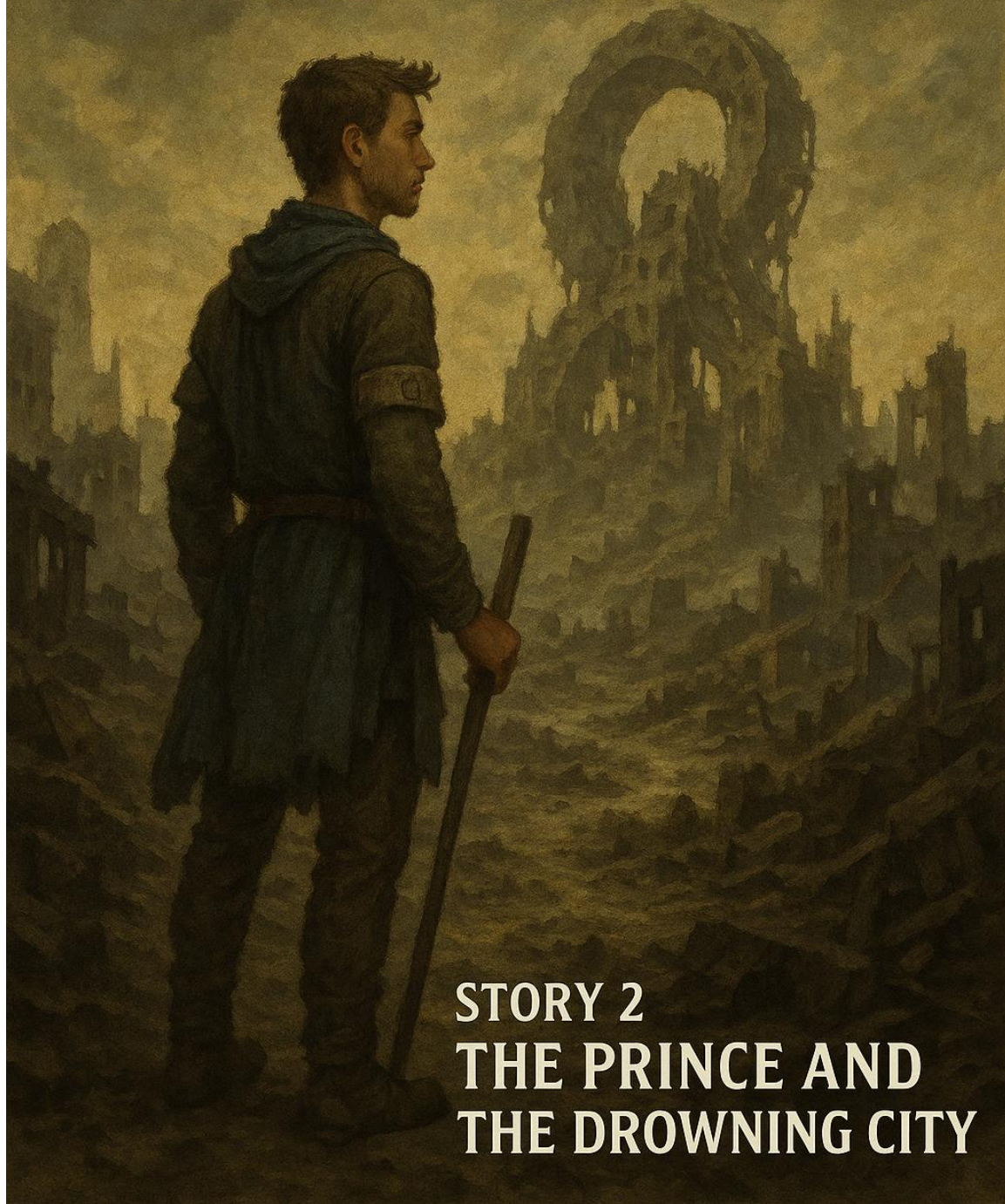


EVERLOOP

STORIES FROM THE BROKEN WORLD



STORY 2
THE PRINCE AND
THE DROWNING CITY

PROLOGUE: THE EVERLOOP

The Pattern was never meant to break.

That is what the First Architects believed. What they carved into stone and bent into sky. What they whispered as they shaped the rivers and flung the stars like seeds across the dark.

They called it the **Everloop**—a perfect lattice of time and space, a symmetry so absolute that even memory could rest within its folds. A song sung forever. A world without ending, because ending itself had been woven out.

But nothing made by hands—no matter how vast, no matter how sacred—can hold forever.

Beneath the surface of the weave, something stirs.

They say the First Map was drawn before ink, before tools. That it bloomed into being the moment the Pattern was cast—etched by thought alone. Not a guide, but a memory. Of what was, what is, and what must always be. Cities unborn. Rivers unnamed. Futures unchosen. All suspended like droplets in the curve of a loop.

And yet...

Even the oldest loops fray.

First in the edges. A soft unraveling. Days doubled. Towns forgotten. Roads walked but never made. Then the deeper rifts: the thinning of matter, the distortion of memory, the ripple through cause and consequence.

Those who have seen the Shards—those small, shimmering remnants of the First Pattern—know this:

They do not hum.

They remember.

Each one a stillpoint in a world that can no longer stand still.

The Scholars believe the Shards were safeguards. That the Architects, in their wisdom, placed them throughout the world as anchors—points of return, should the weave falter.

But others wonder...

Why would a perfect loop require safeguards at all?

What flaw did the Architects see, hidden in their own design?

And what, exactly, did they trap within it?

If there is an answer, it lies buried in time. Or beneath it. Or beyond.

The Fray spreads. The Shards awaken. The Everloop turns.

And somewhere deeper still, the world begins to ask:

If the Pattern was a prison...

...what was it meant to hold?

Chapter 1 – The Lord of Luck

The blade struck Auren across the ribs, a clean slice that would've laid a soldier flat.

Auren grinned.

“Excellent parry, Master-at-Arms!” he called as he stumbled backward, tripped over a training dummy, and landed flat on his back with a triumphant whoop.

Across the courtyard, the older man—scarred, stocky, and utterly unreadable—offered only a slight nod.

“Indeed, my lord. A... reversal. Devastating.”

Auren rolled to his feet with the flourish of a man who believed the tumble had been strategic.

“Not many could've baited a feint with a stumble,” he declared, adjusting his collar and flicking imaginary dust from his shoulder. “I rather like that one.”

The Master-at-Arms held his sword with both hands, knuckles white, breathing through his nose in what might've been a prayer.

“Your instincts are... unorthodox,” he said.

“Unorthodox victory is still victory,” Auren said cheerfully. “It's not how you fall—it's how you convince the world you meant to.”

The older man offered no rebuttal. Instead, he raised his sword again.

Auren sprang forward with a lunging jab, slipped mid-step, and accidentally hurled his weapon ten feet across the yard.

“Ah!” he cried, spinning as though it had been intentional. “Disarmament test. Yours. Go.”

The Master blinked.

“My lord, you are currently unarmed.”

“Which makes it harder for you,” Auren said brightly, circling him with wide, theatrical steps. “Unless you want me to retrieve it?”

“No... need.” The Master-at-Arms sighed and stepped forward, swiping downward with a clean strike.

Auren twisted to dodge, lost his footing, and fell straight into the older man—knocking him off balance and sending both of them tumbling to the ground in a tangled heap.

There was a long pause. Then Auren, lying on top, gave a satisfied nod.

“See? If this were a real battle, you’d be under me. I win.”

“You... fell on me,” the Master muttered, winded.

“Precisely. A tactical descent.” Auren clambered upright with a theatrical bow. “If your technique doesn’t improve, I may need to start requesting *two* opponents just to keep my skills fresh.”

The Master-at-Arms turned away, his expression hidden beneath the scowl that had become his armor. He retrieved Auren’s sword, handed it back with perfect form, and muttered:

“A duel of one is still a duel, my lord. Let the record show... decisive.”

Dinner that night was served in the Winter Room, where the hearth was always full and the curtains never opened. The scent of cinnamon broth and roasted parsnip drifted lazily through the wood-paneled hall. At the long table sat the Lord and Lady of House Thorne, eyes soft with warmth and worry.

Auren entered in half armor and half silk, still glistening faintly from the fight.

“You should’ve seen me today,” he said, sliding into his seat. “I nearly broke my foot off baiting a feint—revolutionary technique.”

His mother, Lady Thorne, blinked slowly. “Did you... win?”

“Of course I won.” He lifted a grape from the bowl beside him and popped it into his mouth. “Master says I’m unorthodox. You know. Unpredictable. Dangerous.”

His father, Lord Thorne, didn’t look up from his wine. “Unpredictable and dangerous. Hmm.”

They exchanged a glance—a quiet one, the kind forged in long love and deeper secrets.

“I’ve been thinking,” Auren said between bites. “The business with Virelay. The disappearing town. The sailors who come back with their heads full of fog and their hearts turned backward.”

He placed his goblet down a little harder than intended.

“Someone needs to go. To help them. To fix it.”

His mother’s spoon paused halfway to her mouth.

“Auren—”

“They say buildings appear one day and vanish the next. That rivers pour the wrong way and then forget they ever did. That fish swim under the stones now, and some days the sky’s the wrong color.”

His voice, for all its pomp, held a kernel of fear. Not for himself. But for the people.

“Our trade lines are crumbling. Ships can’t find the harbor. No one can tell what’s real. And every day the Fray reaches further inland.”

He looked up at them, solemn now.

“The town feeds the rivers. The rivers feed the land. If we lose Virelay, we lose everything.”

Silence. Then:

“You’ve always cared deeply for our people,” his mother said gently.

“That’s what this house is for,” his father added. “But... Auren, perhaps we should wait. Perhaps there are others better trained. Or better... prepared.”

More glances. This one more urgent.

“You mean soldiers? The ones who came back whispering nonsense and crying into their boots?”

Auren pushed his plate away.

“I’m not afraid. I have studied the Fray, its signs, its patterns. And I know our land. I know our stories. I am... prepared.”

His parents said nothing. They looked at their son—a boy full of stories and courage and love. A boy who had never truly failed.

And so they smiled.

And changed the subject.

And planned, quietly, to keep him safe.

They loved their people more than anything—and their son more still.

And that was why they would not allow him to go.

Not willingly.

For in some part of them, too, they believed that if the world could be mended through compassion, through stories, through the quiet magic of belief, then perhaps Auren truly had a part to play.

But not *out there*. Not in Virelay. Not in the heart of the Fray.

There was one truth they had never spoken aloud. Not to the court. Not to each other. Not even to him.

For all his book-learning, for all his study of lore and maps and myths, for all his generous heart and brilliant mind...

Auren Thorne was, by every measure of battle and blade, an exceptionally bad fighter.

And so they smiled again, faintly.

And waited for the right time to tell him no.

CHAPTER 2: The Great Escape

It began, as many of Auren's plans did, with a whispered monologue to himself beside a half-open window and a loaf of stolen bread.

"Phase one," he murmured, "procure rations."

The bread had been sitting on the kitchen table, still warm, intended for the staff's supper. Auren had "procured" it with the calculated swiftness of a cat burglar—which is to say, he casually strolled into the kitchen, took the loaf, nodded at the cook, and said, "*Top secret mission. You understand.*" The cook, who had watched Auren grow up and once seen him trip over a rug while trying to bow, simply smiled and handed him a wedge of cheese to go with it.

"Phase two," Auren intoned, crouching behind a decorative hedge in the manor's west garden, "stealth movement across the perimeter."

He darted out from behind the hedge like a fox in the moonlight, only to be spotted immediately by two gardeners taking a smoke break by the fountain. Auren froze mid-stride, one leg lifted dramatically in the air.

“Evening, m’lord,” one of the gardeners said.

Auren narrowed his eyes. “Forget you saw me.”

“Alright,” said the other, taking a drag of his pipe. “Forgotten already.”

Auren nodded grimly and vanished into a rose arbor, convinced his fierce tone had struck fear into their hearts.

“Phase three,” he whispered, flattening himself against the wall of the east wing, “silent infiltration past the eastern corridor.” This “infiltration” consisted of him walking in a wide arc around the outdoor patio, waving at a maid who was sweeping the stairs. She waved back and pointed to the path that would avoid the muddy section. He saluted her solemnly.

Then came the final test: the front gate.

An iron-wrought archway stood sentinel at the edge of the grounds, flanked by twin stone columns and one slightly bored guard named Brennick. He was leaning against his spear, humming a tune, when Auren burst from the shrubbery and rolled into a crouch not five paces away.

“Don’t move,” Auren hissed. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

Brennick blinked. “Wasn’t planning on moving, m’lord.”

“I’m trained in seven forms of combat,” Auren lied with astonishing confidence. “Eight if you count underwater.”

Brennick glanced at the manor, where lights still flickered in warm windows, and then back to the young man who had once attempted to joust with a broomstick and a goat. He stepped aside.

Auren gave a slow nod. “Wise choice.”

He slipped—no, *swept*—through the gate like a shadow in motion, vanishing into the road beyond with dramatic flare, the bread tucked triumphantly under one arm, the cheese in his satchel, and his father’s old compass dangling from his belt.

High above, on the west-facing balcony of Thorne Manor, Alira and Eldren stood shoulder to shoulder, wrapped in shawls against the night breeze.

“He’s gone,” Eldren said softly.

Alira nodded. “He thinks we didn’t see him.”

“He thinks *Brennick* was afraid of him.”

They both chuckled, and then fell into silence.

Below, Auren’s silhouette grew smaller as it made its way down the path, lantern bobbing like a firefly in the dark. For all his comic bluster, for all his fumbling and bravado, there was something true at his core. A strange sort of gravity, however crooked.

Alira reached for Eldren’s hand. He took it gently.

“He’ll learn,” she said. “One way or another.”

“And if the world is kind,” Eldren murmured, “he might even survive it.”

Their fingers intertwined as the last glimmer of Auren disappeared over the hill, the boy certain he had escaped into legend.

And perhaps, in some small way, he had.

CHAPTER 3 — The Road and the Ruse

Auren Thorne was hungry.

Not starving, not desperate—but the kind of hungry that made you rethink leaving home with only three oatcakes, two apples, and what he now realized was ceremonial jerky. He’d mistaken it for travel rations, but it turned out to be part of a decorative gift basket meant for a departing ambassador. It had a ribbon on it.

Still, he was undeterred. He *had* studied the old maps. He knew these lands like a scholar knew ink. Virelay lay beyond the coastal ridge, two days’ ride or four days’ walk—if one walked *sensibly*. Auren, it should be said, did not.

At first, he kept to the brush beside the road, imagining patrols scouring the land for him, dramatic reunions and forced returns. But brambles had no flair for choreography, and after the third trip, tumble, and face-full of thistle, he conceded to practicality and returned to the road—deciding that the true disguise was confidence.

Which is how he began rehearsing his cover story aloud as he marched down the empty road in full view of absolutely no one.

“I’m a body double,” he muttered, “for the Prince. Due to assassination attempts. Yes. Dangerous work, really. But someone’s got to do it.” He cleared his throat, tried a deeper voice. “He’s bed-bound this week with... chronic kneecap inversion. Very serious. Kneecaps—flipped entirely inward. Happens when you spend too long horseback fencing in cold weather. Nothing can be done.”

He nodded to himself. Convincing. Specific. Devastating.

The sun dipped low when he reached a small village just shy of the river bend, where woodsmoke curled up from squat chimneys and warm light spilled out of a tavern window that shimmered like syrup against the coming dark. His stomach made the decision before his mind could catch up.

The place was called *The Cracked Pot*, and it lived up to its name—walls slightly leaning, shutters mismatched, but golden with welcome. A heavy drink bell swung above the bar, and a sign hung over the hearth that read:

NO SWORDS, NO SHOUTING, NO WEEPING—UNLESS IT’S A BEAUTIFUL SONG.

Auren entered, tried to appear nonchalant, and approached the bar with the swagger of someone playing a role slightly too large for them. “Evening,” he said. “Your finest loaf and a small stew, please. I’ll pay in coin, of course.”

The barkeep blinked, then squinted. “Auren Thorne?”

There was a pause, then a quiet ripple of recognition around the room. Heads turned. A chair scraped back.

In Auren’s mind, this was *it*. The moment when his identity was discovered. Where a bounty hunter would surely spring from the shadows, or a whispering spy would dash off to report his position. He placed a hand near his belt, where he kept a dinner knife sharpened slightly too eagerly.

“I... suggest,” Auren said carefully, “we all just go on with our evenings. No need for dramatics.”

The villagers looked at one another. Someone offered a polite shrug. Another raised a cup in silent toast.

“Well said, lad,” the barkeep replied. “You’ll have your stew. On the house.”

“Don’t *bribe* me,” Auren hissed in a whisper. “I know how these things work.”

The barkeep stared. “Right.”

As things settled and Auren took a sip of cider, still scanning the room for betrayal, the door slammed open behind him.

A hulking man stumbled in—shirt half-tucked, eyes bleary, and carrying the mood of a storm that had already decided who it wanted to hit. The tavern quieted at once.

The drunk scanned the room. “Anyone here got a face needin’ fixin’?”

Auren stood slowly, finished chewing a bit of bread. Destiny he thought to himself.

“Go home, friend,” he said. “Sober up. No need to trouble these kind people.”

The man blinked at him. “I’ll show you trouble, then? You look soft.”

“I’m trained,” Auren said calmly, “to appear soft. Assassin-like-soft.”

The man snorted and took a step forward. “You talk soft.”

Auren held his ground. “And you smell like a sewer.”

A few chuckles bubbled up, quickly stifled.

The man scowled and advanced with fists rising.

Auren, calmly and with purpose, began to stretch. Not as mockery—genuine warm-up. A wrist roll. A shoulder circle. He bent sideways, trying to remember the stance Master-at-Arms—Edran—always corrected. Then, with practiced poise, he swept his leg out to loosen his hip—

—and clipped the side of the table.

His cup tipped. “No, no, no,” he muttered, reaching to catch it with the speed of a man who really liked his cider.

In doing so, his foot swung out again, low and unplanned, just as the drunk was closing in. It struck the man square in the shin, buckling his knees. The brute stumbled backward, off-balance, and pitched sideways—striking his temple *clang* against the tavern's brass drink bell.

Auren rose with his cider in hand, satisfied.

He turned just in time to see the drunk slumping against a chair, mumbling something about a duck and a toll road.

Auren knelt beside him, frowning. “He’s clearly unfit to fight,” he declared. “I won’t duel a man who can’t defend himself.”

He gently laid the man down, tucked a few coins under a coaster, and handed a silver to the barkeep. “See that he gets water and... directions.”

Then, brushing off his coat, he nodded to the silent, wide-eyed room and stepped out into the cool night.

Behind him, after a beat of stunned quiet, someone muttered:

"We're gonna be telling that story for *years*—and it won't sound any less stupid."

The tavern erupted. Auren, already halfway down the lane, mistook it for cheers.

CHAPTER 4 — Virelay

The first thing Auren noticed was the sea.

Not the sound of it, though that, too, was constant—murmuring and hissing like it knew secrets it refused to say twice. Not even the smell, brine and fish and smoke curling in every alley.

No. It was the fact that no matter where he stood, someone, somewhere, was hauling up a fish.

He saw it from the hilltop road as he entered town: a single point offshore where the lines were always cast and always tugged taut with life. Every boat in the harbor angled toward it. Nets dipped there. Eyes lingered. Even the gulls clustered over it in an almost reverent spiral.

That, he thought, filing it carefully in the library of his mind, *isn't nothing*.

The second thing he noticed was everything else.

Virelay was *wrong*.

It wasn't rot or fire or ruin—not in the traditional sense. The town still stood, still bustled. But it didn't... hold still.

He saw buildings where none had been a moment before. Streets that narrowed into alleys and then widened again without a sound. Children chasing marbles down steps that hadn't existed when he passed the square that morning.

And the people—gods, the people. Talking in half-sentences. Selling pears with names that changed between customers. An old woman scolding a chicken as though it were a boy named Lark.

At first, Auren tried to chalk it up to nerves. New places always had rhythms. But Virelay didn't *settle*—it shifted. Like trying to read a sentence written on water.

By afternoon, he was ready to rest and regroup. He found an inn that looked promising—*The Oar and Candle*, its sign swaying gently beside a narrow stone door. Inside was warm, modest, and *mostly* normal. A front desk. A bored clerk. Chairs. A woven rug with far too many birds on it.

"I'd like a room," Auren said.

The clerk looked up. "Of course. Have you checked in already?"

"No."

The clerk frowned. "That's odd. You were here just this morning."

"I wasn't," Auren replied, then added, "Unless I was and don't remember. Which... is possible now, I suppose."

"Well." The clerk consulted a ledger. "It says Room 3B. But 3B isn't..." He blinked. "3B's not a room. That's a broom closet."

"I'll take it," Auren said.

"No no—wait, now it *is* a room. But it's occupied." He flipped a few pages. "By you."

Auren stared at him.

"You're currently in it," the clerk continued, then looked behind Auren's shoulder. "Or... you *were*."

Auren turned. Nothing was there but a plant and a crooked painting of a boat with legs.

"Is the lobby spoken for?" he asked. "This couch looks very... horizontal."

The clerk opened his mouth, closed it. "Technically, the lobby's under renovation."

"No it's not."

The clerk blinked, then frowned at a paper. "Huh. You're right."

Auren layed down.

"I'm checked in," he said flatly. "This is my room."

He slept like a man trying to stay awake, limbs stiff, boots still on, one hand resting on his satchel. Sometime in the night he woke to the sound of two people arguing in a language he didn't know, only to realize it was one man arguing with himself in a mirror.

By morning, the inn had grown a second staircase. It now led nowhere.

The next day brought more of the same. Auren wandered the docks, asked questions, took notes, tried to chart the layout of the town only to find that whole intersections had rearranged when he returned to them.

He spoke with a fruit vendor named Nel—sharp-eyed, warm, talked about her daughter's wedding and the price of cinnamon.

The next morning, she was gone. Her stall was there, but it belonged to a bearded man who insisted it always had. No one knew who Nel was.

Auren asked three more people. None had heard of her. One insisted cinnamon had never existed.

And the fishermen... they all said the same thing, in different ways:

"You want fish? Go east, by the black buoy. Always a bite there. Every hour. Every day."

He marked the spot on his map. He asked *why* the fish gathered there.

"Because they do."

"That's not an answer."

"No," the man said, eyes already glassing over, "it's not."

By the second evening, Auren sat back in the Oar and Candle, jaw tight, heart heavy. He had hoped to fix something. Uncover a truth. Instead, he felt like he was drifting through the world with nothing to push against—no walls, no roots, no *reality* that would hold still long enough to explain itself.

Even the inn had turned against him.

He stepped through the door only to be greeted by the clerk again, ledger in hand.

"Welcome," said the man. "Checking in?"

Auren walked past him without breaking stride.

"I live on the couch," he muttered.

The clerk blinked. "We don't have a—"

“Yes,” Auren said flatly. “You do.”

He flopped down on it with a sigh and pulled his cloak over his face.

The clerk stood quietly for a moment, then turned the ledger upside down and stared at it.

Outside, the wind howled like it had somewhere else to be. Somewhere saner.

And in the heart of the broken harbor town, Auren Thorne—body double, scholar, accidental folk hero—lay on a couch he did not own, in a building that may not have existed, wondering how on earth you were supposed to save a place that forgot itself between heartbeats.

CHAPTER 5: The Constant

Auren awoke with a groan and the distinct sense that he hadn’t truly slept. The hotel lobby, though dim and stuttering between three different versions of itself through the night, had at least stayed a version of *itself*. He rubbed his eyes, blinked toward the check-in desk—which now had a hanging fern, a different clerk, and a placard declaring it *The Azure Marlin Inn: Newly Reopened!*—and walked right past.

"Checking in?" called the man, cheerful as a summer bell.

Auren didn’t answer. His head was heavy, his boots found the cobblestone street more by memory than will. The morning light was soft, slanting, and full of the kind of peace that mocked those who knew better.

And then—

“Morning, Lord Thorne!”

Nel.

She stood beside a fruit cart that hadn’t been there the day before, nibbling on a fig like she’d never *not* been there.

“You...” Auren stopped. “You weren’t—”

“Wasn’t what?” she said, cocking her head. “You’ve got that shadowed look again. You sleep alright?”

“No. No, you weren’t—” he started again, but her smile had the stubborn glow of someone whose memories did *not* include failing to exist. The day before—no one had known her. Not even the innkeeper. Now she was here, as normal as sunlight.

It undid something inside him.

Auren turned and walked away mid-sentence, letting her voice trail off behind him. The street was shifting again—new doors, new faces. Some things remained. A man arguing with a goose. A pair of children skipping in opposite directions. But even those pieces had a disjointed feel, like torn cloth trying to pass as whole.

He stopped at the docks.

Two fishermen sat on an overturned barrel and a pile of netting, smoking pipes and speaking in that lazy rhythm only men who lived by tides could manage.

“Still biting out there?”

“Every bloody morning. Never seen the fish this easy.”

“Same spot?”

“Same as always.”

Auren turned his head slowly toward the sea.

There—just past the jetties—was the pattern. A crescent of bobbing vessels. Even from here, he could see the floating traps. Every single boat, in nearly the same spot as yesterday. And the day before.

Everything else had shifted. Streets rearranged. People vanished. But this...

This hadn't changed.

He stared harder.

That wasn't nothing.

—

The dockmaster called him mad. The sky was clear, the gulls idle, and the boat freshly tarred. But the man gave him a nervous glance and said, “Feels wrong. Looks right, but feels wrong. That sky's got a hum to it.”

Auren took the oars anyway.

He pushed off alone.

The first ten minutes were calm—so much so he nearly second-guessed the dockmaster's warning. But then, without warning, the sea around him was *not* the sea he'd left. Wind tore

across the surface. The sky did not darken—it simply changed, all at once, from gentle blue to a rippling sheet of black and silver. Not a storm that rolled in. A storm that *was*.

The waves came without warning, slamming his tiny craft like a toy between gods.

Auren gripped the sides. He was nearly pitched into the brine twice. Once, he hung off the edge, feet flailing, salt in his mouth, before he dragged himself back in. Another time, he dropped his oar and had to lunge to catch it before it vanished into the void of the sea.

But he stayed the course.

Each time he looked back, he saw Virelay on the shore—bathed in soft sunlight like a painting. He thought of his warm bed at the manor, the feel of his mother's hand in his hair, of books that never changed and mornings that always made sense.

He almost turned.

Almost.

But then he remembered Nel, appearing where she hadn't been.

The inn, blinking through states.

The soldier on day one who, on day two, hadn't existed at all.

And the boats. Always there. Unchanging.

He rowed harder.

—

By the time he reached the spot—a good hundred yards past the farthest of the fixed fishing line markers—his arms were trembling, the wind a scream in his ears. And yet, here, in the very center of that cursed sea...

Stillness.

No other boats.

Only the traps.

Dozens of them, bobbing and swaying like empty thoughts.

The fish were still being caught, he was certain of that. But there were no men tending them. No vessels. Just the lines. Dozens of thick rope lines stretching down into the depths, like threads sewn into the skin of the sea.

Auren stood, wobbled, and peered over the edge.

And then he saw it.

Not a shape. Not a glow.

Just... depth.

He reached down and grabbed one of the lines. It was wet and rough, anchored deep.

The answer wasn't *on* the sea.

It was *beneath* it.

Whatever held this cursed loop in place, whatever made the town forget, reshape, re-begin—it was *down there*, in the dark, beneath the tide and memory both.

And Auren Thorne, untested knight of tales, terrible at fighting but too full of belief to stop now...

...began to tie the line around his waist.

CHAPTER 6: The Descent

The sea was quiet. Not calm—never calm here—but quiet in that strange way where all the noise seemed held just behind the eardrum. As if the deep itself were listening.

Auren floated in the small boat, the single oar tucked beside him. The sky above had darkened without warning. Clouds that hadn't rolled in—they had simply *been*—now loomed, low and woolen, pressing down like a lid.

He looked out across the shifting water, following the lines. Dozens of them, slack cords from bobbing traps that fanned outward like spokes on an unseen wheel, stretching into a single distant point.

The fishermen had said it without saying it.

Always there. Always full. Always in that spot.

Auren tied the boat's rope around one wrist, more out of instinct than confidence. Then, he stood, pulled off his tunic, and let it drop. The wind prickled cold against his chest. His breath came slower now.

He stepped to the edge.

And he dove.

The first seconds were silence.

No splash, no bubbles—just *descent*. The chill seized his skin like a second skeleton, and the water blurred the world to hues of grey and blue and the dark green of unseen things.

He opened his eyes.

Below him, lines. Dozens of them. Curling, swaying, converging.

Each fish trap line trailed deeper and deeper, no fish in sight now—only the ropes, sagging toward a shared gravity.

He kicked, steady. His limbs had always been strong, if untrained. But this was no swim in a palace pond. The sea here was layered in cold, and the deeper he went, the harder it pulled.

His ears ached. He tried to clear them. Equalize. But the pressure only *pressed*.

Keep going.

His lungs were still full, but already they *knew*. They whispered panic in small ways. A cramp behind the ribs. A pinch in his throat.

Below, the lines vanished into a hazy blur. But he saw it.

A circle. No—a *well*.

A perfect ring of stone, maybe ten feet wide, embedded in the seafloor. Ancient, moss-covered. Not ruins. Not broken.

Just... waiting.

He swam further.

The ropes coiled around it like reverent hands. They didn't go *into* the well. They ended just above it, floating like offerings.

And suddenly, the instinct hit.

Turn back.

His body screamed it—not a thought, not a fear, but a *command*. His lungs were burning now. Not a metaphor. *Burning*. He could feel the last air thrumming in his chest like a drum stretched too tight.

If he swam now, *now*, he could reach the surface. Maybe.

But that wasn't the question.

The question was the well.

The question was: *Was it worth dying for?*

He hovered above the ring, arms and legs trembling, the world narrowing.

No one would blame you.

No one would know.

No one could follow this far.

His vision blurred. His chest spasmed once, hard. A spark of panic cut through the fog.

He reached out a hand—

And let himself drift lower.

Toward the dark circle.

Toward the choice.

Toward the point of no return.

CHAPTER 7: The Ember and the Drowned Room

The sea pressed in on all sides—black, endless, alive.

Auren hovered just above the seafloor, lungs aching, legs trembling with exhaustion. The tangle of trap lines had vanished behind him, lost in the dark above. There was no more rope. No more guide. Only this.

The Well.

It yawned beneath him—a perfect circle of carved stone, older than reason, rimmed in threads of glowing algae that pulsed like veins. No current stirred its depths. No fish strayed near. It was not a hole in the sea, but a wound—waiting.

He felt it before he understood it: a kind of gravity that wasn't physical. A pull that spoke not to the body, but to something *beneath* the body. A calling.

Auren's chest spasmed. He had seconds, maybe less.

He looked up—darkness.

He looked down—into the Well.

There would be no swimming back.

One path was certain death.

The other *might* be worse.

But he had come this far.

He kicked once.

And let the sea take him in.

—

Silence.

Then motion—sideways, backwards, *inside-out*.

Auren couldn't tell if he was falling or flying or folding. Water roared and disappeared all at once, his lungs flaring in panic—and then, without warning, there was *air*.

He gasped and coughed, sprawling forward. Beneath him was stone. Dry, cold stone. His fingers scrabbled over it. His knees hit wood. He blinked and found himself on the floor of a room.

Not underwater. Not dead.

A room.

It was small, windowless, crooked. The walls leaned slightly inward, as if bowed by pressure or age. A warped table stood in one corner, a single chair beside it. Dust floated in the warm air, and directly ahead of him: a hearth.

A fire crackled softly inside.

He staggered to his feet. Everything felt *tilted*, like the world had been spun and set down wrong. His ears rang with the absence of the sea.

The hearth burned steady, the only sound in the room besides his own breath. But something was *off*. Auren stepped closer.

Within the flames sat an ember that wasn't like the others.

It was shaped like a shard of obsidian—only it glowed with a pulse, as if breathing. Red-gold light flickered from its edges, each pulse stronger than the last. It didn't burn. It *radiated*.

He should have hesitated. Should have questioned.

But all he could feel was a strange *recognition*. Like it had been waiting.

Auren pulled the edge of his damp tunic over his hand and reached into the fire.

The heat should've seared him. But it didn't. The moment his fingers closed around the shard, everything changed.

A *surge* tore through him—sight, sound, sensation. A city crumbling, rebuilding, vanishing. A thousand bells ringing out at once. A pattern unseen, suddenly *seen*.

He fell to his knees.

The shard, now in his palm, cooled as he watched. Red faded to gold, then to deep, glossy black. Perfectly smooth. Silent.

Behind him, the room groaned.

The chair toppled. The table split down the center. Water burst through the cracks between the floorboards, gushing up from beneath. The windows screamed open—though they hadn't been there a moment before—and torrents of seawater came rushing in.

Auren spun. The hearth exploded outward, bricks scattering. The ceiling bowed. Water poured from above.

He was trapped.

Within seconds, he was waist-deep. Then chest. The door was gone. The fire was gone. Only the shard remained, clenched in his hand, warm and alive.

He held it tight, squeezed his eyes shut, and took one last breath before the room filled completely.

—

Light.

He coughed, choked, rolled onto his side.

He was on the beach.

Warm sand shifted beneath him, sunlight pressing against his face. The surf lapped at his boots—gentle, rhythmic. Gulls called faintly overhead.

He gasped and sat upright.

The sky was blue. Clear. The storm—gone. The waters that had swallowed him were calm now, glittering under the sun.

And Virelay—Virelay stood still.

The harbor was no longer shrouded in flicker or fog. Its buildings stayed put. Its rooftops held shape. The city wasn't healed, not fully—but it had *settled*. As if time, for the moment, had agreed to flow in just one direction.

Auren looked down.

The shard sat in his palm, dark and cool. Silent now. But full of something he couldn't name.

He smiled, just a little.

“...Master-at-Arms—Edran,” he whispered hoarsely. “You'd never believe it.”

And then, without fanfare or flourish, he stood.

The wind shifted. Somewhere in the distance, a bell rang once—soft and low.

Auren turned toward the town.

The tide had gone out.

And the way was clear.