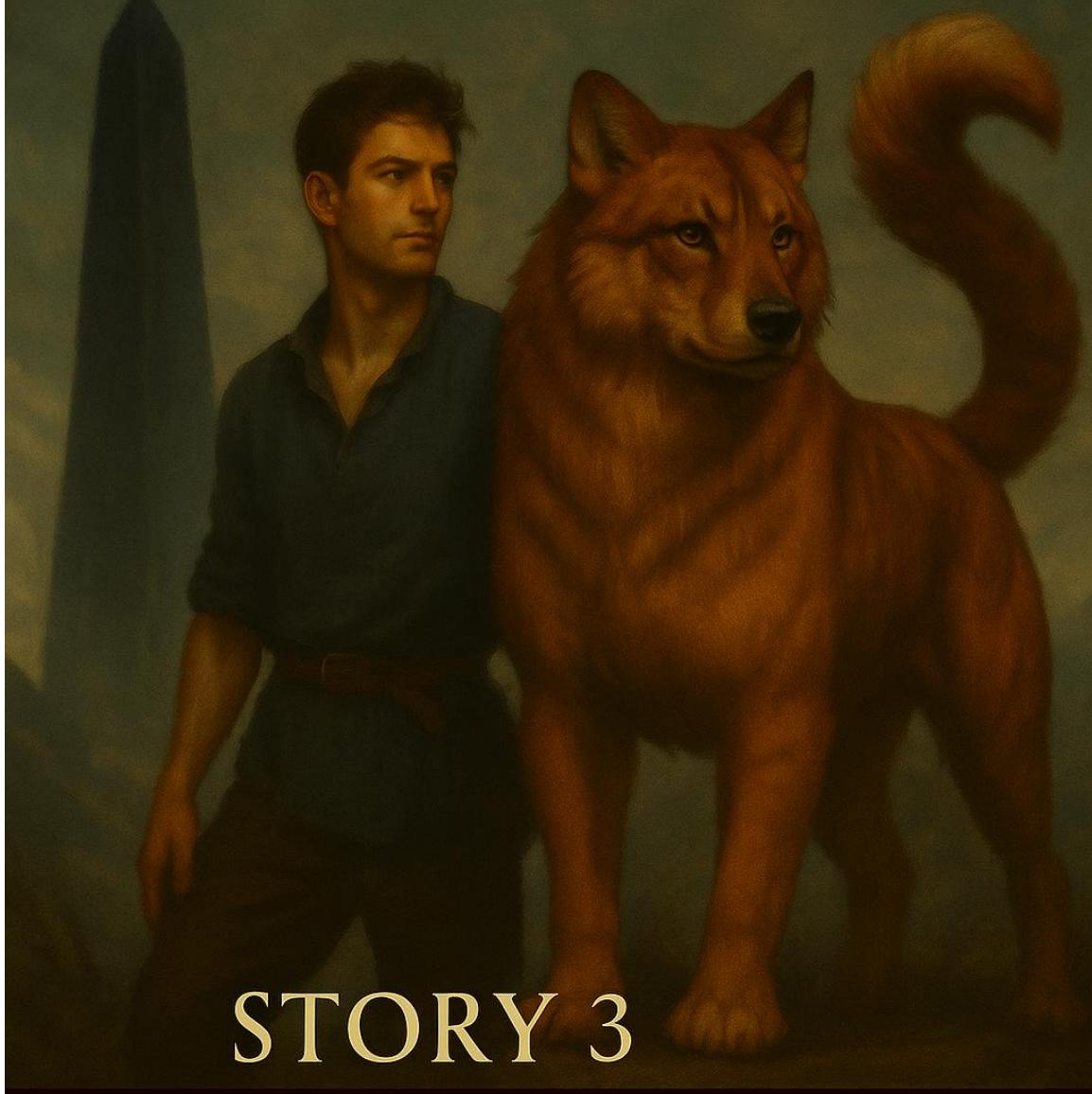


EVERLOOP

STORIES FROM THE BROKEN WORLD



STORY 3

THE BALLAD OF
ROOK AND MYX

Prologue: The Fold Beneath

The Pattern was not the first thing to exist. It was simply the first thing that *stuck*.
A moment of order bold enough to resist the drift.

But beneath every map is an erasure. And beneath every song, a silence that shaped it.
The Everloop did not erase the chaos—it only covered it.

What came before the Weaving did not vanish.
It *folded*.

Deep under the seams of the world—beneath soil, below sea, behind time—something else remained: The Fold.

A place without shape or sequence. Not before, not after. Only *between*. Where discarded possibilities gather like dust in a closed book.

The Fold is not evil. It is not alive. But it *listens*. And sometimes, it *answers*.

Each time a Shard is unearthed—each time a thread is touched or plucked or broken—the Fold stirs. Not with vengeance. Not with purpose.

Only with memory.

There are those who dream the Fold. There are those who fall into it. And there are those who walk its edge—unaware, unprepared, undone.

The Vaultkeepers once believed that everything could be remembered.
That history was a circle. That nothing truly ended.

But even they now whisper of things not written in any loop. Things that came before the First Map. Before the First Architects.

Before the Pattern itself.

Some say the Fray is not a failure of the weave—but its awakening.
That the world was never meant to be held so tightly.

And that the Fold waits not to devour us...
...but to set us free.

The Shards are calling.
The Everloop is thinning.
The Fold remembers.

And somewhere, just beyond the edge of memory—
the Prime Beings turn in their sleep.

CHAPTER 1 — Play the Game or Play the Player

Dusk rolled across the hills like a wolf deciding which sheep to kill first.

The town of **Varnhalt**—if you could call it a town—was little more than a cluster of stone huts, wood planks, and stubborn people who hadn’t yet been burned, buried, or bought. It sat hunched against the shoulder of a cliffside, where the wind howled like it had bad news and nowhere to be.

Myx lay in the dirt outside the tavern, watching the day exhale. A rusted anvil’s throw away, a blacksmith swore at a bent horseshoe. A goat bleated, got kicked, and bleated again. Two children ran screaming down the road—one chasing the other with what might have been a dead snake. Maybe not dead.

The barbershop, tavern, and jail all shared the same crooked roof. A man walked in with three teeth and came out with two. Someone cheered. Probably not the man.

What a place to rot, Myx thought, curling his long tail tighter around his haunches. His ears flicked toward the sound of someone vomiting behind the stable. *Civilization*.

He licked his paw, slowly. Deliberately. Like a noble judging a bad wine. He had dust in his fur. Fleas too, probably. One of them was named Percy. Myx had decided to let him stay. Percy didn’t bite much, and he kept to himself.

His amber eyes scanned the street again. Smoke. Boots. Harsh hands. Quiet knives.

This was not a town that made room for softness.

And Myx, bless his soul, was soft. Not weak. Not fragile. Just... made of loyalty and thick fur and deep sighs. Which made him an **anomaly**, in a place like this. Not that anyone here knew what the word *anomaly* meant.

He narrowed his eyes toward the front door of the tavern.

Inside, the tavern’s only light came from the hearth and a crooked lantern strung low above the card table, where five rough men hunched over a game of **Everloop**—a local vice that ruined wages and friendships in equal measure.

“Wasn’t there yesterday,” said Dorn, the broad-shouldered smith, voice low. “Whole bloody ridge was bare. Now it’s there. Black stone. Tall as three steeples.”

“Things are drawn to it,” said Vett, tapping a finger against his mug. “Birds. Flies. Even the wind. Like it’s got a pull.”

“Or a prize,” muttered Marlo, bald with burn-scabbed hands. “Something worth guarding. Or stealing.”

Rook had said nothing then. He’d only sipped his drink and listened, eyes fixed not on the fire, but on the reflection of the table in his cup.

Now, the talk was cards.

The game was **Everloop**, played with a single spiral board and a deck of ninety cards—Score cards, Modifiers, and the dreaded **FRAY** setups. The goal was simple in theory: reach a high Personal Score when the shared Table Score hit exactly **100**.

In practice? It was anything but simple.

Players formed loops with Score cards—**+6 Boar Totem**, **+3 Fang Sigil**—and used Modifiers to reverse, double, or share those scores through forced alliances. A loop might help you. It might help your enemy. The best players didn’t just play their hand. They played the end of the game.

And in Everloop, the end could be snatched away at any time—especially when someone marked a **FRAY**.

Rook slouched like a man fading from luck. Three cards left. One spun lazily between two fingers. His grin was crooked, his jacket only half-buttoned, and his boots had once been handsome. He looked like someone who got lucky just often enough to be dangerous.

He’s up to something, Myx thought from outside. He always is. He looks broke, which means he’s about to take everything.

“Tough hand?” Dorn asked, dropping a **+6 Boar Totem** card with a red chip beside it—an aggressive power play that pushed both his score and the Table Score closer to 100.

“Should’ve quit while you were ahead.”

Rook sighed. “Apparently I don’t do smart things after dusk.”

Or before, Myx thought. Or when sober. Or hungry. Or conscious.

Vett leaned in next, slapping down a **Loop Chain** Modifier with a **+3 Fang Sigil**—piggybacking onto Dorn’s power and chaining their scores together.

Rook’s eyes narrowed. “Adorable. But if I were Dorn”—he gestured lazily—“I’d be wondering why Vett suddenly wants to share a score. The man’s idea of partnership usually ends in stabbing.”

Dorn didn't blink.

Rook turned to Marlo. "Marlo. You've got a **Crown Inverse** in-hand—I saw the edge when you drew. Use it. Flip the table's gain to your own without helping them. Do that, and we all walk out with coin."

Marlo shrugged. "Nah. Let's see you sweat."

He dropped a plain **+4 Spiral Tail**. No modifier. No disruption.

Of course, Myx thought. Why prevent disaster when you can make it worse?

Moves snapped into place. The Table Score surged past 88. Right into dangerous territory.

Everyone paused. No one marked a Fray—at least, no one had claimed to.

Rook's stack collapsed. Two of his chips were gone. One of his tokens slid to Dorn. Vett laughed, slow and wheezy.

Rook stared at the board. Then casually, he laid two facedown cards in front of him.

"I mark the Fray."

Vett frowned. "Now? Bit late, don't you think?"

Rook flipped one card: a **+6**.

"Targets space 66. Last round. You boys skipped over it."

He flipped the second card: **Fractured Crown**.

"Modifier card. Legal FRAY setup."

Groans. Swearing.

"You had a Fray set on sixty-six?" Marlo snapped. "That was two rounds ago!"

"Correct," said Rook, flipping his remaining card—a **Low Spiral**, once discarded, now reclaimed.

"I just didn't feel like wasting it until now."

The room went still.

FRAYs, once triggered, voided *everything*. All cards played the round they triggered were discarded. All score gains? Gone. The Loop Totem reset to where it was before the round began.

"You bastard," Dorn growled.

“Guilty,” Rook said brightly. “Never met my dad, but I hear he had excellent taste in bad decisions.”

He swept up a modest pile of tokens, stood, and raised his empty cup.

“You can play your cards. You can play the table. Or you can just let eager men play themselves.”

He smiled.

Then added:

“Though I do thank you both for being such *eager* fools.”

He said it, Myx thought. *He always says it right before it goes bad.*

Dorn shoved his chair back with a crash.

Vett slammed his hand down, hard enough to rattle the tiles.

“Cheating little rat,” he hissed, rising to his feet.

Chairs scraped. Voices rose. Someone reached for a knife.

The tavern door creaked open.

Myx stepped inside.

Not fast. Not loud.

Just present.

His fur bristled. His stance was wide. He didn’t snarl—but he made the *idea* of snarling feel very, very close.

He looked like a cross between a leopard and a dog—sleek, muscular, silent. Big enough to tear a man apart if he wanted to.

A **Servine** wasn’t common in these parts. Most people had never seen one in the flesh. And from the looks on their faces, they didn’t know what he was.

They just knew what he *looked* like.

What they didn’t know—what Myx *counted* on them not knowing—was that Servines were the most loyal, affectionate, absurdly sweet animals ever bred.

He just happened to be very good at pretending otherwise.

Everyone froze.

Vett muttered “What is that thing?”

Rook stepped backward with a smile like a man leaving a dinner party he hadn’t been invited to.

“Gentlemen,” he said cheerfully. “It’s been educational.”

Then he slipped out the door.

Myx followed. But not before grabbing a half-cooked sausage off the counter.

Hazard pay.

They walked through the night air, boots and paws quiet on the dirt path. Varnhalt shrank behind them like a bad decision finally forgotten.

“You had to say it,” Rook muttered, rubbing his jaw at the thought of the pummeling he did not receive.

Myx didn’t respond.

He never did.

But in the quiet between their footfalls, the thought landed anyway:

You always say it. And I clean it up.

Rook chuckled under his breath. “Details.”

They walked a while in silence, boots crunching over frost-bitten dirt and brittle leaves, the tavern’s noise long behind them. The trees here seemed less like scenery and more like witnesses. Watching. Listening. One of them creaked with no wind to justify it.

“You heard what they said, right?” Rook finally asked, eyes scanning the trees. “At the table?”

“The drunk one, or the ... drunker one?” Myx thought

Rook adjusted the strap of his pack. “Yeah,” he said after a moment. “ You heard.”

The tower. The thing out east. A story half-told through slurred words and darting eyes. Black stone. No doors. A place the locals didn’t go near, but couldn’t quite stay away from either.

Rook glanced at the horizon. “Could be nothing.”

Myx growled, low and noncommittal. “*Could be Frayed. Could be worse.*”

Rook squinted into the distance, where the hills began to dip and shadow. A jagged silhouette had begun to emerge, sharp against the dying light. Too symmetrical for a cliff. Too smooth for a ruin.

“Now that,” he said, shading his eyes with one hand, “is exactly the kind of thing you chase.”

Myx’s ears twitched, nose tilted to the wind. It moved oddly here—curling back on itself, folding in ways it shouldn’t.

That’s the kind of thing that gets you killed.

Rook smiled, just a little. “Don’t worry pal... so long as we’re together...”

He reached down and ruffled the fur between Myx’s ears. Myx leaned away, but only half-heartedly.

“I’m going to look, you know,” Rook added.

I know.

“and you’re coming”

Obviously.

They stood there a moment longer, man and Servine, bathed in silver moonlight and the quiet promise of something wrong.

Then Rook took a step forward.

Myx followed.

Because that was the rhythm of them.

He walks into trouble. I walk him out.

And sometimes, just sometimes—

We meet something worse than trouble.

CHAPTER 2 – Bone and Thread

The alley was dark, wet with oil and old blood. Somewhere, a butcher's hook clanged in the wind. Somewhere, a child cried—sharp and quick—then stopped.

Rook didn't look up.

His fingers scraped over gravel, frost, and rot. He knew the smell of meat too old for coin. Knew the shape of hunger deep in his belly—not pain anymore, just a dull heat that made his limbs feel thin.

There. Gleaming in the filth—a bone. Turkey, maybe. Still had tendon clinging to one end.

He moved toward it.

A low huff stopped him.

Rook froze. Glanced sideways.

Green eyes stared back.

No—amber. Or something between. Not glowing. Not monstrous. Just *watching*. At first he thought it was a strange dog. But the shape was wrong. Taller. Sleeker. Covered in soot and scrapes. The creature was crouched at the other end of the alley, ribs sharp under skin, head tilted slightly to one side.

It didn't growl.

Didn't flinch.

It was waiting.

Rook didn't know why, but he broke the bone in half anyway. Tossed the smaller piece toward the creature. It landed just in front of its paws.

The thing sniffed. Nudged it once with its nose. Then took it gently between its teeth and lay down to chew.

Rook did the same.

They sat like that in silence. Sharing the bone. Sharing the alley. Sharing the cold.

After a while, the creature crept closer and curled up nearby. Not close enough to touch.

Just near.

Just there.

That was how it began.

No leash. No words. No trust, not yet. Just a broken meal on a broken night.

In time, he would name the creature *Myx*.

And Myx would never call him anything at all.

They weren't raised so much as *not removed*. They grew up like weeds through stone—unwatered, unwanted, and impossible to kill.

Alarook—*Rook* now, and forever—learned early how to pass for useful. How to soften his voice just right. How to smile like a question. How to make himself a reflection of what someone wanted to see. He didn't have friends. He had audiences.

And Myx... Myx learned him.

The Servine didn't speak, not in words. But Rook began to feel things. A nudge behind a thought. A quiet *no* when he reached for something too hot, too sharp, too risky. Not phrases. Not language. More like shapes, passed between them.

It wasn't telepathy. It wasn't magic.

It was *understanding*.

Over time, Rook noticed other things. The way Myx's eyes shifted. They were amber at dusk—lit like sap held to flame. In fear, they paled like frost. And once—just once—when they sat together beneath an overhang and Rook looked into his companion's face with real gratitude, the Servine's eyes turned the same pale gray as his own.

Not a trick.

A mirror.

Later, he'd learn this was common to the Servine—*not a camouflage, but a tether*. Their eyes responded to the world around them: color in emotion, in memory, in trust. A spectrum of selfhood that changed moment to moment.

That night, Rook had said aloud, "You see me."

And Myx stayed.

They had their rhythm.

Rook talked. Myx listened.

Rook lied. Myx watched.

Rook walked into trouble. Myx walked him out.

It wasn't loyalty. Not exactly. It was *likeness*. Two creatures shaped wrong by the world. Both clever. Both tender in places they shouldn't be. Both wearing masks that kept the softest parts hidden.

They didn't talk about it—*couldn't*—but they knew.

They knew what it was to be seen as useful, but never safe.

To be raised with no inheritance but instinct.

To be punished for softness.

To be told you were *too much* of the wrong thing, and *not enough* of anything else.

So they stayed.

Not out of duty.

Because they didn't owe anyone else.

They wandered the fractured places. Always near the edge of something broken. Port towns, scavenger camps, Fray-warped borderlands. Wherever there was risk, there was opportunity—and Rook was very good at pretending he was more lucky than he was smart.

Once, they worked a caravan that smuggled memory coins—tokens etched with someone else's past, meant to be swallowed, sold, or stolen.

Once, they posed as healers for two weeks just to sleep under a roof and steal clean water.

Another time, Rook faked a noble lineage and **nearly married into a vineyard estate** by charming *some princess named Thorne*—sharp-tongued, well-read, and just curious enough to fall for someone who always knew the right lie to tell. She was kind, but caged. Too smart for her own nobility, too sheltered to recognize a con until it was halfway gone.

The lie might've held, too, if Myx hadn't knocked over a crate of silver and exposed their plot.

They left that night in a rainstorm, three horses heavier and one kingdom lighter on scandal.

They survived. They moved. They learned to feel the world's seams.

Rook got good at bluffing. Myx got good at knowing when he wasn't bluffing. And between them, they followed the Fray like a fisherman follows birds.

Not because they loved it.

Because it was where things came loose. Where the rules cracked open just enough to let them in.

One night, huddled under a slanted eave while the sky wept black rain, Rook whispered:

"You ever wonder what it'd be like to stop?"

Stop what?

"All of it. The running. The taking. The pretending. Just... stop."

A pause.

Then what would we be?

He never answered. Because he didn't know.

But now—now there was a tower.

And something in him felt it.

Just there.

On the edge of everything.

Waiting.

CHAPTER - 3 Opportunity at the Frayed Edge

They saw the smoke before the people.

Thin columns rising in odd intervals, curling in the still air like fingers beckoning. The smell that followed wasn't fire, but wet stone, old metal, and something like memory.

Then the ridge gave way.

Below: a scatter of tents, lean-tos, and broken-wagon shelters—shanties cobbled together from tarps and driftwood, patched canvas and scavenged steel. A village not built, but accumulated.

From a distance, it looked like chaos. But as Rook and Myx drew closer, a pattern emerged.

The roads curved inward. The tents tilted. Everything leaned subtly toward one fixed point.

The tower.

It jutted from the earth like a blade. Smooth. Black. Seamless. It caught no light, cast no shadow, and gave no sound—but everything around it *bent*.

Not physically. Psychologically.

The people, the layout, the daily rhythms of life all seemed pulled toward the base of the tower—as if gravity had shifted, not by weight, but by will.

Even Myx paused. His amber eyes narrowed, and the fur along his spine bristled.

“It's not just big,” Rook murmured. “It's... centered.”

And at that center, draped in silk and shade, sat **Sera**.

No throne. No armor. No crown.

Just a young woman barefoot on cushions, wrapped in soft layers and ringed by flowers that never wilted. People moved around her with the ease of ritual—eyes downcast, hands busy, minds hushed.

She spoke softly and sparingly. She didn't give orders. She suggested.

And they obeyed.

They were welcomed without question.

No one asked who they were, or where they'd come from. It was enough that they had arrived.

Sera nodded once from her pavilion, and a space was cleared beside the smithy's tent. They were given blankets, water, a bowl of soup that tasted like thyme and woodsmoke.

And so, Rook and Myx stayed.

The first task was sweeping.

Not for cleanliness—but to preserve the spiral ash-lines drawn into the dirt between tents. Rook was told, gently, to follow the curves. To not cross them. To keep them smooth.

The second task was water. From the trough beside the tower's base—its rim blackened by age or proximity—he ladled water into clay vessels for distribution. Only a few were permitted to touch that trough. Now, Rook was among them.

Each task came with more proximity. To the tower. To the people. To her.

And Rook changed.

He stopped asking questions. He started listening more.

He shared meals in silence. Sat beside the fire with children and taught them old caravan songs. Repaired bone-chimes outside the healer's tent. Helped the old smith sort rusted tools.

He smiled when she spoke. He stood when she approached.

He called her Sera.

Not the Center.

Just Sera.

Myx watched.

At first, he assumed it was part of a plan. That Rook was baiting a trap, or mapping the structure of power.

But as the days passed, that hope thinned.

Rook no longer left the inner circle of camp at night. He no longer whispered jokes. He no longer touched the carved stone at his hip—the one from the old ruins, the one he always rubbed when thinking.

Now, he sat cross-legged near her pavilion, listening to her hum melodies with no names.

Sera noticed Myx's distance. She never said it aloud, but Myx felt her attention press on him.

One morning, she knelt beside him, scratching gently behind his ears.

"You're different," she said. "Too sharp to be softened. But you will be. In time."

He pulled away. But she only smiled.

That evening, she brought him a blanket warmed by coals. The next, a slab of marrowed bone. She never demanded affection. She offered it—quietly, unceasingly.

And Myx, despite himself, began to sleep near the fire again.

Because it was warm.

Because it was quiet.

Because Rook looked at peace.

Some nights, Myx would wake to find Rook sitting alone just outside the pavilion, eyes fixed on the tower.

No expression. No movement.

Just watching.

Like he was waiting for it to speak.

Then came the night she told him.

Under three pale moons, beside a fire that burned without wood, Sera leaned close.

"They'll come, Rook. From the wastes, from broken cities, from places the Pattern forgot. And I'll give them what no one else can."

Her eyes glowed faintly in the firelight.

“Stillness. Safety. A place where the Fray does not twist them.”

She reached out, placed her hand lightly on his chest.

“I’ll build it around me. A new kingdom. Not ruled. *Anchored*.”

He didn’t flinch.

“I understand,” he said.

And Myx—watching from just beyond the firelight—lowered his head.

Because Rook was gone.

No winks. No plans. No lies whispered in the dark.

Just soft obedience.

And stillness.

And the Center.

CHAPTER 4 – The Sun Never Bends This Way

Each morning began the same.

Rook rose to the bell's low chime—its sound less a tone than a feeling, like the tug of tide in the belly—and emerged from his lean-to before the dew dried. The shanty town still crouched like it feared the light. He washed in silence, dressed in plain cloth, and received his task.

There was always a task. Deliver this, fetch that, rebuild the fence, walk the grieving, carry the child, remind the forgetful. And always: return.

To her.

Sera sat at the center of the town's orbit, near the foot of the tower—though never too close. Her tent was broad and heavy with silks stolen from other lifetimes. It smelled of myrrh and dust, a contradiction that suited her. Inside, she lounged among cushions while the world staggered forward in ragged, frayed circles.

Today, she handed Rook a scroll wrapped in thorny ribbon and said, “Take this to the stonemason. He's forgotten his name again.”

She didn't ask if Rook knew the way. Of course he did.

The villagers feared her—not for what she did, but for what she could undo.

There had once been a woman named Tela, who spoke too freely, laughed too loud, questioned Sera's decisions. One morning, Tela was asked—gently—to wait outside the circle.

Just for a while.

By nightfall, she was found sobbing beside the creek, her words eaten by fog. The villagers helped her back in. She doesn't speak anymore.

So when Sera waved her fingers in the air like brushing away a gnat and said, “You may go,” it wasn't dismissal.

It was exile.

And when she said, “Come,” people didn't just move. They obeyed.

Rook obeyed.

That afternoon, as the sun bent against the rim of the tower, Sera lounged on her cushions and flicked a hand lazily at Myx.

"I think he should stop skulking behind you like a shadow," she said. "He's not your equal. He's a pet."

She said it like a joke. But she wasn't smiling.

She reached for a golden collar inlaid with chipped gemstones. "Let's see how he looks in this."

Rook did not blink. He took the collar. Turned it over in his hands. Then, slowly, he knelt and placed it around Myx's neck.

The clasp clicked.

Myx didn't move. Didn't growl. Didn't bite.

So this is the shape of betrayal, he thought, eyes fixed on nothing.

Later, outside, far from the camp's light, he crouched by a thicket and scraped at the ground with dull claws. His eyes had changed. They were the color of faded slate—the dullest they'd ever been.

Rook stood nearby, silent.

Myx did not look at him.

You made your move. I'll make mine.

Still silence.

Or maybe I won't. Maybe I'll just watch and wait. Like you do.

Rook said nothing. But he did not turn away.

"She's not cruel," Sera said that night, reclining with a drink she hadn't fetched herself.

"She's just tired. That's what they whisper, don't they? That I've forgotten how to care."

She ran a finger down Rook's forearm.

"I haven't forgotten. I just stopped pretending it matters."

Rook sat beside her, posture relaxed, eyes unreadable.

"The tower whispers to me," she added softly. "Like it wants to open—but not yet. Not until the pattern is ready. Not until someone earns it."

She leaned close.

"I think you're the only one who understands what it means to be followed. To be depended on."

She smiled. "You stay. Everyone else... fears the wind."

"I'm here," Rook said.

And it was true.

He was here.

But he was not *hers*.

That night, after the lights dimmed, Myx did not return to camp.

He curled in the shadow of the tower, where the ground hummed with strange breath and time creaked in broken intervals. He watched the stars flicker out of rhythm.

You're here, he thought, but I don't know where you went.

CHAPTER 5 — The Mirror and the Mask

The days had taken on a softness. Or perhaps the girl had.

Rook—dutiful, smiling, endlessly resourceful—had become something of a right hand. Not just to her, but to the town. A mended wheelbarrow here. A clever shortcut through rationing lines there. Advice whispered just loud enough to be overheard by those it was meant for.

The girl—Sera, though no one said it without some hitch of reverence—had grown used to his presence. And worse, grown dependent on it. She never said it aloud. But in the stillness between her commands and his footsteps, there was a look. And when her gaze caught him idling, watching the frayed shimmer around the tower's base with a distant stare, she would speak more softly.

No one had ever disobeyed her with gentleness before.

Myx lounged beneath a silk-draped awning, fed and pampered, his coat brushed to a mirror sheen. He did not look at Rook. Not when he passed. Not when their eyes might have met. His eyes—dull, cold, colorless as early ash—said everything.

The girl had ordered him to be treated like a lap pet. And Rook, eyes full of apologies he never voiced, had obeyed.

But not without cost.

That night, the wine was sweeter than usual. Or perhaps her mood was. She wore her loose hair in waves and no crown of command. Just the scent of crushed pears and wind-blown herbs, and a dress of tattered red that flickered in the firelight like smoke.

"You're not like the others," she murmured, reclining beside him on the couch she alone sat on without permission. "They worship. You observe."

Rook smiled. "They've had more time to practice."

She laughed—quick, bright, and human.

"Do you ever miss it?" she asked. "Your life before all this?"

His fingers curled around his cup. "Every day."

"But you stay."

"I want what everyone wants," he said. "A way out. Not just of the town, or the Fray, or the hunger. Out of the endless chase."

She looked at him then, and her voice lowered.

"I know where it leads."

Rook tilted his head, curious.

"The tower," she said. "The crack at its base. You've seen it."

He nodded.

"It pulls at things. Not just the wind. Not just the Fray. It... lessens it. You feel it, don't you?"

"I do."

"There's something down there," she whispered. "Something ancient. Something true. The deeper you go, the more the world obeys. I've stood right at the edge, and for a moment, everything held still. No twist. No warping. It felt... real."

Her voice grew sharper, more alive.

"We could build something there, Rook. You and I. A new order. This place—it could be a kingdom. That crack? It's a gift. And we use it."

He frowned slightly. "Use it how?"

She looked at him like it was obvious. "We place our rule at its center. The closer you are, the safer you feel. The further out, the more the Fray claws at you. People will do anything to be close. To belong."

Her hand brushed his. "You and I... we could be the calm in the storm. The ones who choose who gets peace. Who earns it. Who doesn't."

She leaned in just slightly, the fire painting gold across her cheek. "We don't need armies," she said. "We have fear. We don't need gold—we have stability. And the story we tell them? That only we can hold the Fray at bay."

Her eyes softened. "I want you beside me. Not just now. Always. There's no one else I'd trust to rule with me."

Silence.

Then Rook said, softly, "My mother left me when I was five."

That quieted her.

He stared into the fire, eyes unmoving. “Not because she didn’t love me. Not because she wanted to. Because the man who ruled our village—the one who called himself Protector—had taxed the grain, the medicine, the breath out of the people. She sold her blood for coin, and when that wasn’t enough, she sold her silence. But I was a debt she couldn’t pay.”

His hand drifted to the cup in his lap, but he didn’t lift it.

“She left me behind a butcher’s tent with a note sewn into my coat: *Take him somewhere kind.*”

He looked at her then.

“She thought the world might still have a place like that.”

Her voice trembled. “Rook...”

“I never saw her again. But I saw him—the ‘Protector.’ Living fat and adored behind broken walls. People bowed to him the same way they bow to you.”

He stood now, slowly.

“And now here I am, being asked to help build it all again. A place where peace is just a leash with softer edges.”

She stared at him. “Is that what you think I am?”

“I think you were tired of being no one. And now that you’re someone, you can’t imagine going back.”

Her eyes sharpened, voice rising. “You think I need them? These sheep? I could have any one of them dragged into the square and broken, just for looking at me the wrong way.”

“You already do,” he said quietly.

She stood. “They fear me because I’ve given them something to lose. Order. Shelter. That’s power, Rook. *That’s* what they really want.”

“And what do you want?”

She stared at him, trembling. “You. With me. At the center. Of a world that finally makes sense.”

Rook looked away, as if something in the fire hurt his eyes.

“I wanted an easy life too,” he said. “To stop running. To stop scrambling. To lay down and breathe.”

She softened slightly.

“But not like this.”

He turned back to her.

“Not by turning people into pawns. Not by building safety on servitude. That’s the work of tyrants. And I’ve lived too long in their world to become one myself.”

Her face twisted—rage and heartbreak colliding. “You bastard. You—you *lied to me.*”

“No,” he said. “You believed what you wanted.”

She stepped back. “I’ll destroy you. I’ll raise the town against you. I’ll have them *tear you apart.*”

“You won’t need to.”

The flap opened behind him.

Dozens of villagers stood outside. Silent. Watching.

“You’re not the only one who knows how to tell a story,” Rook said. “I’ve been telling one too. Every day. To them.”

The girl spun, panic rising. “They’ll never believe—”

“They already do.”

Her voice cracked. “I *loved you.*”

Rook’s voice was quieter than before. “I know.”

Behind them, villagers began moving toward the tower. Toward the crack. Toward the truth.

The silken tent came down with one great pull.

Cushions ripped. Drapes collapsed. Her throne splintered. She stood exposed—trembling and small.

And they dragged her, stunned and silent, into the dust.

Myx rose at last from his perch, stretching with a slow yawn. His eyes—deep green now—glinted in the firelight. He padded toward Rook slowly, deliberately. There was no hesitation in his steps. Almost like he’d known this moment would come.

When he stopped in front of Rook, he sat down, straight-backed, head tilted slightly upward—offering his neck.

The soft leather collar, too fine for a creature like him, sat snugly around his throat.

Rook crouched and undid the buckle with gentle fingers. He let the collar fall to the earth.

For a moment, neither moved.

Then Myx blinked slowly.

Finally.

Rook scratched behind his ears, his voice low.

“She wanted peace,” he said. “But not for everyone.”

Myx’s tail gave a slow flick.

You broke the spell.

Rook stood, watching the villagers begin to form a new circle—this time not around a throne, but around the base of the tower.

“No,” he said. “I reminded them they were already awake.”

CHAPTER 6: The Roar and the Rift

Screams. Shouts. A crash of wood on stone.

The town had become a riot of movement and fury. Shimmering mirages of the same people flickered two steps behind them, the Fray stuttering time in erratic bursts. One moment a man lunged with a raised pitchfork; the next, he stood dumbfounded, staring at blood on his hands he hadn't yet spilled. Or already had.

The cause of it all—Sera—was curled on the ground beside the cracked tower, sobbing, face hidden in her tangled hair.

And Rook?

Rook was in the middle of it, arms outstretched, voice raised above the madness, trying to undo a tide he'd helped set in motion.

"Stop! Stop!" he shouted, but they weren't listening. Or couldn't. Half the villagers were caught in loops of rage, the others in echoes of confusion, their emotions churned by the Fray like leaves in a windstorm.

This wasn't the plan. He'd meant to show them the lie. Pull back the curtain. Not—not—leave her broken in the middle of it all, a girl surrounded by sharpened tools and boiling grief.

And then—

A sound shattered the world.

A roar—not animal, not entirely—but ancient, raw, and vibrating with such force that the stones themselves seemed to flinch.

Every head turned. Every foot froze.

Even the Fray seemed to still, as if frightened of the sound's source.

There, standing between the chaos and the girl, was Myx. The Servine's paws planted firm. His fur bristled. His eyes—those shifting, luminous eyes—were pitch black ringed with gold, like the moment before a solar eclipse.

The silence that followed was thick and reverent.

Rook coughed. "Subtle, as always."

Myx didn't move, didn't respond—not aloud. But Rook felt the intent: *That was the quietest option.*

Rook walked forward, slowly. “Look at yourselves,” he said, his voice hoarse. “You’re not monsters. You were scared. Lied to, yes—but not powerless. Not like her.”

He gestured toward Sera, who hadn’t moved from the dirt. “She wasn’t born cruel. She was just... tired. Tired of hunger. Tired of being used. And when people gave her power, it twisted into something she thought looked like safety.”

“She lied,” a man said.

“Yes,” Rook replied. “She did.”

“She made us work, day and night, made us beg to stay near the tower.”

Rook nodded. “And still she was alone.”

The crowd shifted uneasily.

“She had you all doing what she wanted, and yet she was hollow,” Rook continued.

“Because power over others doesn’t fill the void. It echoes in it.”

Sera let out a strangled cry. Not dramatic—just small and broken. She lifted her head, her face blotched and swollen. “I just—” she hiccupped. “I just didn’t want to be nothing again.”

A woman—one of the elders—stepped forward and knelt beside Sera. She didn’t speak, just placed a weathered hand on the girl’s shoulder. Another villager followed, then another. One offered a scrap of cloth. Another simply stood nearby, arms crossed but eyes soft.

The mob dissolved. In its place: people. People breathing heavily, blinking like they’d just woken from a fevered dream.

Rook let out a breath he hadn’t realized he was holding. “Well,” he muttered, “that’s one way to end a coup.”

She’s still crying.

Myx’s thought brushed against him, quieter now. *But not for show this time.*

“No,” Rook agreed. “That’s the sound of someone who got everything they wanted and still lost.”

The silence that followed wasn’t awkward. It was... watchful. Because now, with the shouting gone and Sera no longer a tyrant, they all became aware of the thing looming over them.

The tower.

A lean, looming wound against the sky, humming faintly at its base where a thin fracture glowed like dying embers.

As one, the townspeople turned to look at it.

Then they turned to Rook.

He threw up his hands. “Don’t look at me. I only conspire to topple regimes, not reality.”

Sera stood, slowly. Her legs shook, but she didn’t fall. “When I first found the tower,” she said, voice raw, “there was already a crack in it. Just a sliver. Barely a line.”

They all listened, rapt.

“The closer I got to it, the less the Fray affected me. I could think. Sleep. Remember. It made everything quieter.”

She swallowed hard. “I thought... I thought maybe I could keep it. Use it. Just until I figured things out. Then maybe I’d share it. But I got used to people needing me. That’s on me. I’m sorry.”

A beat passed.

“But now that we all know,” she said, turning to the fracture, “we need to use it.”

Murmurs rippled through the crowd. Even Myx gave a low, uncertain growl.

Rook squinted. “Use it *how*, exactly?”

Sera turned, eyes wide—not manic, but focused. “To destroy the tower.”

That was *not* what anyone expected.

“What?” someone hissed.

“Wait, wait—what?” Rook echoed.

Sera nodded. “There was a story. A tale from the Borderlands. A town worse than this. People living backward. Babies born old. Rain that fell up. They said it started after something *appeared*—a black tree with bells on every branch.”

Rook blinked. Slowly. “You think this”—he pointed at the crackling spire—“is the bell tree?”

“I think it’s *like* it,” Sera said. “Or maybe this is just the next shape it takes. They said the tree rang without wind. The bells pulled the Fray to it like a whirlpool.”

The villagers watched her, breath held, caught in the strange current of her story.

“But the people of that town,” she went on, “they found a way to make the tree collapse on itself. No fire. No blades. Just pressure. Cracks. A shattering from the inside. And when it fell, the Fray disappeared. The town stopped flickering. Time went back to normal.”

She gestured to the tower. “This is our black tree. And we can do the same.”

The crowd wavered—caught between hope and fear, logic and desperation.

Rook turned to Myx.

Has she learned nothing?

Apparently just enough to be dangerous.

A long pause settled over them.

That was when Rook felt it. That creeping, inescapable sense.

Responsibility.

He and Myx had stirred this hornet’s nest. Pulled off the blindfold. Sparked the chain reaction. And now—

He glanced around.

Everyone was looking at them.

Every single villager. Even Sera. Wide-eyed. Expectant.

Myx sighed through his nose. His eyes—an unsettled mix of steel and green—met Rook’s.

Too late.

Rook ran a hand down his face. “Right,” he muttered, “let’s go knock over a tower, shall we?”

CHAPTER 7 - "Pull, You Imbeciles!"

It began with rope.

Rook stood atop a barrel, shirt half-open, hair windswept (or at least ruffled by some particularly opinionated breeze), and declared with a finger pointed at the sky:

"We bring it down today!"

Behind him, thirty confused villagers squinted up at the looming black tower that pulsed faintly in the light. A great chain of ropes—borrowed, stolen, braided together from everything from tow lines to laundry cords—wrapped around the base of the obsidian spire.

"Pull!" Rook shouted.

They pulled.

Nothing happened.

Someone slipped. Someone else broke a sandal. One man claimed he heard the tower whisper an insult and went home crying.

Myx sat a short distance away, tail flicking in a pattern that suggested the Servine equivalent of *you absolute fools*.

The next attempt was fire.

Rook's theory was simple: "If it's tall, mysterious, and black—it's probably flammable."

Myx disagreed through narrowed, flickering eyes. Amber one moment. Slate-gray the next. The kind of color change that suggested deep internal shame by association.

Rook lit the base with every flammable thing he could find: hay, oil, old shoes, an angry letter Sera had written him three nights ago.

It smoldered.

Then it sputtered.

Then it produced a disappointing *pop* like a wet fart in the rain and went out.

Then came the *Hammer Phase*.

No one talks about the Hammer Phase.

Rook refused to use anything metal ("The tower eats metal, I'm sure of it") so he had the villagers carve massive wooden hammers. Myx, in a rare act of silent protest, climbed on top of one and refused to move.

It took three hours to get him down.

When the hammers shattered on impact like brittle kindling, Rook simply rubbed his chin and nodded sagely.

"New plan."

Sera watched all of this with a kind of glassy detachment.

She still *liked* Rook. Sort of. Probably.

But she had also seen him spend two days organizing a "siege choir," convinced that the right harmony might destabilize the tower's frequency.

They sang in F-sharp for six hours. The only thing destabilized was everyone's patience.

"What did I ever see in him?" Sera muttered into her tea, before sighing at how quickly she still smiled when he grinned at her.

That night, Rook sat beside the fire with Myx curled near his feet, fur twitching with half-formed dreams. The tower loomed in the distance, impossibly still.

The village had gone quiet.

"I've been going about this all wrong," Rook whispered to no one.

His fingers played with a bit of rope—remnant of the day's first disaster. He stared at the tower and then past it, into the place where the air shimmered wrong and the edges of things bent like glass under pressure.

The Fray.

"Everything I've tried... it's too *real*," he said softly. "The Fray doesn't obey real. It chews it. Warps it. Laughs at it."

He looked at Myx, who didn't stir.

"So maybe the answer's not brute force. Maybe the answer's... more Fray. Bring the madness to the tower. Let it turn on itself."

Rook smiled.

“Now that’s something I could believe in.”

In the morning, he found Sera packing dried fruit into small bundles.

“I need your help,” he said, all business.

She narrowed her eyes.

“If this is about the trebuchet again—”

“No! No more wood-based nonsense.”

He explained his theory. That the tower repelled the Fray for a reason. That the Fracture might be a seam—a weakness. That maybe, just maybe, the Fray wanted in. And they needed to find a way to bring it.

Sera frowned. “But how would we do that?”

They sat together all morning, throwing out ideas. Mirrors. Echo chambers. Musical chaos. Hallucinogens (“Absolutely not,” Sera snapped). They came up empty.

But not everyone was empty.

That evening, Myx sat alone by the edge of camp, eyes turned to violet—the color of dusk, the color of quiet decision.

He could feel it now. That thing humming in his chest. That capacity. That burden. That difference.

He was Servine.

He *held* things. Held them in his eyes, in his body. The emotions, the pulses of the world, the truths people didn’t want to speak aloud. He absorbed them. It’s what made his kind so loyal, so gentle.

And why it hurt so much when they were betrayed.

He could feel the Fray just beyond the tower’s reach. He could feel it whispering, not in words, but in pulls. In loops. In unraveling possibilities.

And he knew what had to be done.

He stood, slow and steady. No one noticed.

He walked.

The sky cracked with the last of sunset, and night poured in like spilled ink.

Myx crossed the invisible line where the tower's protection faded. The ground shifted under his paws, too soft, then too hard. Shapes flickered at the edge of vision. A bird flew backwards. A rock blinked.

He walked farther.

His thoughts began to unravel. Not fall apart—*loop*. Repeating. Over and over, the same mantra, the only thread left in his fading clarity:

Go further.

Let it take you.

Walk to the edge of reality itself.

Then run back.

Run like you've never run before.

Push it into the fracture before it fades...

Go further.

Let it take you...

His paws stumbled. The stars above him swam like fish. He lost track of direction. He smelled memories. Tasted dreams. Heard Rook's laughter echoing in places it had never been.

And then, at the very edge of sense—

The Fray touched him.

His eyes, unseen in the dark, flared a color no word had ever described.

CHAPTER 8 – The Beast They Wanted

They named him nothing.

In the pit, names were weaknesses. Names belonged to pets, to children, to creatures worth remembering. Myx was born beneath stone and firelight, one of five in a litter pulled squirming from his mother before their eyes had even opened.

There were five of them. One mother. Five kits. Myx was the smallest.

They called it training.

What they meant was violence.

They beat them into snarling. Starved them into obedience. Fed them only after blood was drawn—any blood, didn't matter whose. The strong were given scraps. The weak were made an example. The ones who refused to fight were dragged out by their throats, screaming or silent, and returned broken.

Myx didn't snarl.

Not at first.

Not even when they jabbed him with hot iron or kicked him until his ribs gave. Not when they threw his brother in and demanded one of them come out bleeding.

He didn't snarl.

So they starved him longer. Let the others eat. Let him watch.

He grew slow. His limbs too long for the cage, his eyes too dim to change. He didn't bare his fangs. He didn't lunge.

One night, they threw his sister in.

Amber eyes. Quivering frame. The same scars.

She looked at him like she knew him.

And then she attacked.

They fought.

Because the men screamed for it.

Because they hadn't eaten in days.

Because neither of them could remember what not fighting looked like.

She bled.

He bled more.

She didn't snarl either.

That was a mistake.

The next morning, they took her away.

He never saw her again.

They didn't kill him. They threw him out.

Too weak. Too soft. Too dull.

They left him near a drainage tunnel, half-dead and twitching. A bag of fur and bone that wouldn't die fast enough.

But something inside him moved.

A crawl, not a fight.

He didn't want to die. He just didn't know what living meant.

The city was worse.

At least in the pit, there was a reason for the pain.

Here, there was none.

Here, it came for sport. For boredom. For cruelty's own sake.

He scrounged what he could—from carts, from bins, from bones half-gnawed by dogs larger than him. He didn't speak. Couldn't beg. His tongue was too thick, his voice too alien. He hadn't been taught to plead.

He slept where shadows gathered. Under crates. Behind broken chimneys. Inside barrels that stank of vinegar and blood.

At night, he dreamed of the pit.

During the day, he tried not to.

He saw others like him—broken things, limping things, hollowed-out husks too slow to hide and too stubborn to die.

He stayed away. No one shared here.

There were nights when he stared too long at children walking past with meat pies. Nights when he thought: *Just a bite. Just a leg. Just enough to stop the shaking.*

He never did.

He *thinks* he never did.

But the Fray was cruel.

It didn't simply tear the world.

It twisted it.

Warped memory.

Bent pain into shape.

Made old wounds fresh again. Stretched scars into new splits.

And now—now—it was pressing in again.

Myx blinked and saw the pit.

Blinked again and saw the alley.

Heard the lash.

Felt the choke chain.

Smelled the copper.

Tasted fur.

He was on the ground. Back in the filth. Alone.

He'd failed. He'd wandered too far. The girl had broken him. The tower had mocked him. The world had eaten him and spat out the bones.

His paws wouldn't move.

His eyes dimmed.

He didn't know if it was real.

Didn't care.

And then it got worse.

The Fray folded memory again.

Now he was back behind the butcher's cart.

Now he was crouched in a stall, gnawing on something warm.

He remembered chewing something soft. He remembered the way it gave under his teeth—fibrous, fatty.

He remembered a scream—was it his?

Or hers?

A girl?

A child?

A rat?

He remembered vomiting behind a tavern.

Or maybe he didn't.

He remembered hiding under stairs, belly full for the first time in weeks, whispering:

It was already dead.

But was it?

Was it?

His claws were wet.

He looked down.

Red.

Still red.

Flicker.

Gone.

A child's body.

Gone.

A rat. Torn open.

Gone.

His sister.

Amber eyes.

Fangs.

Blood.

Gone.

His own claws.

Still wet.

Did he do it?

Did he *watch* it happen?

Did he *help*?

Did he kill for food?

Once?

Twice?

Many times?

Did it matter?

He didn't know anymore.

He howled. Or maybe whimpered. Or maybe said nothing at all.

Because he didn't *know* anymore.

His thoughts were not thoughts. They were shards. Slices. A collage of rot and guilt and fury.

He wanted to die. Not because he wanted peace.

Because he wanted the *noise* to stop.

He curled up on himself. Tucked his tail in. Bit into his own paw to feel something that *wasn't* confusion.

It didn't work.

He heard laughter.

The ringmaster's?

No—a vendor's.

No—Rook's?

No.

Rook didn't laugh like that.

Rook didn't look at him like that.

Did he?

"You're not even a partner. You're just a dog I feed."

"I should've left you in that alley."

"You think I care?"

Voices. Not his. But wearing Rook's tone.

The Fray was playing dirty now.

Tearing the only safe thing he had.

Myx growled—but it was pathetic. A whimper dressed up in rage.

His legs trembled.

He collapsed again.

Face down in filth.

Eyes wide, but blind.

Mind breaking.

He wanted it to end.

Let the tower fall.

Let the Fray take him.

Let the world tear open and swallow him.

Because nothing was real anymore.

Not the pit.

Not the sister.

Not Rook.

Not even *himself*.

What was a name, anyway?

Just a lie that pretended a thing like him was a person.

He wasn't.

He was the thing they trained.

He was what they made.

And then—

The memory.

A flick.

A smirk.

A bone.

Not clean. Not fresh. Just something tossed without aim, without thought, into an alley behind a bakery.

And yet—*it mattered*.

He remembered the boy.

Skinny. Loud. Foolish.

Eyes too bright.

Hands too quick.

“You’ve got good eyes,” the boy had said. “Better than mine.”

And for the first time in his life, Myx hadn’t felt like prey.

He had felt seen.

Run.

He didn’t hear it.

He remembered it.

Run.

Myx’s legs moved before he understood why. Scrambled. Slammed into walls. Skittered through mud and ruin. Every nerve screamed. His lungs burned.

He saw Rook.

Not the Rook of now—the boy. The kid with no food and too much charm. The idiot with a hundred plans and no backup. The con artist who lied to kings and cried when he thought Myx couldn’t see.

He remembered firelight. He remembered hiding under the same tarp. He remembered playing Everloop with coins that weren’t worth anything, just to stay warm.

He remembered not being alone.

And he ran.

Faster now. The buildings blurred. The sky cracked above, the Fray folding, pressing in. The ground didn’t stay solid. The air didn’t stay air.

But the tower stayed.

It loomed. Black. Immense. Terrible.

And at its base—a crack.

A line of wrongness.

A fracture in the world.

Myx didn’t stop.

He ran like the animal they wanted.

But not for them.

For *him*.

For *Rook*.

For what they built.

For what they might still have.

And just as the light split, just as the crack widened and the tower opened to swallow him whole—

Then it all was black

CHAPTER 9 – The Mouth of the Tower

The sun was warm.

Too warm. Too *nice*. It pressed against Myx's aching fur like an insult.

He blinked. His muscles protested. His ribs felt like they'd been used for kindling. His claws—*wet claws*—twitched against the earth. He smelled iron and heat and dust. His limbs didn't want to move, and his eyes—

His eyes drifted upward.

Two silhouettes stood against the sky. Rook. Sera. Their faces were blurry at first, shimmering in the light. But he caught the shape of their expressions—hopeful, worried, worn thin by something... but standing. Still standing.

He looked at them, the question loud in his gaze.

Did I do it?

Rook didn't speak.

He just turned, slowly, and stepped aside.

There it was.

The tower.

Still looming. Still impossibly tall. Still wrong.

Myx exhaled a low, soundless groan. His body slumped back to the earth, eyelids fluttering shut like a surrender flag. He had failed. Of course he had. The world didn't *change*. The Fray didn't *break*.

Nothing broke the tower.

“Myx,” came Sera’s voice, strangely gentle.

Rook nudged his flank. “No sleeping yet, furball. You’ll want to see this.”

Reluctantly, Myx opened his eyes again. He turned his head. Squinted.

And saw it.

At the base of the tower—where smooth obsidian met the cracked ground—was something new.

A hole.

Small. Imperfect. Jagged at the edges like it had been clawed into existence by something desperate and ancient. Big enough for a person to crawl through. Barely.

Light didn't touch the hole. It stopped short, curling away like it was *afraid*. Myx had seen darkness before. Night. Cave. Clouded sky. But this wasn't that. This was...

Void.

The kind of darkness that ate light. That chewed it up and spat nothing back out.

The kind of darkness that remembered.

Myx sat up slowly. Everything in his body screamed at him, but he managed it. He held the tower in his gaze for a long, long time. Then he tilted his head back to Sera and Rook.

I did that? his eyes seemed to ask.

Rook nodded, grinning like a man who didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

"You cracked it," he said. "And not just a little. You opened the damn thing."

Before he could process that, Sera knelt beside him and wrapped her arms around him in a full, honest hug.

Myx flinched.

His ears pressed back. His claws curled.

But slowly—cautiously—he softened.

And leaned in.

When she let go, they both blinked away whatever that moment had been.

Then the three of them stood before the hole.

Or rather, Sera and Rook stood. Myx sat on his haunches, shaking, the effort of standing clearly unsustainable.

"Well, it's not going to be you," Rook said, nodding to Myx.

Myx blinked, almost offended.

"No offense. You look like a week-old sack of fish guts."

Myx's head drooped in reluctant agreement.

"Not me either," Sera said firmly.

“You sure?”

“Rook, I’ve already spent too long making bad decisions about the tower. I’m not making another.”

They both looked at the hole.

Then at each other.

Then back at the hole.

“Oh come on,” Rook muttered.

Sera raised an eyebrow.

“I’m clever. I’m useful. I’m good at getting *out* of things. But this?” He gestured wildly at the mouth of the void. “This is exactly the sort of shit I *don’t* do.”

Silence.

Rook kicked a rock. “This is the part where one of you insists on going, and I look brave by talking you out of it.”

No one moved.

Sera just crossed her arms.

Myx blinked at him with slow, damning certainty.

“Unbelievable,” Rook muttered. “I *hate* destiny.”

He crouched down by the hole and peered in.

“Looks like a stomach,” he said. “A really hungry, evil stomach.”

No one laughed.

With a sigh, he crawled in.

The world blinked.

From the outside, Rook vanished.

No sound. No silhouette. No shimmer of motion.

Just gone.

Sera gasped. Myx lunged forward—then winced as his legs gave out beneath him.

“Rook?” she called, her voice barely a whisper.

But inside...

Rook took another step.

“And I’m in,” he said aloud, his voice steady. “Okay. Still here. Still breathing. It’s a little chilly, but—wait.”

He looked down.

His boots didn’t touch the floor.

There was no floor.

He was floating. Just drifting, like a leaf on windless air.

He spun slightly, hands paddling uselessly at nothing.

Above him: a chasm. Endless, spiraling upward in a slow, impossible curve.

Below him: a pit that went *down forever*.

Around him: only that void. Still. Silent. The very idea of space and direction began to fray at the edges.

“Right,” Rook said. “So I’m floating. That’s new.”

He reached for something—anything—to grab. There was nothing. Not even air resistance.

And yet... he didn’t panic.

For the first time in his entire *wretched, scrambling* life... he felt calm.

Clear.

There was no pull. No Fray. No whispering lies. No shadows pretending to be hope.

It was just him.

Just stillness.

“Shit,” he said softly. “What now?”

And from the far, unreachable walls of the tower, something began to *shift*.

Symbols. Faint and ancient. Lit like dying embers in a vast celestial script.

A *path*?

Maybe.

Or a *test*.

Rook rotated slowly toward the light. He didn't have a plan. He didn't have a clue.

But the tower had opened.

And now it was waiting.

CHAPTER 10

What to Do When Floating in Infinity: A Practical Guide for the Temporarily Untethered By Rook (Edited by No One, Because Everyone Else Was Busy Panicking)

Step 1: Confirm That You Are, in Fact, Floating in Infinity

This step is crucial. If there's a floor beneath you, this guide does not apply. If there's wind, birds, or any sign of "sky," please refer to "*So You've Been Catapulted Into the Upper Atmosphere: A Scream-by-Scream Survival Manual.*"

Signs you are floating in infinity:

- No up, no down, no sideways—just you.
- Your limbs drift like kelp in black water.
- Your last memory involves a void inside a tower.
- You attempt to scream and realize sound has nowhere to go.

Congratulations. You are now existential soup.

Step 2: Do Not Panic (Unless You're Very Good at It)

Panic burns oxygen, which is... not really a problem here, actually. Still. Deep breath. Or fake one. Whatever makes you feel tethered.

Think of something grounding. For Rook, it was the way Myx's fur looked right before dusk. Amber-gold and annoyed. That helped.

Step 3: Pick a Direction. Any Direction. Seriously.

Movement in infinity is mostly a matter of will. There is no resistance. No physics. Just decision.

So Rook chose to reach.

He curled his fingers toward what *felt* like forward, even though there was no frame of reference. His body responded like it had been waiting to obey. Slowly, then faster, he drifted. The nothingness shivered.

There. Far ahead—a shape.

A wall? A shimmer? A surface that caught no light but etched itself across the dark like frost on glass?

Step 4: Approach the Wall Without Losing Your Mind

This is the hardest part. The wall is covered in glyphs—some ancient, some impossible. They move like water, rearranging themselves when you’re not looking. You might see your name. Or someone else’s.

Tip: Do *not* try to read them aloud unless you’re a fan of spontaneous nosebleeds and temporary reincarnation.

Instead, Rook observed. Noticed patterns. The glyphs pulsed when he got closer, flared when he reached out. Some burned blue. Others hissed red.

They wanted a sequence. A combination. A... code.

Step 5: Solve the Puzzle Without Becoming Part of It

Here’s what worked for Rook:

- He thought of the loops. The loops of the Everloop game.
- He remembered the way the Tower pulsed at three specific times: Dawn, Frayrise, and the Moment Myx Screamed.
- He touched the glyphs in this order:
Blue spiral → Broken hourglass → Eye with no pupil → Thorned loop

The wall shivered. A clean slit appeared—lightless, but there. A door.

Step 6: Enter the Room. Try Not to Trip Over the Physics

The moment Rook stepped through, gravity returned like a jealous ex. He hit the stone floor with a grunt. The air was warm. Damp. Smelled like old moss and new parchment.

The room was circular, carved of the same stone as the great Tower—but here, on the floor, anchored by what looked like roots, was a perfect miniature replica of the Tower itself.

It pulsed softly. Black veins of stone slithered out from its base, writhing into the floor like a parasite feeding on the world.

Step 7: Pull the Tower from the Roots (or: Ruin Everything Gloriously)

Rook approached. The room trembled. The roots twitched.

He didn't ask permission. He never had.

He grabbed the mini-Tower with both hands and *pulled*.

The roots screamed. Not with sound, but with pressure. Memory. Sorrow. He tasted Sera's tears, Myx's fear, his own regret. The Fray itself wailed through the walls.

Still—he pulled.

And with a final *crack*, like the world snapping a bone it didn't know it had, the roots tore free.

The Tower went still in his hands. Warm. Humming.

Step 8: Don't Ask “Now What?” Out Loud

Because something *will* answer.

And it's probably listening already.

CHAPTER 11 – The Collapse

It happened faster than thought.

One breath he was in the room—the roots still writhing where the mini-tower had been ripped free—and in the next, it folded.

Not with a snap or crack but a slow, impossibly smooth *curling inward*, like watching paper burn in reverse. The tower in his hands folded down to something smaller than his palm—slick, black, pulsing faintly red. A shard.

And then the shaking began.

Outside, the ground trembled like a beast being roused. Dust poured from rooftops. Buckets fell. Cries echoed. And the Tower—the great one, the real one—shuddered.

The impossible tower. The unmovable one. It trembled.

Villagers screamed. Some dropped to their knees. Others ran without direction, their minds already half-unhinged from Fray exposure. Myx growled sharply—no words, never words, but the urgency was clear. *Move.* Sera joined him, helping drag dazed townsfolk away from the base.

“Where is he?” Sera shouted.

Myx didn’t look at her. His eyes had gone that stormy green, almost black. He was scanning the tower’s surface, like maybe he could see through it.

Inside, Rook stumbled.

The floor lurched like a ship on black water. The walls cracked—not just physically but *dimensionally*, light leaking in from directions that didn’t exist.

He clutched the shard harder.

The void poured in.

Not fell, not surged—*poured*. Like water from a thousand unseen faucets, it slipped through cracks and curled from the corners, filling the room with starless dark. Every surface it touched dissolved. The table. The hearth. The chair he’d never sat in.

The void swallowed without hurry. Like it had all the time in all the worlds.

And still, he held the shard.

It burned.

Just a little at first, then more and more.

It was cooking his hand he thought, I'm hungry, was his next thought, which was immediately interrupted by the ongoing burning sensation.

It burned hot enough that he dropped to his knees, hand fused around the fragment like it had grown roots in his flesh.

The void coiled tighter. It hissed—not a sound, exactly, but a pressure in the skull. Like the memory of a scream you hadn't heard yet.

His other hand clawed at his wrist. It was reflex. Useless. He *had* to hold on.

He screamed.

The void listened.

And then—

It *funneled*.

All of it. In an instant, as if a great unseen drain had opened in the center of the shard, the entire void *rushed* toward him. Ripped the walls apart in its wake. Crushed sound into silence. Pulled everything—not just matter but *meaning*—into the small, molten shard in his hand.

He blinked.

He was standing.

Still clutching the shard.

The tower was gone.

The *tower was gone*.

The cracked, gnarled earth where it had stood now steamed slightly in the cool morning air, as if exhaling from a fever. Around him, people cowered. Sera had her arm around a child. Myx stood ready to leap, ears flat, body coiled like a spring.

And Rook—

Rook stood in the center of it all, his face locked in pain, though the burning had stopped.

He looked down.

The shard no longer glowed. It was smooth. Cool. Unmoving.

No one spoke.

Not yet.

The air was too thick with silence. The kind that settles after a god dies.

And in Rook's hand, the first of many answers pulsed quietly.

CHAPTER 12 – Goodbyes Are Easy

They didn't pack much. There wasn't much to pack.

Rook stood just past the edge of the village, sun low behind him, casting long shadows that reached like arms across the dust. Myx sat nearby, chewing something he probably shouldn't have. A bird whistled overhead. For once, the tower was silent—because it was gone.

Where it had stood, the land was bare. Not scorched or ruined, just... still. The trees no longer leaned unnaturally toward the center. The wind didn't spiral in lazy circles around an invisible axis. The loops were gone. The same bird no longer flew past twice. People didn't repeat conversations. Myx hadn't sneezed the same sneeze in hours.

And yet—

There was still that *feeling*. That inner hum. The pull that lived in the bones. The Fray hadn't vanished. Not completely. It was just... quiet. Like the world had exhaled for the first time in years.

Sera approached quietly. No dress of silver thread this time. Just a tunic, scuffed boots, a loose braid hanging over one shoulder. Her eyes were tired, but calm.

"You're really going," she said.

Rook nodded. "Felt like the right time after, you know... tearing a hole in reality."

She gave a soft laugh. "You could stay."

"I could." He looked at her. Really looked. "But I think I'm better at leaving."

There was a long pause. Then Sera stepped closer. "I didn't think I'd miss you. Thought I'd be glad when you were gone."

"That sounds like something I would say," Rook smiled. "Right before crying into my soup."

She didn't laugh this time. "You reminded me who I was. Before all this. Before the fear made me cruel."

He didn't respond at first. Just let the quiet sit between them like an old friend. Then: "You weren't cruel. You were surviving. You just forgot other people were trying to survive too."

Sera looked down. "I'm sorry."

"I know." Rook replied

Sera smiled. "And the shard?"

Rook touched the pouch in his pocket. “Feels like the kind of thing that breaks the world. Or maybe puts it back together.”

She touched his hand, just briefly. “Be careful.”

He looked up. “Don’t make it weird.”

“Right.” She pulled her hand away, eyes glinting. “Goodbye, Rook.”

He nodded. “Goodbye, Sera.”

They walked in silence for a while.

Myx stretched long and low, his strange eyes—today a warm gold—flashing with freedom. He looked at Rook, then ahead, then back again.

That’s it?

“That’s it.” Rook said aloud as if he could hear Myx’s thoughts.

No dramatic last kiss? No tragic slow-motion run to the gates?

“No drama for this guy.” Rook continued

Myx snorted.

Rook chuckled and looked at Myx. “Have you ever been in love? Kissed anyone?”

I’ve bitten a prince. Myx thought

“Of course you have you heartbreaker.”

They crested a hill and looked back once. The village was already small in the distance. The place where the tower had stood—calm now. As if it had never been there. But the pull in Rook’s chest said otherwise. Said something had changed. Something deeper than the ground.

“So,” Rook said. “What now?”

Myx tilted his head.

“Remember that story Sera told?” Rook said, picking at a loose thread on his sleeve. “About the bell tree? Whole place went back to normal after it fell. That tower wasn’t the only thing like it. I know it.”

Myx gave a look of “You want to fix the world now?”

“Those shards” Rook grinned. “They’ve gotta be worth something, and theirs gotta be more of them”

Oh good. For a second you almost sounded noble.

Rook shrugged. “We’ll need supplies. Maps. Luck.”

We have me.

Rook nodded. “May not luck, I’ve got something better, you”

They walked on. The wind picked up. Somewhere, far away, something shimmered and cracked.

The road was open. The world, broken and vast.

They had no destination. Just a reason to move.

And sometimes, that’s enough.