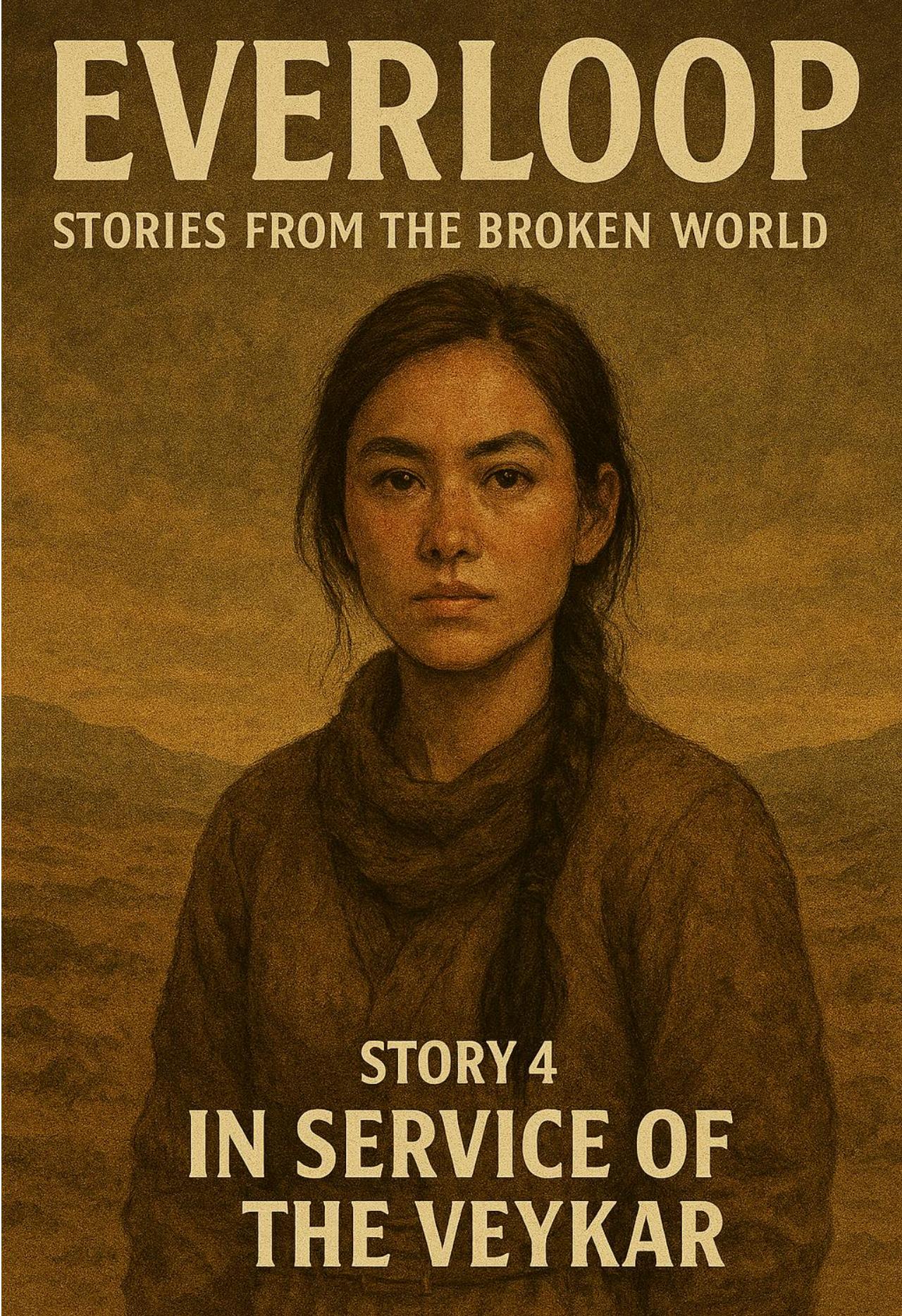


EVERLOOP

STORIES FROM THE BROKEN WORLD



STORY 4
IN SERVICE OF
THE VEYKAR

Prologue: The Hollow Thread

The Pattern was never seamless.
Even in the golden age of the Weave—when time curled obediently, when cities pulsed in rhythm with the stars—
there were soft places.
Places where the thread wore thin.
Where light bled out faster than it came in.
Where memory faltered.

The Vaultkeepers knew them well.
They called them hollows.
They called them fractures.
But they feared to call them what they were:
the beginning of the end.

Some believed the Fray began with ambition—when the last of the Rogue Architects tried to weave a loop of their own.
Others say it began far earlier.
A flaw seeded in the First Map.
Not a crack, but a choice.

Because even the First Architects were not immune to fear.

They saw what drifted beyond the Fold—
not chaos, but *freedom*.
Not ruin, but *unwrittenness*.

And so they bound the world in loops.
Looped thought.
Looped law.
Looped pain.
All under the name of order.
All under the name of salvation.

But the Shards remember differently.

They hum not with preservation, but with longing.
With the pulse of something trapped too long.
They are not anchors.
They are keys.

Now, the Fray runs deep.
Not just through cities or years—but through belief.
Through blood.

The Vaultkeepers have stopped keeping.
The Dreamers sleep uneasily.
And the Fold—
the Fold begins to shine through the seams.

There is no map for what comes next.
No thread to follow.
Only the shape of what was buried.
And the girl who would not break.

The Everloop thins.
The Pattern forgets.
And beneath it all, the world begins to remember...
what it was *before* it was held.

CHAPTER ONE – The Land That Bows to No One

The wind here was older than language.

It carried the dust of bones and ash across the wide-backed steppe, brushing over hills worn low by time and hoof, past stone shrines long since swallowed by grass. It did not whisper. It did not howl. It moved like memory—steady, shapeless, and impossible to hold.

This was the eastern expanse of the world, beyond the reach of border stones and merchant routes, beyond the maps that hung in the war rooms of western lords. Here, the land bent for no man. It belonged to the sky, the animals, and those born of both.

People lived simply here—not because they lacked the ambition for more, but because they understood the cost of taming what never asked to be ruled. Clans rose and fell like tides. Some traveled with herds across the plains. Others carved villages into valleys, stony and wind-bitten. There were no cities. No kings. Only the land, the clan, and the weather.

They called it by many names—the Deyune Steppe, the Barren Reach, the Long Wind. But those were names others gave. The people here rarely bothered. When you were born of the land, you didn't name it. You endured it. You learned it. You tried, if you were lucky, to leave something behind that would not be swallowed by it.

Then came the one who would not be swallowed.

He had no bloodline worth boasting. No old name with roots. But he had fire. And he had will. Enough to burn a map into the grass with only the soles of his boots.

He called himself the Veykar.

Not a title passed down. A claim seized and nailed into the world by the edge of a blade.

He spoke of unity. Of bringing peace to a fractured land. Of forging the tribes into one people, strong enough to resist the pull of foreign empires and the creeping madness of the west. He called it *Uniting*.

Others called it slaughter.

His message was simple: serve, bend, contribute—or be forgotten. He did not raise temples. He raised pikes. He did not write laws. He carved boundaries in the flesh of those who defied him.

And still... he built.

Each village taken became a spoke in a wheel that grew wider with every conquest. He brought roads where once there were none. Taught tactics to people who had only ever known skirmish. Enforced order where chaos had always reigned. Under his rule, merchants moved freely for the first time in memory. Crops were requisitioned, but no longer stolen. Raids were punished, but trade was protected.

To the ones who bent, he was order.

To those who resisted, he was fire.

One such village stood nestled in a shallow bowl of rock and wind, where sheep clung to life in tough-furred herds and smoke rose in thin trails from yurts and stone huts. Its name was known to those who lived there, and that was enough. The people had seen smoke on the horizon—distant, rising in straight black lines. Another village gone. Then another. The rumors came fast and loose: a warlord, a prophet, a demon on horseback.

At night, the elders argued by firelight, voices low and bitter with fear.

“Send tribute,” said one. “Let him pass.”

“Flee into the hills,” said another. “We’ll return when he’s gone.”

“No,” said the oldest. “We are not leaves in the wind. We are stone.”

And so they chose to fight.

They sharpened what blades they had. Strung the few bows passed down from grandfathers. Dug shallow trenches, piled stones. They taught their children where to run if the fighting came close. They kissed them on the forehead and promised the fire wouldn’t reach them.

The fire reached them.

When the Veykar’s riders came, they did not thunder in like raiders. They surrounded. Cut off escape. They were precise. Cold. They moved like they had done this a hundred times—and they had.

The defense lasted less than an hour.

Afterward, the yurts smoldered. The stone homes collapsed. The sheep bleated, then fell silent. The men were dead. The women and children were sorted.

The Veykar did not speak to them directly. He did not need to. His orders moved through the ranks like breath through a beast.

Among the taken was a girl.

Five years old. Barefoot. Dirt in the lines of her cheeks. Her eyes held no tears, only the long, hollow stillness of someone too small to understand, but too smart to forget.

A gash split her left brow, raw and crusted, an accident of falling timbers or flying stone—no one remembered. She did not cry. She only watched.

She was sent to the kitchens.

CHAPTER 2 - The Kitchens

The smoke hung low and constant, a heavy veil that clung to the skin like rot and grief. It filled the lungs and eyes, coated the tongue with the taste of ash. Breathing became a chore. Seeing, optional. Suffering, guaranteed.

The kitchens of the early days were not kitchens in the way of comfort or warmth or the nurturing aroma of stews. They were dug pits and raw stone. They were fire-blackened cauldrons and rusted spits. They were sweat and screaming and iron-stained hands. They were hell, made daily.

Before the fires, there were trenches—trenches dug by hand with warped spades and broken fingers. No one arrived in the kitchens by choice. You were sent. Sometimes as punishment. Sometimes because you looked weak. Often, simply because you were there when the order came down.

They dug first—always dug. Deep into the stubborn earth, hacking through roots like bones, hitting stone that blistered hands and shattered tools. No gloves. No water. No rest. Blisters peeled, then bled, then hardened. The blood mixed into the dirt until the trenches smelled of copper and rot.

Then came the hauling. Wood from the dry hills. Buckets of brackish water from the half-poisoned creek. Dead weight dragged on too-thin limbs. The fires had to be kept burning, and no matter how many mouths the Veykar brought to heel, the fires demanded more. There were no breaks. Only shifts—endless, aching shifts where you passed the labor like a sickness, one broken body to the next.

And the fires—Gods, the fires. They raged without kindness. Smoke bled into the eyes until everything looked like sorrow. Flames licked too high and too fast, and many a girl lost her eyebrows, her skin, her scream. Oil pots burst without warning. Meat caught fire. Stones exploded in the heat. Everything was too hot or too sharp or too heavy.

And above all—noise. The cacophony of hunger. Orders barked by pit-leaders. Wailing. Always wailing. There was never a moment when someone wasn't weeping. From pain. From hunger. From remembering the village they'd lost. From a name that no one answered to anymore. There were girls who cried while they peeled roots. Girls who cried while they stirred vats of boiling fat. Girls who cried until they broke, and even then, they kept crying.

Except her.

The girl with the scar did not cry. Not once.

She dug. When her fingers bled, she wrapped them in rags and dug more. When her palms blistered, she pressed them tighter against the wood until the flesh tore and hardened into callus. She hauled wood until her knees gave, then crawled it forward. She stirred the fire-pots until the skin of her arms was spiderwebbed with burns. She cooked until the smell of fat and rot soaked into her hair and skin and bones. But she did not cry.

Others noticed. They whispered. At first, they thought she was broken. Empty. But it was worse than that. She chose the silence. Chose the work. Chose to bury the hurt somewhere deeper than the pits they stood in.

They all had names once. She had one too. But in the kitchens, names faded. Screams replaced them. Orders. Numbers, sometimes. A few still called her “the quiet one.” A few, “scar.” But even those stopped after a while. You didn’t waste breath on names in the kitchens. You spent it hauling, or burning, or surviving.

She became a presence. Like fire. Like smoke. You didn’t talk to it. You just worked beside it, and tried not to get too close.

One night, when the heat was so bad it baked your breath dry before you even spoke, and the flies moved like molasses over the offal trench, a girl collapsed beside the soup pit. Her hands were raw meat, her eyes glassed with fever. She didn’t make a sound. Just crumpled, mouth open in a scream she couldn’t voice.

The scarred girl didn’t flinch. Didn’t pause. She stepped over her, took the ladle from the twitching hand, and kept stirring.

No one thanked her.

They learned, in time, that she wasn’t there to be liked. She wasn’t there to be saved. She was there because she wasn’t broken. Not yet. And maybe, in some terrible, twisted way, she didn’t want to be.

The kitchens were hell, but she made a kind of shape in the fire. A rhythm to the suffering. Her scar didn’t fade—it deepened. Took on new texture with soot and grime. But still, she did not cry.

Even when her hands shook.

Even when the pit smoke choked the youngest girls into silence.

Even when the others wailed for homes they would never see again.

She simply worked.

And one day, someone noticed. Someone in a darker robe. With cleaner hands. Eyes like cold iron.

She was sent to the kitchens to burn. To be broken.

But instead, they sent her *up*.

She was moved. No explanation. No words.

She was simply told:

“You serve in the Hall now.”

And she went.

CHAPTER 3 — The Hall

The Hall wasn't a hall at all—not in the way the word might sound to someone who hadn't seen it. It was a vast, open pavilion of stone and bone, half sunken into the rock and half built upon it. Heat shimmered off the dozens of fire pits and smoke channels that lined the outer ring, while inside, long troughs of chopped wood and layered iron grates turned raw slaughter into the illusion of civilization. Here, the chaos of the conquest was turned into ceremony.

It was here the girl first learned: food was not simply food.

There were scraps—always scraps. The gristle and marrow-fat left from butchering, the charred bone ends, the limp onions too soft for boiling, the half-spoiled potatoes. These went to the soldiers. Not all soldiers, of course—only the ones who bled, dug, burned, and buried. The ones who didn't bark orders but took them. The ones whose faces blurred in dust and smoke until one became the next. These men ate with their hands, sitting on their helmets, carving meat with the same blades they'd used to carve through men.

Better scraps—fattier cuts, crisper skin, pieces that still held a shape—went to the ones who barked. The quartermasters. The drillmen. The ones who carried long rods for pointing and whips for correcting. They received their meals slightly warmed, slightly spiced, handed over with a grunt by those further down the chain. These men were louder, fuller in the chest. They had names. And teeth too white to have seen war recently.

But it was the men in the dark robes who ate differently.

They never raised their voices. Never touched the food until it was placed before them on carved wooden trays laced with gold inlays—ancient things, older than the conquest, older maybe than the Veykar himself. These men, the ones with the strange tattoos along the base of their necks, ate in silence. They chewed slowly. They drank thick, bitter brews made from roots and bone ash. Their meals were precise, plated like diagrams, with slivers of rare meat folded between leaves she'd never seen before. Red greens, pale blacks, translucent slices of pearly fungus that steamed violet when touched by heat.

And then—there was *him*.

The Veykar.

She hadn't seen him yet, not truly, but she had seen the food meant for him. It came into the Hall on trays larger than horses' backs, pulled by two men each, sometimes more. The food was sculpted. Not shaped. Sculpted. Towers of roasted fowl stacked like battlements. A haunch of elk seared in the shape of a rearing warhorse. Fish twisted and curled into serpents, their scales re-glazed with oils and herbs to shimmer like polished obsidian. Bowls of stew that shimmered gold, tinted with saffron and black salt

and thistle oil. Meats cured and lacquered until they looked more like stone than flesh. Desserts that cracked like glass when struck with a spoon.

None of the kitchen girls spoke, not while they worked. It was too hot to talk, too dangerous to be heard saying the wrong thing. There was a rhythm to the labor, a brutal poetry: chop, braise, sear, salt, repeat. The girl with the scar said nothing—but she *watched*.

She watched everything.

The master cook barked orders in five languages. The fireboys tended coals with singed brows and blistered hands. The slicers moved faster than thought, their blades flashing, tongues clenched between teeth to keep focus. She took her place without direction, and no one stopped her. There was no welcome—but there was no rejection either. That was enough.

Her job, at first, was quiet: peeling roots, sorting herbs, lifting heavy pots over hotter fires than she'd ever felt. She didn't complain when the heat flayed her skin or when the black soot of the smoke stung her scar. She didn't flinch when meat juice ran pink down her arms or when the bigger boys pushed past her, jostling her with elbows and trays. She simply moved, adjusted, absorbed.

Every day she saw more.

And every day the structure of it all became clearer.

This was not a kitchen—it was the engine of an empire.

The Hall sat at the center of the Veykar's moving camp, which they called *the Wheel*. The Wheel was a living machine, shifting as needed but always organized. At its outermost ring were the pits: latrines, stables, and butcher grounds. Inside that: the soldiers' quarters, built from hide tents and bone stakes, easy to burn if needed. Closer in still: the command tents, the archives, the black-robed men's quarters, and the Hall itself—always at the center, because what you fed the body was what you fed the war.

Above all of this, somewhere she had never yet glimpsed, was the Veykar's tent. Or palace. Or tower. No one could agree on what it looked like. But everyone knew: it moved with them. And nothing entered it unless it had passed the Hall first.

The Hall was the final filter. What left here was not just food. It was *offering*.

And something in her began to understand.

She didn't smile. She didn't laugh. But something in her face softened, just slightly. A tightness relaxed. A wall inside, long-held and rigid, cracked a little.

Was it pride? No, not quite.

Was it relief? Maybe. Maybe not.

But it was something.

Purpose, perhaps.

She was no longer just a survivor.

She had a *function*.

In the bones of a beast that fed empires, she was a moving piece.

And for now—that was enough.

CHAPTER 4 — The One Who Watches

Time passed in the way only time does when no one marks it.

The girl had grown—not tall, not loud, not in any way that would have made her more visible to the world—but grown nonetheless. Her limbs had lengthened into something lean and quiet. Her hands, once blistered stumps, were now precise instruments. She still did not speak. She rarely made a sound. But by now, she was known.

It had begun with observation. She learned faster than anyone else not by asking questions, but by listening to the fire and watching the oil. She noticed the way smoke changed when a meat was turned too late. She understood why the sour leaf needed scalding before it could be wrapped around goat heart. She began to know things without being taught.

At first, she was only allowed to sweep, then to scrub. Then to chop. There was a hierarchy in the hall, unofficial but brutal, enforced not by words but elbows, stolen bites, burned hands. But soon, none dared jostle her. Not after the boy who did—just a boy, elbowing for a place near the flame—was split open before the fat dripped from the spit.

The men in the black robes had been watching. They always watched. They were not the Veykar's guards. They were more than that. They were his voice, his ears, his breath. His blood made in flesh. His sworn Brethren.

They were called the **Draethan**.

The Draethan bore no names among slaves, only rankless presence. Their robes were cut from the hides of horses taken in conquest, dyed with ash and pitch, their oaths tattooed in ink and scar from wrist to throat to jaw. One Draethan alone could end a conversation by walking into the room. Ten could end a town.

They were terrifying. But they were also her patrons.

They had seen what she could do.

She had not asked to cook for them. The first time was necessity—their stew had soured. She stepped in, unbidden, while others froze, and by dusk, the scent rising from the hearth was rich with rendered marrow, toasted saltleaf, and crisped cumin skin. They said nothing, only ate. She returned to her corner. The next day, they returned, and from then on, she cooked for them and them alone.

She learned the science of fire: where the coals must be banked for bread versus bone, how smoke from plumroot wood softened the sting of fermented milk, how a blade could slice an onion into four kinds of

sweetness depending on its angle. She learned to render fat in stages—first for the crackle, then for the oil, then again for the glaze—and saved every drop in clay-stoppered jars for future meals. She boiled bones until they sang, and then boiled them again for the silence beneath.

Her palate sharpened. She tasted everything, even raw. A hint of iron here, a whisper of cardamom there. She knew how to mask the sourness of horse meat with honey vinegar, how to draw the bitterness from tough greens with salt and char.

Every meal she made was better than the last, and she never made the same one twice.

In the Hall, there were no titles. Only roles. But if there had been rank among slaves, she would now have sat second only to the one who cooked for the Veykar himself.

He was an old man. Older than the knives he used. His name was spoken aloud—the only cook whose was. They called him **Morran**.

Morran walked with a stoop and sneered without smiling. He did not speak to the girl, nor correct her, nor teach. He watched her from across the hearth, lips tight. He knew he could not harm her. The Draethan had made that clear.

Still, resentment burned in him like a low fire. His dishes were flawless, but uninspired. Always the same three things: **cured stag back, spiced marrow stew, and fire-roasted root clusters soaked in bone oil**. He claimed that was what the Veykar preferred. No one questioned it—not out loud.

And so the girl cooked below him. But never for him. She cooked for the Draethan, and they, in turn, killed for her.

She never smiled. But her face softened now, some nights, when the crackle of spiced fat rose just right from the pan, or when the smoke curled like ribbons instead of clouds. In those moments, she knew something rare—**not peace, but place**.

Then one night, it happened.

It was not a feast night. No celebration. Another village had been wiped from the map, their name already forgotten. Morran was working quietly, preparing the usual spread for the Veykar's inner tent.

Until a messenger came. Not a guard. Not a servant. A **Draethan**.

He said nothing, only gestured. Morran went pale. He wiped his hands twice on the same cloth and followed.

No slave had ever been called into the Veykar's tent.

The hall went silent. Even the fire seemed to hold its breath.

The girl did what she always did.

She watched.

The girl didn't think twice when Morran disappeared.

Perhaps he cooked only in the Veykar's private halls now—perhaps he'd earned some elevated post among the noble fires, seasoning goat fat with mountain fennel for the men who wore war as clothing. That's what the others whispered. But the girl did not whisper. She never had.

Things in the Hall had changed. The frantic bustle had softened into something steadier. The mud beneath the cookfires had been packed flat, then covered in cut stone. The racks no longer folded. The walls no longer swayed in wind. Smoke traveled upward through actual chimneys. The smell of permanence had settled—ash and mortar, tannin from the lumber, meat and brick. No one said it aloud, but the girl felt it in her bones.

The Wheel had stopped turning.

And when a wheel stops, it is not always peace it brings.

The Veykar—his conquests complete, or paused—had begun to gather the conquered. He would no longer roll into the hills and flatten resistance with flame and hoof. Now, they came to him, dragging carts of tribute, baskets of dried fruit, shivering daughters. They came not for mercy. They came because they had no other choice. And around her, from the Hall outward, rose the skeleton of something new. Not a camp. A city.

And that is when it happened.

She had seen strange things. Had stirred blood into stew and heard screams in the firelight. She had seen black cloaks bow only to a whisper, and men punished for less than stepping too close to her station. But this was different. This was *intimate*.

She wanted to speak. To cry out. Just once, to say anything.

But as always—*she stayed silent*.

Because for the first time in her memory, **she was bathed**.

The courtesans of the Veykar were not cruel. They were precise. They spoke softly and used pumice like punishment. Fingers scrubbed into the crevices where smoke had lived for years. Nails worked through hair that had never once been cut or combed. Oil and grease were forced from her skin with hot water and bark soap. When she winced, they said nothing. When she clenched her fists, they did not stop.

Then came the clothes.

Not the soft silks of the pleasure-women. Not painted cloth or sheer linen. She was given **thick animal hide**, shaped into a tunic that tied at the waist, stitched leggings with no tears, and boots—*actual boots*—that covered her feet entire. She had never owned a pair of shoes. Now she wore the dead skin of something far stronger than herself.

She didn't ask why.

If they were going to kill her, this wasn't the worst way to go.

They brought her through the rising city like a shadow among stones. At her sides were the black cloaks—the men who whispered only to the Veykar, who killed with still hands and said nothing to anyone. Their grip on her shoulders was not unkind. But it was final.

And then... the tent.

If it could be called that.

It was a tent only in shape. Its sides were made of some great beast's hide—tanned and dyed a deep maroon, staked in place with iron rods thicker than a man's wrist. The roof stretched high, far too high for any practical need. The inside was dimly lit, lined with hanging braziers and red glass lanterns. The ground was carpeted in cloth so fine it looked like a spilled painting.

She was marched forward. Down the long path toward the throne.

And *that* is when she nearly gasped.

Hands.

Lining the walls of the tent—*human hands*. Dozens of them. Stripped clean, preserved, the wrists bound by the thumbs and hung like garlands. Some small, some large, some still bearing the trace calluses of their final acts. Trophies? Warnings? Art?

And then her eyes caught one she knew.

Wrinkled. Curved at the second knuckle from a bad break. A half-faded burn scar across the base of the thumb.

Morran.

She didn't breathe.

The carpet ended. The black cloaks halted. She was pushed—gently, but with no room for resistance—to her knees.

And then **he stood**.

The Veykar.

He stepped down from a throne far too large for any man. The kind of chair meant for a god or a legend. It made his body seem smaller than she had imagined, but his presence—*his eyes*—were something else entirely.

Eyes like split coals. Half devil, half philosopher. The kind that did not see you so much as assess you. Carve you open, measure you, and place you somewhere in the clockwork of whatever vision ticked behind that stone gaze.

He stepped down toward her. Each movement slow, deliberate. His voice had not yet spoken. No one else had made a sound.

And the girl with no name, no voice, no past—

—was called to serve.

Chapter 6 – It Speaks

“Who are you?” said the Veykar.

The girl did not respond. Her eyes fixed to the floor, unblinking. A glance, she knew, could be taken as offense. So she remained still, quiet, almost breathless.

The Veykar circled her slowly.

With a single glance, he sent his cloaks—his silent, watchful men—out of the tent. They obeyed without word or gesture, fading into the dim beyond like smoke from a dying fire.

He stood tall, close enough that she could see the outline of his legs, the weight of his boots, the shifting fabric of his heavy robes. His gait was not natural, not confident. It was the walk of a man imitating something he had only seen, not inherited—formality without tradition. She recognized it. She had seen proud men in the Hall, former leaders now made stokers of fire and scrapers of bones. For a day or two they would walk with dignity, chins high. But time always broke them. Eventually, they shuffled like the rest, hollow and bent.

The Veykar’s walk reminded her of those early days—before the break.

“Who are you?” he repeated. The voice wasn’t angry. Not violent. It was curious. Insistent. A man used to being answered.

Still, she said nothing.

A sudden rasp—metal against leather.

She heard his blade unsheath.

A chill coursed through her, deep and final. Not fear of pain, but of what might end with it. Her name. Her story. Her memory. She wanted to say something. Anything. But she had no words, no self left to summon. She hadn’t been anybody for as long as she could remember.

Then, a second sound.

Not a blade piercing flesh, but slicing fruit.

She looked up.

The Veykar was back on his throne, not sprawled but at ease, cutting into an apple with a slow, practiced rhythm. He brought a slice to his mouth and bit. Juice dripped from the corner of his mouth.

He chuckled. Not cruelly. Just the way a man laughs when he knows nothing can threaten him.

“They told me you couldn’t speak,” he said. “Seems I was not misled.”

He stood, brushing the juice from his fingers.

“Walk with me.”

He didn’t offer his hand. He didn’t wait to see if she followed. He simply turned and moved through the tent—and she, unsure why, obeyed.

He pointed as they walked, speaking like a boy showing off a collection of knives or insects.

“That—my water table. Cold water, brought from beneath the riverbed. That there—spices from a southern trader who once tried to poison me. I keep them for their scent. And this—”

A golden bowl, smooth as glass, shimmered in a corner alcove.

“Made by the melted jewelry of a hundred conquered wives.”

His tone was not cruel. Just... honest.

“This tent is temporary,” he said. “The city outside is not. You’ve seen it, yes? Stone rising where once there was only brush and wind. The Wheel no longer turns. It plants. It roots. And with it, so shall we.”

He stopped.

“Which brings me to why you’re here.”

He gestured toward the far wall. Hung like a banner was the severed, blackened hand of the old chef.

A reminder.

“I believe in the future. I believe in power. And I believe the most skilled should serve it—or be destroyed by it.”

He turned to her now, fully, his eyes sharp and alive.

“They tell me you have a skill. A rare one. A precious one. And in my kingdom, skill will be the only coin that matters.”

He began walking again, slower now.

“The way your people lived—mud huts, boiled roots, cold gruel by firelight—that ends now. My empire will not eat like peasants. The most glorious crops will be brought from the farthest reaches. Spices, meats, fruits the likes of which you’ve never touched. And it will be *you*—” he stopped again, inches from her, “—who shapes that table. For *me*. Only for *me*.”

He let the words hang.

“You will cook for no one else. But you will teach others to cook for my most trusted. You will build the foundation of a new way. A better way. For those who matter.”

His tone darkened.

“And if you refuse... you will not die as the old man did. Not clean. You will die slowly. In the pits. Fire licking your skin inch by inch until even your scream gives out.”

He turned away, walked back to his throne, and sat.

“Kneel,” he said.

She did.

He studied her in silence, for a long time.

Then he said:

“So, my mute cook... you will now cook for me. For the empire I build.”

Silence.

Then, from somewhere buried deep, past the layers of ash and bone and memory, came a sound.

A word.

Her voice, coarse and cracked, but clear:

“I will.”

CHAPTER 7 – Brick by Brick

Years passed like smoke through the rafters—noticed only once they’d blackened everything.

The Hall still stood, though it was no longer just a hall. It had become the central artery of a city that had clawed its way into existence—stone by stone, fire by fire, brick by brick. The girl, now a young woman, worked in silence, same as ever, though the quiet she wore now was chosen, not forced.

She had not grown beautiful in the traditional sense—too sharp of shoulder, too long of neck, hands too burned and calloused to be hidden. But she had grown formidable. Her eyes no longer scanned for approval, but for error. Her kitchen had become a machine. She had designed it that way: fires stoked in rhythm, knives arranged by frequency of use, a hierarchy of tasks that required no explanation. The ones who followed her rhythm were not elevated—they were still slaves—but they were given softer mats to sleep on, extra crusts of bread, and—most rare of all—moments without fear.

She spoke often now, but never loudly. Her voice moved like her hands: efficiently, with purpose. Those who listened closely might hear her shift between dialects—coarse street bark from the eastern isles, guttural northern trade tongue, the click-and-hiss of the desert coast. She had heard them all in the long years of servitude, and now they lived in her like spices—each drawn forth only when needed.

The Veykar had noticed.

He noticed everything about her now.

He had grown more terrible with time. His conquests had slowed not for lack of desire but for lack of resistance. The world bent to him now, but he no longer found pleasure in the bending. Even the Black Cloaks—his oldest and most brutal allies—bored him. They bickered, flattered, postured. He’d once split a man from chin to groin for calling a stew “sublime.”

Only with her did he speak plainly. Only with her did he ask.

She taught him things—not in lessons, but in shared moments. She showed him that wine changes its soul depending on the wood of the cup. That fat, properly rendered, can make a root taste like meat. That repetition, even of joy, dulls the tongue.

“You ate this yesterday,” she said one night.

“I liked it,” he replied.

“So have something new,” she said, and he obeyed.

There were whispers that she could calm him with a word, with a dish, with a look. That when his temper flared, she simply stepped closer, and the storm passed.

But no one dared say these things aloud—not just because they feared the Veykar, but because they feared *her*. She was no longer “the girl with the scar.” She was *Her*. And no one quite knew her name.

In the stillness of their shared nights—when the fire dimmed and the bloodlust ebbed—he spoke to her of dreams. Of a city that could last. Of a people who wouldn’t need to be ruled by fear. And she listened. She told him of kitchens that had no chains. Of meals cooked because someone loved to cook them.

They didn’t believe each other.

But they kept talking.

She never wept. He never begged. But between them, in the hush of candlelight and cooling plates, something like softness was born.

It did not belong to the world.

Only to them.

CHAPTER 8 – Aged Like Wine

They dragged him in on a rain-slick morning. Barefoot, cloaked in soot and ash, the boy stumbled as the guards pushed him toward the kitchens like garbage set to burn. His left leg dragged slightly behind him, twisted at the ankle or perhaps the knee—too much to run, too small to notice from atop a horse.

He didn’t cry. He coughed. A dry, ragged bark that echoed through the steaming halls of the great kitchen.

The girl watched from the spice shelf, stirring a vat of simmered bone marrow and herbs. She had seen new ones arrive before—wide-eyed or hollowed out, sometimes both. But this one didn’t look broken. Bent, yes. Dirty, yes. But not broken.

She glanced at him without interest, then turned back to the broth, dropping in bayleaf and fennel. Yet later, when his coughing didn’t stop, when his shivering began to disturb the rhythm of the other workers,

she placed a bowl by the edge of the flame, ladled the broth she'd made herself, and passed it down the line without a word.

He took it like a starving man who didn't want to seem starving. Sipped once. Looked at her. Then sipped again.

That night he whispered to her from the straw pile they both lay on.

"Your stew tasted like warm snow and secrets."

She didn't respond.

"You don't speak, they said."

Nothing.

"I'll speak enough for both of us then."

She rolled her back to him, but didn't close her eyes.

He became a fixture in the kitchens, too fragile for the heavier work, too sharp not to be useful. The girl noticed he had clever hands, quick despite the limp. He was assigned to chopping and grinding, peeling roots, and arranging platters. He never complained. He did speak. Constantly.

"You know," he'd murmur, "in my village, when it rained, we used to pull tarps over the fires and dance in it. My sister said the gods washed our sins away with every storm."

Or:

"They say the Veykar once spared a city because a poet wrote a verse so beautiful it made him weep. I don't believe that. I think he liked the poem and killed the man anyway."

Or:

"There are cities to the south where spices are traded like coins. One man grows fat selling only saffron. You could make a king's ransom with the things you've taught these old men to crave."

She listened. Never reacted. But her knife paused slightly when he spoke of poets.

He was fire and wind. Foolish and stubborn. He whispered of rebellion in the quiet corners, of the old gods, of "what if" and "maybe someday." She would glare at him when he spoke too loudly, but never told him to stop.

One night, when the others were asleep, he leaned close and whispered, "Don't you ever think about leaving? Escaping? There's still green in the world. Trees older than memory. Places where no banner flies."

She looked at him then, fully. For a long, still moment.

Then she shook her head once, slowly. No.

But she did not look away.

She still served with silence. Still bowed in the presence of the cloaks. Still entered the Veykar's private kitchen chambers with downcast eyes and pristine platters.

But something was changing.

When she arranged his meals now, she chose from farther corners of the empire—dishes learned from listening to the boy's rambling stories: spiced duck wrapped in smoked greens he said grew in the southern marshlands; sticky rice soaked in goat milk and fermented honey like the mountain tribes once made; dried berries mashed into bitter paste and folded into lamb fat for unexpected tang.

The Veykar noticed. He commented, amused. "You've grown ambitious."

She bowed slightly lower. But the faintest flicker of something like pride crossed her face before she hid it.

He asked questions now. More than before. Asked what she thought of this flavor, or that. Sometimes even of what to wear to council. She never spoke. But she would shift the placement of a herb on his plate, or select a wine from a different region. And he understood. Somehow, he understood.

He trusted her now. She knew. He showed her letters brought by the black cloaks, sometimes even asked her to seal the ones he sent. He once, in an uncharacteristic moment of indulgence, spoke aloud a fragment of his own youth.

"I used to chase deer in the hills where the stone teeth rise. I haven't seen those hills in years."

She had not reacted. But the next morning, his breakfast included a small bowl of smoked hillberries, only grown in those regions.

He said nothing. Just ate them slowly, eyes distant.

The boy, meanwhile, was growing bolder.

He carved little things from scraps of bone and wood. Tokens, he called them. He gave her one: a tiny fox with one leg curled under. "It's me," he said. "Except sly."

She kept it. Hidden in the folds of her bedding.

He tried to rally others sometimes. Whispered to the younger ones about escape, about freedom. She always found him after, always pulled him aside and glared so hard it nearly burned. Once, she grabbed his wrist. Her first time touching him. She shook her head fiercely.

"You think I don't know?" he hissed. "You think I don't see it in your eyes? You hate him. You hate all of this."

Her stare softened. And then—barely, but real—she shook her head.

No.

He looked stunned. "Then what are you?"

She turned away.

Weeks passed. The boy was caught with a scrap of charcoal and half a map etched onto the back of an onion sack. The black cloaks took him. The girl heard the shuffle of feet in the night and knew. She did not sleep. She stirred no pots the next morning.

But she still worked.

The Veykar said nothing of it, though he had to know. Days later, during a quiet supper, he picked at a strange dish—rabbit roasted in ash and nettle, bitter with memory.

“Tell me,” he said, not expecting reply, “do you think I am cruel?”

She did not answer. But she did not look away, either.

For a long time, they sat in silence, him at the table, her at the edge of the hearth.

She remembered the boy’s voice, the wild light in his eyes when he spoke of trees, of freedom, of rain. She remembered his cough. She remembered his fox.

That night, she added a sprig of pine to the stew. It didn’t belong. But it lingered in the air, sharp and earthy and green.

The Veykar noticed. He said nothing.

But he finished every drop.

She did not change her walk, nor her silence. But now, she stood straighter.

Not defiant.

Just steady.

Like something old and fermenting, deepening with time. A flavor not yet fully known.

Aged like wine.

CHAPTER 9 – Ash and Ember

Days passed.

Then more.

The crippled boy did not return.

No one mentioned it. No one ever did, when they disappeared.

But still... she noticed. Not with alarm or panic. With *curiosity*. A flicker of something new, like a candle lit in the darkened recess of her mind. She *wanted* to know.

He had been foolish, yes—but kind. Kind in a way that burned.

And now, he was simply gone.

She went about her duties, methodical and mute. But her thoughts wandered—slipping through the cracks like steam from a boiling pot. She remembered his voice, how it trembled not from weakness but from dreaming too loudly. She remembered the look in his eyes when he spoke of escape, of rebellion, of beauty outside the black-sooted tents and kitchens. She remembered his cracked fingers fumbling spices as if they were precious stones.

And then—one night.

Not special. Not marked by omen or moonlight.

She stood by the hearth as the Veykar ate, the silver edge of his knife glinting in firelight, his black-cloaked guards standing still as stone.

The meal was perfect. He was pleased. All was as it should be.

So why did she speak?

"What happened to the boy?"

The words dropped like hot iron.

The Veykar's utensils paused mid-cut. Still. Silent.

But the rage—it pulsed from him like heat from an oven's mouth.

He did not look up as he spoke, low and venomous.

"*What boy?*"

She should have bowed. Should have stepped back. Should have swallowed the words before they formed.

But something in her had cracked.

"The crippled boy," she said quietly. "He was... useful."

The Veykar rose.

"Useful?" he repeated, louder, as if the word itself had insulted him.

"Useful?" he roared again, now pacing, now shouting, his voice shaking the tent poles. "You DARE assign value to a worm who babbled of treachery? Who whimpered of escape while lapping my scraps?"

She stood her ground, barely. Her knees trembled. Her throat burned. But she didn't flinch.

Not from defiance.

From something stranger—trust.

She *trusted* he wouldn't harm her.

She *believed* he wouldn't.

The Veykar came close. Too close. One hand gripped his knife. The other shook with fury.

He raised it—and then stopped.

His rage curdled into sorrow.
He turned his face, hiding it as if it were shameful. Then waved her away with a voice hoarse and low.

"Go."

She did not sleep.

The fire of the boy's words and the storm of the Veykar's fury swirled in her chest like oil and vinegar—unable to mix, unable to settle.

She stared at the tent's canvas ceiling until dawn cracked it open with pale light.

She should have gone to the kitchens. She should have begun her prep.

But instead, the cloaks came.

Silent, grim. Not in pairs, but in a formation—three across, blocking escape. One motioned. She obeyed.

They led her, not through the smoke halls, but into the Veykar's tent.

The boy was there.

Tied to a post. Barely a shape, barely a soul.

His face was pulp. One eye swollen shut, the other bloodshot and glassy. Skin hung in ribbons. Bones shifted wrong beneath flesh. He did not cry—he simply wheezed.

The girl stopped breathing.

The Veykar emerged from behind him like a shadow.

He looked tired. No—*emptied*.

His voice was calm. Terrifyingly calm.

"Obedience is absolute," he said. "There is no half-measure."

Treason is death.

The boy was heard whispering poison. Of escape. Of betrayal. If it is true, there is no choice."

He gestured to the cloaked man behind the boy. Blade already drawn.

Then the Veykar turned to her.

"You. He was yours, from your hearth. Your kitchen. Did he speak of these things?"

The girl froze. Her breath shallow. Her stomach a pit.

She looked at the boy. He did not plead. He was past pleading.

A long silence passed between them. Then longer still.

"Yes," she said.

The blade flashed like lightning.

The boy jerked once. Then sagged.

A red line bloomed at his throat, then gushed.

The Veykar did not blink.

She did not flinch.

He stepped toward her slowly.

His voice soft, almost desperate.

"You chose right. You protected the flame we're building.

I know this hurts. But I need you. I need you beside me.

Please," he said, and now his voice cracked,

"Please, understand. Please... stay with me."

She could feel his breath. Warm. Human.

She didn't move.

Then softly, barely audible:

"I will."

CHAPTER 10 – Calm

That night, she slept.

Not the restless dozing of kitchen nights or the half-conscious stupor of exhaustion, but real sleep—deep, soundless, without dream. Her mind drifted as she fell into it: flickers of flame, the face of a burnt child, the sting of calloused hands, the silence of a girl who never cried. Then, flashes of the Veykar's rare kindness, the reckless hope of the crippled boy, the long, humming years of fire and metal and meat.

And still, she slept—longer and better than any night she could remember.

Morning came, and with it, routine.

Prep. Cook. Direct. Attend. Stand. Repeat.

No one could tell the difference.

Not even her.

She moved through the kitchen with the same quiet precision as always. Her fingers knew every handle, every hinge, every soft spot in the floor. She checked the herb stocks without looking, plucked the spoiled roots from the pile before anyone else noticed, stirred the stewing bones clockwise four times, then counterclockwise three, because that's how the flavor settled. She knew the ovens would burn hot that morning—the wind had shifted, and the draft pulled stronger from the east—so she adjusted the chimney damper by half a brick and propped the side door with a wedge of blackened wood.

The butchers brought in their morning cuts. She ran her hand over the boar haunch, pressed two fingers into its center, and shook her head once. Too fresh. The meat would fight the fire. She reworked the menu in silence. Pulled river fish from the barrels instead—scaled and bled with a flick of her knife—and set them into brine while the firepit steadied.

She walked the lines, tightening the movements of the kitchen without a word. A boy spilled pepper—she made him sweep it, not because of the mess, but because if it stayed, it would foul the roast on the lower rack. She sharpened blades by feel. She weighed salt by hand. She smelled the dough to know when it needed more rest.

No one questioned her. No one dared.

It was a perfect day of labor. Methodical. Automatic. Sacred, in its own way. And through it all, she felt—nothing.

That evening, she stood in her place by the hearth, as she always had. The Veykar feasted on what may have been the finest dish she had ever prepared. He praised it lavishly—spoke of the flavor of the spices, the brilliance of the sauce, the layering of textures. She heard his voice but felt nothing. His words fell around her like ash.

He stopped. He could sense it—something in her silence. He dismissed his cloaks with a glance.

Then he stood.

He crossed to her slowly and asked, gently, “Are you thinking of the boy?”

She shook her head. “No.”

He began to speak again, “Then what are you th—”

He never finished.

His throat seized. Not a cough. Not a gasp. Just... silence. His eyes widened in confusion and horror as his body betrayed him. No wound. No hand around his neck. But he could not breathe. He clawed at his own collar, stumbled, dropped to one knee. In desperation, he reached for her. His eyes begged.

Only then did she speak.

Calm. Cold. Steady.

“I’m thinking of my family,” she said. “Of my mother, my brothers. Of the father I never knew.”

He gurgled.

“I’m thinking of fire. Of smoke. Of screams and silence. Of the hundreds I watched die with my own eyes, and the thousands who died in places I’ve never seen.”

He collapsed, twitching.

“I’m thinking of the price the world has paid for your dream,” she said. “For your vision. And I’m thinking—it needs to end.”

The Veykar died then.

Not with a cry or a final curse.

Just... fell.

Still.

Face-first on the stone, like a log toppled in the forest. No fanfare. No witnesses.

Just her.

She stood over his body for a long moment.

Then, softly, as if remembering something from a forgotten dream, she said:

“My name was... My name is Nyra.”

She turned, slipped quietly out the back of the tent, and vanished into the night.

She was never seen again—

Not in that city, nor the steppes,

Nor the dreams of those who still whispered his name.