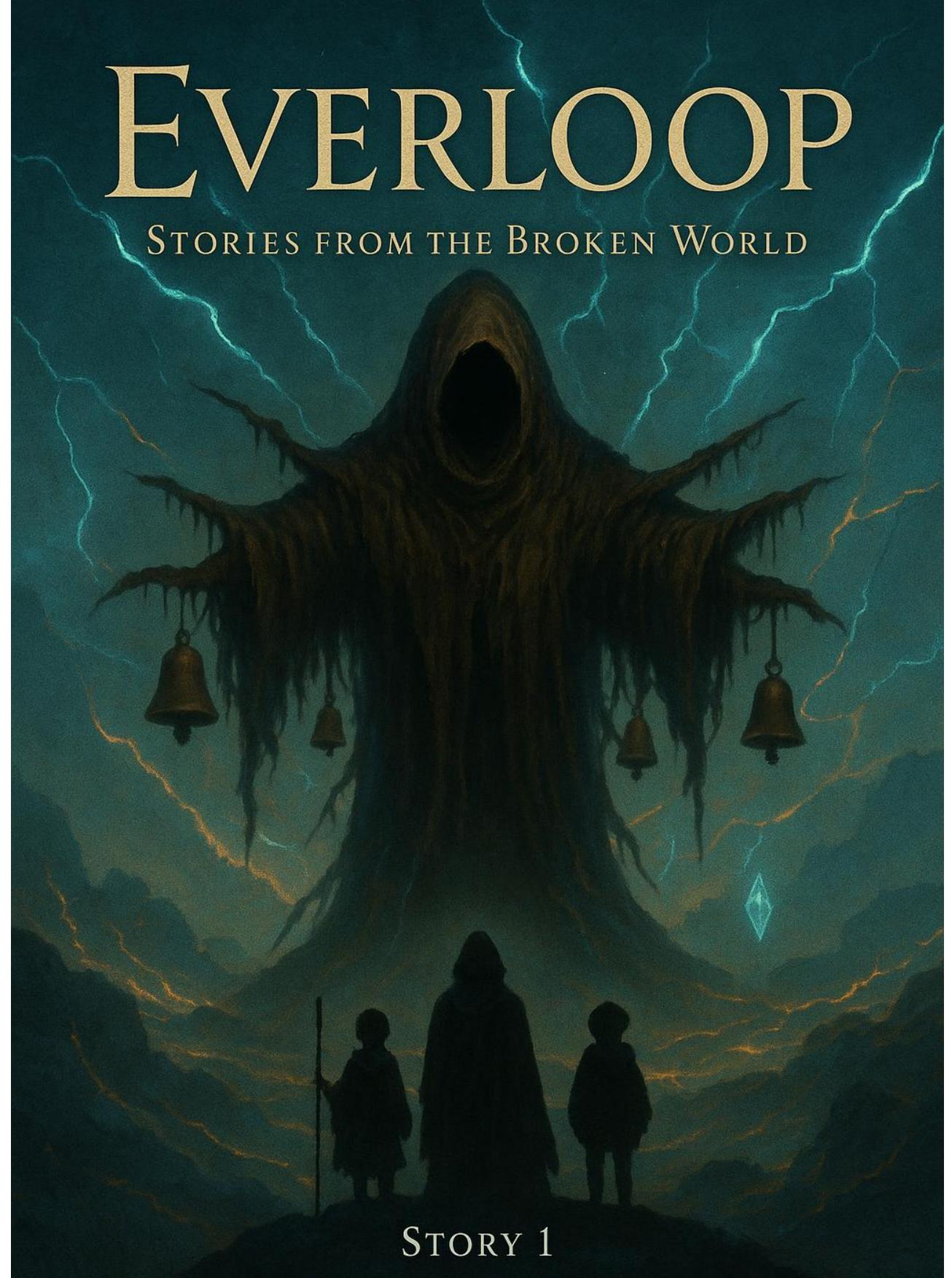


EVERLOOP

STORIES FROM THE BROKEN WORLD



STORY 1

THE BELL TREE AND THE BROKEN WORLD

Prologue: The Pattern and the Fray

Before there were names, before there were maps, before time dared to call itself time—there was only drift.

This was the **Dawn**, the age before shape. The world had no corners, no centers, no memory. Mountains walked like beasts. Rivers unspooled into the sky. The wind forgot where it came from. In this primal dream roamed the **Prime Beings**—not gods, but forces: hunger, storm, ash, birth. They whispered through roots and rumbled beneath stone.

There was no writing then. Only memory passed through blood.

But even in the chaos, something reached upward.

The **First Architects**—whether mortal or something in between—began to pin the world down. They built monuments of intent: towers that hummed, stones that pulsed, maps that bled when torn. These were not creations. They were **anchors**. They did not tame the world—only slowed its unraveling.

This was the beginning of the **Weaving**.

And from the Weaving came the **Pattern**.

It began with the **First Map**, a living tapestry sewn from starlight, bone, and breath. It did not merely describe reality—it *made* it. Time stitched itself into loops and cycles. The world settled. Seasons held. The sun returned when it should. This was the birth of the **Everloop**.

Civilizations bloomed, woven into the Pattern—along invisible rivers of thread-energy that hummed through everything. The people flourished.

But the price of stability was hidden.

Life and death fell into rhythm. But that rhythm was a trap. Decay and renewal became clockwork. History repeated—predictably, endlessly.

Some whispered that the Prime Beings had not died, only fallen asleep beneath the Pattern.

Some could *feel* the threads beneath their feet, could touch them and feel them hum. These were the first **Dreamers**—those who could nudge the strands, altering paths with a thought, a word, a wish.

Others looked *between* the threads, peering into the Time Before. These were the **Vaultkeepers**—keepers of memory, guardians of the gaps.

But even a perfect weave can fray.

And fray it did. First slowly. Then wildly.

Threads snapped. Loops collapsed. Time bent and buckled—days repeated, years vanished, entire cities blinked out of sequence. People wept for children they hadn't yet had. Dreams bled into waking.

Shards of the Pattern—broken pieces of the First Map—surfaced in hidden places, humming with forgotten power.

Rogue Architects tried to repair the weave, but only deepened the damage.

Now, we live in the Fray.

The world no longer holds a single truth. Each region bears a different scar. Some lands are trapped in loops—an unending morning, a single grief. Others drift, unanchored and wild.

But even now, whispers stir:

That if the Shards can be gathered...

The Everloop might be healed.

Or unmade.

The Pattern is breaking. The threads are loosening.

And no one—not even the Vaultkeepers—knows what happens if it tears completely.

This is the world you walk into.

This is where our story begins.

Story 1: The Bell Tree and the Broken World

Chapter 1 – A Fire, A Story, A Shard

The fire crackled low in the hearth of the cottage, throwing soft light against the beams of the ceiling and the shelves packed with jars, herbs, and hand-bound books. Outside, the wind pressed gently at the shuttered windows, but inside all was warmth, quiet, and the breath of listening.

Three children sat before their mother, cross-legged on the thick woven rug, eyes wide in the firelight. The eldest, a girl with dark hair braided into a thick rope down her back, tilted her head slightly, the way she always did when she was trying to remember every word. Her name was **Kaerlin**, though to her siblings she was always **Kerr**.

Her sister, **Mira**, younger by two years, leaned against her knee, chewing thoughtfully on a leather strap—restless, but enraptured.

The boy, the youngest of the three, had his elbows on his knees, chin in his hands, mouth slightly open. His name was **Thomel**, though only adults ever called him that. To the rest of the family, he was just **Thom**.

Their mother, **Alira**, tall and strong in her presence even seated, spoke with a low, certain voice—the kind that built a world out of words and invited you to live inside it.

"It began," she said, staring into the flames, "with a lie. Not a lie told to a person. A lie told to the Pattern itself."

Kaerlin's brow furrowed, imagining what it meant to lie to something as big as the world.

"The Fray wasn't an accident. Something was broken. Something whispered a false truth into Time's ear—and the world began to loop. Not forward, not backward, but wrong."

Thomel blinked, caught in the image of a world looping like a ribbon pulled through tangled hands.

"And then," Alira went on, lowering her voice, "people disappeared. Entire cities. One day they'd be there—and the next, just fog. Not forgotten. Not dead. Just... unwritten."

Mira swallowed hard.

Alira swept her hand toward the hearth and touched one of the hanging charms—a bell made from twisted brass and shell. It jingled softly.

"The Fray spreads where the world has grown weak. Where the Pattern thins. It doesn't tear like cloth. It... forgets. You breathe the air and begin to lose your name. Your memories. Your reasons. Some say your soul doesn't leave—it simply fails to remember it exists."

The door creaked open behind them. **Uncle Edran** entered, brushing snow off his shoulders, boots heavy. He grunted as he shut the door and dropped onto a stool.

"She's filling your heads again with those Fray stories," he said, voice half-growl. "The world is the world. The Overlook's always been there, and it always will. You stay away from it, and you're fine. That's all there is to it."

Alira turned to him, her jaw firm. "The Overlook is growing. Every winter, the edge is closer. The air feels different. People forget things. Their names. Their homes. Their children."

Edran scoffed, removing his gloves and shaking his head. "You sound just like him. Gods help us, my brother was a dreamer too. Always scribbling notes, chasing glimmers in the woods, talking about the Pattern like it was a puzzle to solve. And now look where it got him."

The children looked up sharply.

Alira's eyes softened at the mention, but her voice stayed steady. "He was more than a dreamer. He had the courage to see what the rest of us wouldn't. He knew the world was changing, and he went to the edge because he had to understand it."

Edran snorted. "And he never came back."

"That doesn't make him wrong."

"It makes him dead. Or worse."

She stood then, crossing the room. Her fingers unwrapped a linen cloth she kept beside her books. Inside lay a shard of smooth black glass, faintly warm, etched with soft curves like veins in a leaf.

"He brought this back the first time he went to the edge. He said it hummed in his hand. That it didn't feel like anything from our world. He said he could feel the Loop beneath it—feel the truth buried under the lie."

She smiled, gently, lost in the memory. "Your father... he was like a lopsided lantern in the dark. Not always steady. But always glowing in places no one else could see."

The children said nothing.

But they would remember.

Chapter 2 - Two Graves, One Goodbye

Fifteen years later, the Bell Tree had not rung.

But the cottage was quieter.

The fire still crackled, but the chair was empty. The herb jars were dusty. And two graves now sat beneath the birch tree behind the house.

Kaerlin stood at the foot of her mother's grave, hands clenched. Mira placed a smooth black stone on the mound, one she had carried for years. Thomel—now a man—said nothing, but his eyes glistened.

Uncle Edran stood apart, arms crossed, staring into the woods as if daring the dark to send something from the Fray.

Later that afternoon, the three of them sat beneath the birch, knees brushing in the wind-stirred grass. Their bags leaned against the trunk. The sky above was pale and wide.

"We're leaving," Kaerlin said, not unkindly.

She looked at Thomel with steady eyes. "I know you won't want to come. I know this place matters more to you."

Thomel's brow furrowed, but he didn't respond at first. His gaze traced the roofline of the cottage, then the grave, then out past the treeline where clouds swam low. He exhaled through his nose.

"It's not that I didn't want to go," he said finally. "I dreamed of it. Every time. When you two left, I almost followed. Every time. But someone had to stay."

Mira tilted her head. "We weren't *gone* gone. We always came back."

"Eventually," Thomel said gently. "But you didn't know you would. You two were chasing storms and towers on Dad's maps. The Fray is hungrier now than when he made them."

Kaerlin looked away, jaw tight.

"We thought you'd come with us," she murmured.

"I almost did," Thomel admitted. "But she needed someone here. I stayed because if you never came back, she wouldn't be alone. And Uncle Edran—he's strong, sure. We all know what he's capable of. But he's not... gentle."

"She wouldn't have let us go if she thought she'd be truly unprotected," Kaerlin countered.

There was a pause.

"We brought the maps back," Mira said, fishing through her satchel and unrolling a thin leather scrollcase. "Most of them survived. I cleaned the ink. Dad's annotations are faded, but still legible. We think we know where the next rift is."

"We?" Thomel asked.

"I mean me and Kerr," Mira said, using the name only they did. "We've been out twice more than you know. West of the Hollow Vale."

Thomel raised an eyebrow. "I wondered. The boots by the door were never muddy from the garden."

Kaerlin gave a half-smile. “We needed to know what we were talking about before we asked you to come.”

Thomel looked down at his hands. “She told me—before she passed—that she could feel the Fray pressing in. Said the threads were shifting in the floorboards.”

There was silence for a moment as they sat in a line, quiet and somber.

Then Kerr let out a breath and leaned against him. Mira followed, resting her head on his other shoulder.

“You’re coming with us,” Kerr said. It was not a question.

“I’m coming with you,” Thom confirmed.

Mira grinned, eyes still closed. “Well, now that that’s settled… who tells Uncle Edran?”

They sat in silence—three shadows under a tree.

Inside the cottage, Uncle Edran waited. When they entered, he was still seated at the table, hands wrapped around a mug gone cold. His cloak hung on the peg behind him. A long knife lay beside an unfinished carving, the wood still curled where his blade had last turned.

“We’re going,” Kerr said again.

Uncle Edran shook his head. “You don’t have to. There’s nothing for you out there. Stay. Build. Live.”

Mira countered. “There isn’t a lot for us here anymore. We’ve already waited too long. The border’s only five miles from here now. We feel it.”

Something in her words landed hard. The old man flinched—just slightly—but enough. A strange thing, to see someone of his stature look wounded.

Kerr softened her tone. “You know what Mira means.”

Thom stepped forward. “We’re going to finish what she and Dad started. They mapped the early rifts. We’ll map the rest.”

Uncle Edran set the mug down. Rubbed his palms together slowly. Stared into the grain of the table like it might answer him.

“I knew this day would come,” he said. “Your father… you’re just like him. All of you.”

Kaerlin knelt beside him. “We’ll come back. We promise.” She kissed his cheek.

Mira leaned in and embraced him. “We’ll never forget you.”

Thomel clasped the old man’s shoulder. “You raised us too. You’re part of this.”

Uncle Edran didn’t speak, but his eyes glistened. He gave a slow nod—firm, solemn. As if to say: *Go. I taught you well.*

That night, they packed.

That night, the Bell Tree appeared.

Not with thunder. Not with light.

It simply... stepped from the shadows where a copse of trees had been.

As if it had always been there.

As if the world had been waiting for it to remember.

Twisted limbs like cloaked arms. Bells swaying in windless air. A hollow where a face should be.

The children did not sleep.

Chapter 3 - The Ringing

The town of Drelmere had known peace for decades. It sat far from the Overlook's edge, nestled in a valley where merchants still passed, where weddings were still sung. People still danced on Feastdays. But something had changed.

Children began waking without memories of the day before. Crops bloomed too early, then turned to dust overnight. Time slipped. Names fell apart on paper.

Mayor Halrick Vann refused to believe it. He was a man of routine, of firm handshakes and firmer opinions. A former soldier turned town leader, he polished his boots each morning and drank his tea the same way his mother taught him—scalding hot and unsweetened. “Coincidence,” he muttered when merchants lost their way on familiar roads. “Poor seed stock,” he said when the harvests failed. “Too much imagination,” he barked when children forgot their own names. He would not abide panic. He’d keep the town steady.

But even Halrick had grown quieter of late.

It was Merra Dune that people trusted—the apothecary, midwife, and practical voice of Drelmere. She wore her hair in a silver braid down her back, always smelled faintly of pine and herbs, and had hands that could coax life back into the sick. When a child forgot her own name, she helped recover it. When a farmer woke to find his house facing the wrong direction, she showed him true north.

But even she had begun to grow wary.

Rumors drifted. Then the tree appeared.

It wasn’t there.

And then it was.

The morning market opened as it always did. The baker’s boy swept the stones. A cobbler tightened his awning ropes. And where there had been open square—stone and sun and birdsong—there now stood something else.

A tree, they called it. But it was no tree.

It rose from the earth like a cloaked figure carved in shadow. The trunk hung in long, torn ribbons, shaped like fabric frozen in motion—wind-blown but motionless, shredded like a battle banner long forgotten. Its hood

drooped forward, hollow where a face might be, and inside that darkness: nothing. Not shadow. Not shade. Nothing. A black that pulled at the eye like gravity.

Its limbs unfurled like arms outstretched, not in welcome, but in warning. From them dangled bells—some bright, some broken, some rusted, some smooth as river stones. Tiny bells on thin wire. Massive ones strung with chain. And each silent.

The sky above the tree seemed a shade dimmer. The cobblestones beneath it warped ever so slightly, as if the ground had softened to accept it. No roots showed. No leaves fell. No birds perched.

No one had seen it arrive. No cart. No crew. No magic spoken aloud. No flash or thunder.

Just—nothing.

Then something.

It wasn't there.

And then it was.

Mayor Halrick Vann ordered it cut down. The axe blades dulled after a single strike. One man fainted. Another vomited. Halrick himself returned to his office with blood beneath his eyes and a ringing in his ears he couldn't shake.

That night, it moved—a single branch, twitching under moonlight, like a finger tapping just once.

At dawn, it rang.

Not a chime or a toll, but a scream wrapped in melody. A sound that didn't echo—it *clung*. It spread through rooftops, seeped into cellar stone. It found cracks in the wall and made them weep. Windows bowed. Children woke with nosebleeds. Dogs ran from town.

High above, on the ridgeline, **Kaerlin**, **Mira**, and **Thomel** stopped.

Their eyes met.

It had begun.

Chapter 4 - The Map and the Valley

They stood just below the ridgeline, boots half-buried in wind-swept loam, where the earth gave way to a plunging valley bathed in an amber hush. The morning sun had broken through a cage of high clouds, casting long fingers of light across the land. It touched broken stone and forest veins alike, pulling gold from green.

The wind curled past them in gentle bursts, smelling faintly of ash and thyme.

Kaerlin crossed her arms, her eyes narrowing against the glare. "What's down there?" Kerr asked.

Mira crouched, unfastening the leather satchel slung across her shoulder. She pulled free a roll of parchment, edges curled and ink faded by weather and time. She didn't speak at first—just let her finger trace the map's uneven lines until it stopped near a scribbled crescent.

"Drelmere," she finally said. "Or what's left of it."

Kaerlin frowned. "That can't be right. Drelmere's supposed to be—what—four, five days southeast? Past the bramble hills?"

"It was," Mira replied, not looking up. "The land doesn't care what it's supposed to be. The Fray shifts things. That's why I bring these maps. Every climb shows something new."

"Not new," said Thomel, kneeling. "Changed."

The youngest of the three was already a few paces ahead, crouched low to the earth, where the mud had softened overnight. "Tracks," Thom said.

"What kind?" Kerr asked.

Thomel pressed his palm beside one. The print was deep, three-toed, and wide. His eyes followed the trail through a patch of thistle. "Hoofed. Big. But steady. No skid, no scatter. Nothing was chasing it."

"Just passing through," he said, rising and brushing off his hands. "Still warm. Maybe a few hours ahead."

"You always notice things like that," Kerr said. "You missed your calling as a tracker."

"Somebody's got to keep you two fed," Thom said, trying to sound gruff. "And I promised Uncle Edran I'd make sure you didn't get killed."

"We didn't ask for a chaperone," Mira teased, rolling her map again with a half-smile.

"You didn't have to," Thom said. "I'm here anyway."

Kerr clapped a hand on his shoulder. "We know."

They stood together for a while, silent again, staring down into the valley's mouth. The ruins of Drelmere were visible now—a scatter of rooftops, one half-collapsed bell tower, and the bone-white curve of the dry riverbed. But something else caught their eyes.

Above the valley, above Drelmere, the air shimmered.

It wasn't heat—not really. It moved like heat, bent light like it, but there was no warmth to it. No breeze touched that shimmer. It pulsed, as if the sky had torn a stitch and the threads were fraying apart.

Thom stepped forward, brow furrowed. "Do you see that?"

"We see it," Kerr said.

Mira's hand gripped her satchel tighter.

They did not move.

But they knew.

The Fray was here.
And it was growing.

Chapter 5 - The Dreamers of Drelmere

The path into Drelmere twisted through fields once bright with lavender. Now the grass grew in brittle clumps, shadows fell in unnatural angles, and the wind whispered directions that contradicted the map.

At the edge of town, they passed a ruined chapel, half-swallowed by gray moss. A cracked statue of the Triumvirate—Time, Memory, Flesh—stared with hollow eyes. Thomel paused, brushing his hand along the stone's cold cheek.

"Another skip," Mira muttered, scratching a note onto her map. "This shouldn't be here."

Kaerlin shrugged. "The Fray doesn't obey lines on paper."

The town square opened before them in quiet decay: moss-veined cobblestones, rusted shutters, and cautious townsfolk who stared, then looked quickly away. At the center, rising like a question no one dared ask, stood the Bell Tree.

Its roots pushed through the flagstones like veins through old hands. They moved—slowly, subtly, like breathing.

"Roots shouldn't move like that," Mira whispered, eyes fixed on the dark tendrils.

On the far side of the square, Merra knelt beside a boy, murmuring in a voice too soft to carry. After a moment, the boy blinked, smiled, and ran off calling a name he seemed to have just remembered.

Merra stood and turned to the newcomers. "You're not from here."

"No," Kaerlin replied. "But maybe we were always meant to be."

Merra studied them—expression unreadable. "That's what Dreamers say."

"Define Dreamer," Mira asked.

Merra exhaled slowly. "Dreamers are the ones who can see the Pattern—not just feel it, like most do in dreams or déjà vu. They see how time folds and frays. They see threads—moments, choices, paths—and sometimes, they can move them. Tuck one beneath another. Nudge a memory forward. Hide a day inside a second."

She began walking. They followed.

"It lets them glimpse what hasn't happened yet. What might happen. Sometimes what never could. But it comes with a cost. You can't walk between threads and expect to stay stitched in place."

Thomel furrowed his brow. "What happens to them?"

"Some lose their bodies before their minds. They become something like ghosts—trapped in a moment no one else remembers. Others lose their minds but keep walking. Staring. Whispering names from futures no one else sees."

She looked back toward the Bell Tree. "The Pattern folds them. Or it unravels them. No one's certain."

They walked in silence after that, their boots soft against the broken stones.

"Drelmere was once a gathering place for Dreamers," Merra said at last. "A sanctuary. A place between places. They thought the Valley was stable enough to anchor their visions. But the Fray doesn't honor hope."

"And now?" Mira asked.

Merra's voice lowered. "Now there's only one left. The rest... are just gone."

They arrived at a cottage of rippling stone, nestled between leaning homes and broken fences. The walls shimmered faintly, as if light couldn't decide which side to stay on.

Merra paused at the threshold.

"This is where the Dreamers used to gather," she said softly, then turned to face them. "What brings you to Dreelmere?"

Kaerlin glanced at her siblings. "We're not entirely sure."

"Our father left us maps," Mira said. "Old ones. They all led here. Eventually."

"Some pieces didn't make sense until we followed them through the skips," Thomel added. "And even then, not all of them make sense."

"But they pointed here," Kaerlin finished. "To this place. To now."

Merra studied them for a long moment, quiet.

"It sounds like you'll want to meet the Dreamer who remains," she said finally. "But he's not here."

"Watcher's Hill," Mira said.

Merra's expression shifted—tightened. A flicker of warning in her eyes.

She looked away and spoke with a voice almost too low to hear.

"Expect no welcome."

Chapter 6 - Watcher's Hill

Watcher's Hill had stairs. Which, frankly, was insulting.

"They could've at least been even," Mira muttered, dragging her boots up another tilted stone. "Who builds a staircase with nine steps, then three sideways ones?"

"Someone with a deep hatred for knees," Kerr said, not even winded.

Thomel said nothing. He was carrying all the supplies.

At the top, the trees parted around a clearing. A crooked wooden gate marked the threshold, hanging from one hinge and engraved with symbols that seemed to rearrange themselves when you weren't looking.

"Very welcoming," said Mira. "Should we knock?"

"Should we burn it?" Kerr offered.

Mira reached toward a symbol. It darted aside as if shy.

"Friendly," she muttered.

The gate creaked open on its own.

They walked in.

The hut looked like a mushroom that had aspirations of becoming a cottage and then gave up halfway through. It leaned to one side, windows glowing faintly. The door opened before they reached it.

"Hi!" said the young man inside.

He looked to be in his twenties. His hair was the color of bark in spring, and his eyes were silver and soft. The three siblings stopped.

"You're Old Eidon?" Thom asked, confused.

"Maybe," the man said cheerfully. "I might've been old once. When I was young. These days I'm mostly... misplaced. I fold. Folded... like origami. Half my thoughts are soup." He shrugged and made a folding motion, then the motion of drinking soup with a spoon.

He turned and walked inside like that explained everything. "Come in," he said, walking away. "There's tea. It might already be steeped. Or not. I've had it, but not yet."

The siblings exchanged a glance, then followed.

The inside of the house was somehow bigger than the outside, and stranger. Bookshelves stacked on chairs. Teacups in the fireplace. A map pinned to the ceiling. Mira's eyes sparkled.

"You're a Dreamer?" Kaerlin asked.

"No," Eidon said. "I'm a Folder."

"I fold," he said again, making a vague origami motion with his hands. "I'm a piece of paper that folded onto itself, and then someone sneezed and threw me into a wind tunnel. Time's messy. I remember things that haven't happened, and I forget things that are happening right now."

The siblings stared at him, confounded.

Eidon stared back, smiling blankly.

Then, without a word, he made another slow folding motion with his hands and shrugged.

Mira opened a drawer. It had soup in it.

She blinked. "Is this—"

"Drawer soup," he said proudly. "Keeps well."

He handed another bowl to Thom. This one came from under a cushion.

Kerr eyed hers suspiciously. "This smells like cinnamon and... chalk?"

"That's the Tuesday batch," Eidon said, sitting cross-legged on a stool that immediately collapsed under him. He didn't seem to notice.

"So," Kerr said, hands on hips, "you're telling us you're broken?"

Eidon grinned. "No. I'm rare. Big difference."

Thom finally spoke. "Do you know anything about the Bell Tree?"

"Oh," Eidon said, suddenly solemn. "Yes. And also no. But mostly yes."

He led them to a shelf and pulled down what looked like a rusted dinner plate. "The Bell Tree is... how do I explain this... Have you ever tried to build a puzzle without knowing what picture it makes? That's the Bell Tree. It's part memory. Part machine. Part scream."

"A scream?" Thom asked.

"Everything that's been lost by the Fray—it ends up there. Echoes, regrets, moments that fell through the cracks. The Bell Tree is trying to sing them back into place."

"And the Shards?" Kerr asked.

"Oh yes, the Shards," Eidon said, turning over a chair to reveal a diagram etched on the seat. "You'll need them. All of them. They're the bits that didn't forget they were part of the Pattern. The anchors. If the Bell Tree is the wound, the Shards are the stitches."

"How many are there?" Thom asked.

"Eight. Or thirteen. Or one, shattered eight ways. Depends if you ask me tomorrow or yesterday."

There was silence while Eidon looked like he was trying very hard to recall something. At last, he said, "He knew."

"Who?" asked Kerr.

"The lopsided lantern. I think I met him. Or I will. Or he dreamed of me, and that's close enough. He told me something important, I think. I remember the shape of his voice."

"You remember the shape?" Mira asked.

"Like a lopsided lantern. But kind. He was tall. Quiet. Thought too much. Disappeared."

The children looked at one another. Thom mouthed *lopsided lantern* to the others.

Eidon continued, "He told me something important."

"What was it?" Thom asked.

"I forgot," Eidon said without apology. "But I remember it was important. That counts."

He smiled, drifting to a window. "The Fray does that, you know. Unwinds you. I try putting myself back together. Some days I do a better job than others."

"Why tell us all this?" Kerr asked.

"Because," he said, eyes far away, "I think you're the ones who are supposed to do something. Or undo something. Or maybe just make a really important choice."

"Which is it?" Thom asked.

Eidon looked delighted. "Oh, I haven't the foggiest."

Then, suddenly serious, he looked at each of them.

"You're meant to choose," he said softly.

"Something. Anything."

Chapter 7 - The Soup and the Self

"Come with us," Kaerlin said, for what was definitely not the first time.

"No," Eidon replied brightly, setting a third bowl of soup on the crooked table. "Soup?"

"We don't need soup, we need answers!" snapped Mira.

"I need soup," muttered Thom, rubbing his stomach.

"I'm grounded," Eidon said, lifting one foot as though it were somehow rooted to the floor. "See? If I leave the hill, the rest of me might forget where the rest of me is. Or go sideways. Or get jealous."

"We are wasting our time," Mira huffed, pacing between a bookshelf and a taxidermy fox wearing reading glasses. "We have actual leads. Maps. Riddles. Bells screaming in public squares. And you're sitting here debating internal cartographic jealousy with your ankles."

"I'm not debating," Eidon said. "My ankles and I are quite aligned. They know what they've signed up for."

Kerr threw up her hands. "This is ridiculous."

Eidon turned to Thom. "Soup?"

Thom looked between his sisters, then nodded slowly and sat. "Sure."

He took a spoonful, chewed thoughtfully, and said, "You know what it's missing?"

Eidon leaned in. "Do tell."

"Everfern," Thom proclaimed.

Eidon blinked. "Everfern doesn't grow here. It has a combative temperament and once tried to strangle my shoes."

"No," said Thom. "But it's in Merra's shop. I saw it—dry shelf, middle row, third hook. Right between the sunroot and the powdered tarruffin."

"That... that can't be," Eidon said, furrowing his brow. "If she's keeping sunroot and tarruffin that close together, she's either very bold or very doomed."

Thom nodded gravely. "Exactly. Which is why, if we don't go and check, your soup might never be complete. And Merra could be in danger."

"Grave danger," Eidon said, almost with a hint of excitement.

Thom leaned in. "Is there any other kind?"

"And if Merra's shop goes, your soup is at risk of being emotionally unbalanced."

"Everfern is unstable when dried improperly," Eidon mused. "It would explain the bitterness. Also the haunting aftertaste of regret." He looked down at the bowl. "It has been sulking lately."

"Also," Thom added, stirring the soup, "if the soup is the metaphorical mirror of your fragmented self, and the Everfern is the key note that brings it all into harmonic resonance, then aren't you obligated to seek it out? For closure?"

Mira groaned audibly.

Eidon stared at him for a moment, then perked up. "Is it a concave mirror or the kind that makes your chin look like a duck?"

"Yes," Thom replied confidently. "Exactly. And that's the thing—it's reflecting the self that's been folded through time, so the duck-chin effect is actually prophetic. But what it needs—what *you* need—is Everfern. That's the key note. That's the grounding..." He paused, searching desperately for the right word. "*Frequency*."

Mira, completely lost, mumbled, "What is happening?"

"The herb as a harmonic stabilizer," Eidon whispered, eyes wide. "It would complete the chord. Like a melody finally remembering where it began. *We must go*."

Mira blinked. "What just happened?"

Kerr shook her head. "He logic-looped the lunatic."

Thom nodded to Eidon. "Otherwise you'll just keep making soup that almost tastes like you."

Ignoring his sisters' skepticism, Thom stood, smiling, and patted Eidon's shoulder. "Let's go find your herb."

Eidon stood so fast his chair wheezed. "Yes! We must go. For soup. For identity. For seasoning!"

He grabbed a walking stick that may have once been a curtain rod. "To Merra's shop we go! For Everfern—and everything it implies!"

Mira looked exhausted. "We've broken him."

Kerr shrugged. "No. He was already broken. We just... found the missing herb."

Chapter 8 - The Roots Beneath Us

It was a journey fraught with peril. The wind howled. The clouds hung heavy. The slope stretched downward like a treacherous ribbon unraveled by fate.

"Just... just one more step!" Thom called, breathless.

"You can do this," Kerr encouraged, holding out a steady hand.

"We believe in you," Mira added flatly, already thumbing through her notebook.

Eidon clung to the top step, cloak flapping dramatically despite the total lack of wind. "The stairs are angry today," he whispered. "They remember what I said about granite."

"That was two days ago," Kerr snapped. "You insulted granite. The stairs have moved on. Now move."

The hermit shifted forward with the hesitance of a man attempting to descend a mountain made of porcupines and betrayal. His arms hovered at his sides, his cane tapped the next step like it might bite.

"I feel the world tilting," he murmured.

"You're wearing one boot and one slipper," Mira noted.

"They each offer different traction philosophies," he replied solemnly.

Thom knelt at the bottom of the steps. "We're almost there, Eidon. Just four more. Three. Two..."

With the kind of determination generally reserved for surviving avalanches or escaping very boring dinner parties, the hermit placed one trembling foot down—and took the last step off the hill.

He paused. Looked around.

"Oh," he said. "That wasn't so bad."

Then he strode off like he'd always meant to, posture upright, curtain rod cane tucked beneath his arm like a royal scepter.

"Let's go! Stop holding everything up!" he called back.

The siblings exchanged glances and hurried to catch up.

By the time they reached Drelnmere, the tone had shifted.

Mayor Halrick was already there, standing just off the square like a schoolmarm watching for mischief—arms folded, mustache alert, eyes tracking their every step. He didn't approach or speak. Just observed. As if determined to prevent anyone from getting the town too excited. Or too nervous.

Ever practical and forthright, Mira reached for Eidon's wrist to stop his walking.

"Eidon, you know there's no Everfern," she muttered.

"I'm shocked," Kerr deadpanned.

"You knew?" Eidon gasped, turning to Thom.

"There was never Everfern," Thom said kindly. "The soup was... a metaphor."

The hermit clutched his chest. "You manipulated me with symbolic seasoning?"

Eidon winked at Thom and mouthed, "I know," then turned to Mira and Kerr with mock outrage. "Deceivers, you all!"

"Let's look at the tree," Kerr interrupted, already turning toward the square.

They approached the Bell Tree. Its dark trunk shimmered faintly under the mid-morning sun, and the bells swayed ever so slightly—never quite in time with the wind.

In Kaerlin's coat, the Shard began to pulse gently. A warmth. A presence. Not loud, but familiar.

"It's... humming," she said, resting her palm over the pocket.

"Like it knows one of its siblings is near," Eidon murmured. "Shards are like that. Born together. Torn apart. They remember each other."

Merra appeared beside them quietly, as she always did. "No one knows what the Shards are for," she said. "What they do. Or if they should do anything at all."

"Pragmatic as ever," Kaerlin said.

Merra shrugged. "Survival demands realism."

But Eidon was already circling the tree. "It's a clue," he muttered. "I know it. I've seen it. Felt it. Or maybe I just want to. But there's something here."

He prodded the bark. Licked a bell. Knocked three times on the roots.

Mira sighed. "Okay, this incoherent puzzle-flirting is going to drive me insane. I'm working on my maps."

She sat cross-legged nearby, parchment spreading in a fan around her. Thom joined Eidon, equally enthralled.

"Do you think if we sing to it, it'll respond?" Thom asked.

"Only if it's a waltz," Eidon replied seriously.

Then he tripped over a thick root. "These roots shouldn't be here," he muttered.

Thom bent to look. "They really are weird. They twist like they're following something. Not random."

Mira suddenly leapt to her feet. "It's all wrong!" she shouted.

Everyone froze.

"I mean—it's all wrong in the best way!" She snatched up her main map and sprinted toward them. "Look—look here. This should be the bakery. But it's two blocks off. And this—this entire row of shops curves now."

Merra frowned. "We've known the town's shifted."

"Yes, but it hasn't shifted randomly. It's aligned." Mira began placing markers on the dirt. "If you chart everything as it is now—not where it's supposed to be—it mirrors something. It mirrors this."

She traced her fingers along the roots. "The roots are the map."

Everyone stared.

"And the tree's not here," she said, pointing to the center of her chart. "Not the true base. Not the origin point. It's here—in the gorge. Outside town. That's where the trunk begins."

A throat cleared behind them.

Mayor Halrick stood exactly where he had been, arms still folded, mustache unmoved. "Are we rebuilding the town or divining from weeds?"

"Neither," Merra said flatly. "They're investigating. Let them."

"The gorge is a dry, empty crack," Halrick huffed. "There's no need to go there. No need for any of this. We're fine. Nothing is wrong."

Merra turned, eyes narrowing. "Look around. Everything is wrong."

She glanced back at the siblings. "But maybe the world wants to forget. Maybe the Fray came because something needed unmaking. Maybe it's better to live in the world we have, not try to rewind it."

Kaerlin stepped forward. "And maybe undoing an undoing is just... healing."

The hermit grinned. "Or maybe it's soup. With Everfern."

They all looked to the gorge.

They would go.

Chapter 9 - The Sound Below

The path to the gorge wound beneath a sky dull with overcast gray, the silence around them broken only by the muffled crunch of boots on loam. No one spoke for a while. Even Eidon, whose chatter usually peppered the air like scattered leaves, kept his curtain rod cane close and quiet.

When they reached the gorge's edge, it yawned out before them—deep, dry, and entirely unimpressive.

"This is it," Mira said, crouching near the edge with a map in one hand and charcoal in the other. "I'm telling you, this is where the roots lead. If you follow the map backward from the town's new layout, this spot is the center. The base of the tree."

"There's nothing here," Kaerlin said, arms crossed.

"Not visible, no. But the roots don't lie," said Mira.

"They don't talk either," retorted Kaerlin, clearly annoyed at the lack of obvious clues.

Mira scowled. "They spoke to you yesterday."

Kaerlin's hand moved instinctively to the pouch where she kept the Shard, fingers resting lightly over it.
"Metaphorically."

"Metaphorically useful is still useful," assured Mira.

Thomel raised both hands. "Can we... not fight at the mouth of a mysterious gorge?"

"I'm not fighting," Kaerlin said.

"You're just debating very hard," Thomel replied gently.

"Precisely."

They stared into the gorge for a long moment. The wind stirred dust at the bottom, revealing only more nothingness. Empty stone. Barren walls. No signs, no markings, not even an echo.

Mira's grip tightened on her map. "It should be here," she murmured. "I measured everything three times."

She rose, paced a few steps, then crouched again to scan the terrain. Her fingers twitched around the charcoal.
"This isn't how it's supposed to go."

Behind them, Eidon was picking up pebbles and tossing them over his shoulder without looking.

Out of frustration, Mira lobbed a pinecone into the gorge.

They all heard it: the faint, delicate chime of a bell. So subtle it might've been wind. So strange it couldn't have been.

They froze.

"Did you hear that?" Thomel whispered.

They all leaned over the edge.

"Still nothing down there," Kaerlin muttered.

Eidon poked his head in between theirs. "I see your problem. You're looking down. Should've been looking *up* while leaning down. Changes everything."

Thomel grabbed another stone and dropped it.

Chime. Slightly louder. More real.

Kaerlin nodded slowly. "Throw something else."

They spent the next few minutes experimenting—stones, sticks, even a spare map corner that fluttered like a leaf on the breeze. Each object produced a different sound: faint echoes, irregular clangs, the distant shimmer of resonance that whispered of metal just out of reach.

Then came the moment. A heavier rock, thrown wide by Thomel, struck something with a clean, sharp ring—a bell's cry, rich and perfect.

They all looked to each other.

"Again," said Kaerlin.

This time Mira knelt, calculating. She aimed, threw. Another clear note. Then, as the silence stretched after it, the sun caught something metallic in the gorge wall.

"There," Kaerlin said.

Set into the gorge's far side—tucked behind a fold of jagged stone, now lit just so—was a narrow slit of an opening. Iron bars. Carved reliefs. Rootlike tendrils of silver etched across its frame like veins.

Eidon exhaled slowly. "Well," he said, "that explains... absolutely nothing, but also everything."

They stared at the entry. No one moved.

Because now they all knew: this wasn't just a door.

It was an invitation.

And something had been waiting to answer.

Chapter 10 - What Was Folded

The cave entrance was no more than a slice in the rock—narrow, jagged, uninviting. Two ancient iron bars ran vertical through the center, set so seamlessly into the stone it was as if the mountain itself had grown them. Whatever lay beyond, it was not meant to be stumbled into.

They stood breathless, the four of them slick with dust and sweat from climbing down the gorge. All their supplies had been left above—even Eidon’s curtain rod cane, which he had insisted was too noble to risk scraping against rock.

“Well,” Kaerlin said, brushing a strand of hair from her brow. “This is it.”

Mira stepped forward, tracing the edge of one bar. “This isn’t a door,” she murmured. “It’s a decision.”

Thomel crouched and ran his hand along the cave floor. “We’re not going to fit unless we figure out those bars.”

Kaerlin examined the worn carvings that ringed the frame. Each seemed like a stone set in the rock, the faintest trace of a seam around each one. Strange, swirling etchings, almost like mirrored letters or layered runes.

Mira sighed. “I got us here. I read the maps. I lined up the roots. Bending iron isn’t my department.”

Eidon leaned in, squinting. Then he began muttering.

“Rrrhmmm... hmmph... k’tarrr... ehhrr...”

Kaerlin gave him a long, flat stare. “What does it say?”

He straightened, cleared his throat with exaggerated ceremony, and said, “Oh. Nothing. I was just clearing my throat.”

Thomel laughed. Kaerlin did not.

Then Eidon blinked. “Oh wait. No. I *can* read it. Dust in the throat—that was the issue.”

He leaned in again. “Together, unfold what was folded. In unity, the locked shall part. But unfold not what cannot bear its own shape.”

Below that, a second line of symbols:

To Enter is the key

Mira lit up. “Aha! A riddle!”

She clapped her hands and began pacing before the entrance like a professor in mid-lecture. “It’s paradoxical. No—recursive. Wait... no, it’s performative recursion embedded inside metaphor. Maybe.”

She dropped to the ground, scrawling letters and loops in the dirt with the tip of a charcoal nub pulled from her pouch. “What was folded. What was folded? That could mean a physical fold... but maybe it’s temporal. Or metaphorical folding. Memory? Dimensional overlap?”

Kaerlin exchanged a glance with Thomel, who shrugged.

“In unity, the locked shall part.’ So—four of us, four stones, maybe we each press one? But wait—what if the runes are coordinates? No, too literal. Unless—unless they represent mirrored frequency pairs.”

She pulled out her compass, then her protractor, and began measuring the distance between runes with increasing urgency.

"If these are markers on a circle, maybe they're meant to be rotated... or reflected? What if the phrase 'To Enter is the key' is literal *and* symbolic? Maybe the symbols correspond to tones—like bells!"

She tapped one with a knuckle. It gave a dull click.

"No resonance," she muttered. "Not sonic, then."

Thomel tried to speak, but Mira held up a hand. She was now drawing a diagram that resembled a bell tree tangled with an algebra equation.

"It could be Fibonacci-based!" she whispered. "The spacing—if you count the grooves—could align with the golden spiral. If we just fold the Pattern inward on itself—"

"Mira," Kaerlin said gently, but Mira cut her off.

"Don't interrupt. I'm almost at a breakthrough."

She pressed a sequence of six runes in a spiraling order. Nothing happened. She stared. Then pressed again—slower this time. Still nothing.

Her jaw clenched.

"This place wants to be opened. It's just hiding the logic from me. The logic is always there. I just haven't—haven't folded it right."

She stood, dusted off her hands, and screamed into the cave: "MAKE SENSE!"

A pause. The cave said nothing.

Then, quietly, Kerr stepped forward. She hadn't even been looking at the carvings. She'd been eyeing the second line of text again, where it glowed faintly in the stone:

To Enter is the key

She tilted her head.

"...The key?" she said aloud. "No. That's too obvious. That can't be it."

She looked again at the symbols above—at the way some of them mirrored shapes in the phrase itself.

Her fingers brushed the first stone. Then the next.

"T... O... E... N... T... E... R..."

Each one clicked softly beneath her touch.

The moment she pressed the final rune, the bars vanished. Not dissolved. Not retracted. Simply gone—as if they had never been there. Not even the memory of them remained.

Mira turned around, stunned. "What did you—?"

Kaerlin gave a small shrug. "You were overthinking it."

"To Enter," Mira repeated, eyes wide. "That was it?"

Kaerlin's smirk was nearly invisible. "Which is why you missed it."

Without another word, Mira repacked her maps and chalk, walked straight past everyone into the dark cave.

They stepped inside behind her.

The cave swallowed the light. Darker and darker as they descended, the walls closed in, damp and close. Eventually, only the faint blue shimmer of moss lit their way.

Then Eidon stumbled.

"Eidon?" Thom asked.

Eidon gasped. His sprightly form sagged. Before their eyes, his skin paled and wrinkled, hair silvering into a wild halo of age.

"Gods," Mira whispered. "What's happening to him?"

Kaerlin caught him beneath one arm. "He's... aging."

"No," Eidon said softly. "Not aging. *Unfolding*."

The siblings gathered around him.

"What can we do?" Kaerlin asked, urgent.

"I've been folded across too many layers," Eidon continued, voice light with wonder. "When I came through... the fold ended. And I became what I've always been."

"We can take you back out," Thomel said, kneeling beside him.

Eidon smiled, gentle and clear-eyed. "You can't fold me back up. That part of me is finished. What's done is done—and I am glad for it. I am all of myself again."

"You're dying," Thom said gently.

"Yes," he nodded. "And I'm finally all in one piece. For the first time in... I don't know how long."

Mira's voice caught. "You can't go. There's still so much more to learn."

And then, as if something vast and forgotten uncoiled behind his eyes, Eidon began to speak:

"There are thirteen Shards," he said. "Each one a spine of the Pattern. Anchors, yes—but also keys. Keys to something that doesn't yet understand it is locked."

"I don't understand," Kaerlin said, clutching the Shard at her side.

"Before the Pattern," Eidon said, "there was only Drift. Chaos without memory. Then came the Architects. They built the Pattern to hold time still. They forged the First Loop."

His breath hitched. But his voice remained steady.

"But something flawed got caught in the design. It twisted the weave. And the Fray was born—not as a destroyer, but a symptom."

"A symptom of what?" Kaerlin asked.

"Of time's refusal to stay fixed," Eidon replied. "Of the lie whispered into the world's bones. Now the Pattern forgets itself, piece by piece."

He closed his eyes, but his voice stayed strong.

"You gather them... and the Fray will have nothing left to cling to."

"Will it fix the world?" Mira asked.

"No one knows," he whispered. "Unfolding the world might mean losing everything we built from the damage. Or it might mean restoring what we forgot. It's not a repair. It's a remembering."

He opened his eyes again.

"Your father believed this. He found me once. A man with a voice shaped like a lopsided lantern. He was looking for the Shards—just like you."

"You knew our father?" Thom asked.

"Where is he? What happened to him?" Kaerlin demanded.

Eidon drew a long, slow breath.

"He may be old, or young. May have died, or begun again. Time is a paper folded too many ways," Eidon said, smiling faintly. "Time has little respect for calendars. But you—you must keep going. You're already further than he ever came."

Thom reached for him. "We won't let you go."

But Eidon only nodded, once.

"I'm not gone. I'm home."

Then—gently, without spectacle—he closed his eyes, and faded into the stone, like shadow settling into the wall.

The siblings were quiet.

Then, slowly, they turned toward the tunnel ahead—dark, uncertain, waiting.

And they walked forward.

Chapter 11 - The Bound Thread

As they walked deeper into the cave, time grew heavy.

The world outside had been loose, almost fluid—distances bending, days blurring, moments folding into each other. But here, the deeper they traveled, the more weight the seconds seemed to carry. Time no longer drifted. It pressed. Solid and thick.

Each footstep landed harder. Each breath echoed slower.

They didn't speak. They didn't have to. They all felt it: space was closing in around them—not in walls, but in certainty. Time and space were being re-bound to the Pattern.

And their bones knew. Their minds resisted.

It wasn't malevolent.

It was inevitable.

The only light came from the moss—faint threads woven into the walls like veins, glowing a soft silver-blue. It pulsed slowly, like breath.

They didn't know how long they walked.

It could have been hours.

Or days.

Or a single moment stretched too far.

Then, without warning, the tunnel opened into a vast cavern—so tall the ceiling faded into shadow, impossibly high for the depth they thought they'd reached.

The space was beautiful.

And wrong.

Towering. Silent. Still.

Roots, black as coal and thick as limbs, twisted up the walls, vanishing into the dark. They grasped the stone like fingers closing into fists.

They turned around.

The tunnel was gone.

Not blocked.

Not sealed.

Gone—as if it had never existed.

Panic came like a wave.

Mira ran her hands along the stone, searching. Kaerlin circled the cavern's base. Thomel shouted once—just to hear the echo.

None came.

They climbed, clawed, scraped their fingers bloody against stone and root. They shouted until their voices cracked. They begged the air to shift, to do something. But nothing answered.

They stopped searching. Just for a breath.

Then Thomel stood. He said nothing. He only walked to one of the roots, knelt beside it, and started peeling at the bark.

"What are you doing?" Mira asked, voice hoarse.

"Looking for something to feed you," he said. "You haven't eaten. Thought maybe... I don't know. Maybe food will help us think."

He tore a strip of bark away.

And there, beneath it—etched in silver—was a shape.

Not random.

A spiral.

They didn't know what it meant.

But it felt like it had always been there.

Kaerlin knelt beside him. "That's... familiar."

"I know that symbol," Mira said, crouching next to them. "That's one."

"One of what?" Kaerlin asked.

But Mira didn't answer. She just pulled out her charcoal and parchment, hands shaking, and began to draw.

"Keep going," she said.

So they did.

Kaerlin and Thomel tore at roots with bare hands, ripping back thick bark, choking on clouds of black dust that billowed with each strip. Their fingers turned gray. Their faces streaked. The air grew gritty, hard to breathe.

But still they worked.

One spiral.

Then another.

Larger.

Smaller.

Some half-hidden beneath overlapping tendrils. Some deep in knots of root.

Mira tracked them all, drawing feverishly with blackened fingertips, sweat cutting paths through the dust on her cheeks.

"Twenty," she whispered. "Twenty-one..."

And then—after what felt like forever—

"Twenty-two."

Each spiral different, but not chaotic.

They aligned with something unseen.

Not understood—but felt.

Then, a sound.

Soft.

Resonant.

The wall cracked.

Light poured through a widening seam.

They stepped forward—

And the cavern unraveled.

They were outside.
In daylight.
Back in the square of Dreelmere.

Mayor Halrick was mid-sentence atop his wooden platform, addressing the townsfolk.

“—and as I have said many times, there is nothing unusual occurring within this town—”

He stopped.

The entire town turned.

The siblings stood there—filthy, smoke-smeared, disheveled, covered in soot and sap and streaks of ash, blinking in the sunlight like creatures dragged from a dream.

The mayor's jaw dropped.

Near the edge of the crowd, Merra slowly raised one eyebrow.

No one spoke.

Above them, the bells swayed—
But gave no sound.

Chapter 12 - The Second Shard

Merra helped clean them up.

No fuss, no commentary—just soap, water, and sharp glances when anyone winced. The siblings sat around her workroom, wrapped in towels, hands raw, hair matted with black dust. As they scrubbed the grime from their skin, they noticed familiar items stacked neatly on a nearby shelf—packs, cloaks, even the hermit's curtain rod cane.

“These are ours,” Thom said, pulling a satchel down.

“I retrieved them,” Merra replied, drying her hands. “I thought you were dead. Or worse. And if you were, well... free things. I’m practical.” She paused. “But you’re not dead—so I suppose I just retrieved them for you. You’re welcome.”

She handed Mira a warm cloth, then nodded at the stack of drawings. “Let me see those.”

Mira unrolled her charcoal sketches, spreading them across the wooden table.

Merra leaned in, squinting, lips pursed. “I’ve never seen markings like these. Not in this sequence.”

A voice grumbled from the doorway.

“You’re still encouraging this nonsense?”

Mayor Halrick stepped into the shop, arms folded, boots muddy.

“You need to keep this quiet,” he said, straightening his coat. “Tell them nothing happened. Let them believe everything is fine. The last thing we need is wild stories and strange rumors. People get ideas. And ideas spread faster than facts.”

"We're not going to lie," Kaerlin said.

Halrick's expression tightened. "Don't be naive. I'm trying to protect the town. You think I don't want answers? I do. But I want order more."

"We're not here to start a panic," Mira said. "We're here to stop one."

"I get that you're scared," Thom added. "We are too. But silence won't help."

The mayor looked at them for a long moment.

Then his shoulders dropped. "Do you know what happens when people panic?" he said, voice quieter now. "They run. They flee. And when they go, they leave behind the ones who can't. The old. The sick. The scared. They leave me to pick up the pieces. To hold the town together. That's the only way we make it through this. Together."

"We understand," said Kerr.

"And we respect it," said Thom. "But we won't lie."

Halrick exhaled hard through his nose and stepped closer to the table.

He frowned, tapping one of the spirals. "You know these match the bells, right?"

Everyone froze.

"What did you just say?" Mira asked.

"These," Halrick said, gesturing again, "match the engravings on the Bell Tree's bells. I've seen them. Examined that tree a hundred times, trying to figure out what's causing all this weirdness. You think I don't care? You think I'm not scared too? But I can't have people panicking."

"Wait," Thom said. "You're sure?"

"Positive. The smallest spirals match the smallest bells. The largest... the biggest."

They stared at the drawings, breath caught.

Merra leaned forward, nodding slowly. "It's an order. A sequence to ring the bells."

"What happens when they're rung in that order?" Mira asked.

Nobody answered. Silence filled the shop like fog.

Then Kerr spoke. "We ring them."

"Absolutely not," Halrick snapped. "We don't know what it'll do."

"We don't know what not doing it will do," Thom countered. "The Fray is growing. It doesn't wait for permission."

"The hermit said the Shards are spines of the Pattern," Kerr added. "We think the Bell Tree has a connection to the Shards—maybe it was guarding one, or maybe it responded to the sequence. Hidden, dormant. Until now."

Merra looked between them, her voice low. "It's your call. But if you do it, do it with intention. With clarity."

They stepped out into the square.

People had begun to gather—curious, wary, confused. Halrick tried to hush them, to keep order, but Mira raised her voice.

“We went into the unknown,” she said. “We stepped into something none of us could explain—and we came back with proof. We didn’t understand it all, but we didn’t let fear stop us. We went forward. Because sometimes trying is the only thing that matters. Because standing still is just another way to fade. And we won’t fade—not quietly, not blindly, and not without a fight.”

Kerr stepped up beside her. “We’re not asking for trust. Just space. Let us try.”

A low murmur rippled through the crowd. No one moved to stop them.

They approached the Bell Tree.

The spirals were there—etched into the bells, just as Halrick had said. The order was unmistakable now.

Mira stood with the map. Kerr and Thom moved to opposite sides of the tree. Together, they began to ring the bells, one by one, in the sequence the drawings had revealed.

Soft chimes echoed through the square.

One.

Two.

Five.

Twelve.

A final note, clear and still.

Silence.

A breeze stirred the air—gentle, like the breath of something listening.

Then nothing.

Another moment passed.

No wind. No sound.

Only the sensation of breath held.

Then—the tree moved.

It groaned. Its limbs curled inward. Branches folded like parchment. Roots twisted and recoiled. The entire trunk compressed, shrinking inward, folding over and over into itself—into a knot of bark and shadow, dense and angular in ways the eye couldn’t follow.

Then, slowly, it began to unfold—delicately, precisely.

Not back into a tree.

But into a single, small object, resting in the center of the stone platform.

A black shard.

Smooth.

Silent.

The second of thirteen.