut opened again when she bent it. She tore a strip from the spare shirt and tied it in place.

Across the stream, the ground divided.

To the left, flattened grass followed the water. To the right, exposed roots climbed around a low hill. Between them, half hidden under brush, another set of old steps continued east. Some were hoof marks. Some might once have been cut by a spade. A broken branch had weathered pale at the end.

Sela crossed on the flat stones.

At the middle, a sound came through the mountains.

Metal struck metal.

She turned.

The sound came again, low and imperfect. It carried along the stream, weakened, returned from the stone behind her, and became two sounds where there had been one.

Whitehart's Bell had no clapper.

To make it speak, people had to climb the outer frame and swing the shod beam by hand. The work took two adults or four strong novices. Three strokes called novices to trial. Five called

the Brothers and Mothers to the hall. Seven were used when the whole settlement must know that Whitehart had made a political fact.

The fourth stroke reached the stream.

Then the fifth.

Sela stood with one boot wet above the sole.

Six.

Seven.

The echoes thinned. She waited for their end.

An eighth stroke crossed the neck.

Then a ninth.

After that she lost count. Some blows arrived clear. Others broke against the ridges and reached her as a pressure in the air. Whoever worked the beam continued beyond the number Whitehart used for its own decisions.

Something had ended.

She did not know what.

The Bell could not tell her whether the ending belonged to a person, an office, or a road. From the stream she had only the blows and the empty distance after them.

The strokes stopped.

Water moved around the stones. The bent pine shifted once in the wind.

Sela tightened the cloth around her knee and chose the old steps under the brush. They did not become a road. After fifty

paces they narrowed, crossed deer tracks, and nearly vanished in dead grass. She followed what remained.

By midday she would need food. By night she would need shelter. Vey lay days beyond ground she could not see.

She went east.