

# THE PRICE OF REMEMBERING



**THE PRICE OF REMEMBERING**

**OR,**

**THE DOORS OF STONE SPECULATIVE  
MUSINGS**

# **THE KINGKILLRR CHRONICLE**

**DAY ONE: THE NAME OF THE WIND**

**DAY TWO: THE WISE MAN'S FEAR**

**DAY THREE: THE PRICE OF REMEMBERING**

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**OR,**

**THE DOORS OF STONE SPECULATIVE  
MUSINGS**

**THE KINGKILLER CHRONICLE DAY THREE**

**NOT PATRICK ROTHFUSS**

**VERSION 3.05.08**

# **LEGAL DISCLAIMER**

WE, THE AUTHORS of this fan fiction, can attest that we never sought permission, or consulted with the creator of the Kingkiller Chronicles series of novels; Patrick Rothfuss. This is a fan fiction work and is in no way endorsed or affiliated with either Patrick Rothfuss or the Kingkiller Chronicles series.

# FORWARD

WELCOME FELLOW ‘Old Knowers’ and ‘Proud Dreamers’. As an exercise I thought it might be interesting to try piecing together some of the prevailing book 3 theories together into a cut down version of what we may potentially get. Let me preface this by saying that this interpretation is unquestionably going to deviate, on many, if not all accounts from what I imagine will be Pat’s final version. At present I don’t believe there is sufficient information to truly piece The Doors of Stone together in its entirety, that doesn’t mean however it’s not worth trying. After so many years, it’s unlikely the fanbase would be able to settle on any one specific conclusion, a problem Pat himself will likely run into eventually, with that in mind, though it should go without saying, this is merely an ending, not the ending. It’s also worth noting, given the considerably shorter length this will lack a lot of the intricacy and nuance that are the hallmarks of the series, and though there is potential to expand, it’s worth gleaning community feedback first.

Though Kvothe states that stories seldom take the straightest way, for this fan version I’ve attempted to be as forthright as possible, employing as little artistic license as I can, using only what we can logically surmise from the existing books, Interviews, and other official media, in combination with some of the more accepted fan favourite theories developed over the years. The idea being to resolve as many plot threads as possible, whilst delivering as satisfying a conclusion to what’s already been established as I can. For the areas where I’ve been forced to fill in the gaps with original elements I’ve tried to do so in a limited and respectful manner.

My hope with this endeavor other than to entertain is that members of the community will consider the broader implications of theories posed, and that, like Kvothe when attempting to understand the Lethani, we can somehow pull the answers from within ourselves :)

For those of you reading this, there are no expectations put upon you for doing so, but should you wish to, and you have input, it would be greatly appreciated. As you will find, a lot of this is still quite rough, I’m hoping that with your assistance we can iron out its flaws before release. In regard to editing, I am open to the concept of making changes, particularly in the vein of matching the tone and prose of the existing novels, but am also open to plot changes, so long as the proposed alterations are not too extensive.

I appreciate this won’t be for everyone, however I offer it without obligation, let, or lean :)

That all said, please enjoy.

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# PROLOGUE

## A SILENCE OF THREE PARTS

NIGHT HAD SETTLED OVER Newarre, and the Waystone Inn lay in silence, a silence of three parts.

The first was an absence, hollow and wide. Doors stayed shut. Windows slept dark. No crackle of kindling stirred hearths, no footsteps brushed dew from the grass. If there had been music, there would have been some measure of comfort, but there was no music. And so the silence lingered, caught in the spaces where life could have been.

In the inn's basement, the second silence curled sharp and anxious. Coals in a small forge glowed faintly, their heat fading into whispers of orange light. Tools lay scattered on a workbench, the tongs still tipped with blackened soot and the copper chisel tarnished green. Nearby, acid stained the stone. It hissed as it ate its way inward. Its soft and steady whisper adding tension to the stillness. This wasn't the silence of peace. This was the silence of effort begun and abandoned.

The third silence wrapped around the inn itself, heavy and unmoving. It crept into the locks that were turned tight and lingered in stones that drank more sound than they should. Upstairs, it burdened the man who slowly undressed by the dim light of a single candle.

The man had true-red hair that once caught firelight, but that now was muted in the darkness. His hands trembled faintly as he folded his shirt. His eyes, dark with some great weight, moved restlessly but saw nothing.

The Waystone was his, just as the third silence was his. The type of silence that comes when certainty falters and that lingers when words slip away. One that is born of frustration from enduring with no end in sight. It was the silence of a man who had forgotten his song. It was the silence of a man waiting for time, for change, for an ending.

And so the Waystone lay still. The silence waited on him.

# CHAPTER 1

## THE WEIGHT OF SILENCE

**M**ORNING CREPT INTO THE Waystone Inn. It did not rush. It came on quiet feet, as if ashamed to wake what darkness might still be dreaming. It pooled in the corners, thin as old regret, gathering where the stones cracked, settling in the bones where ache begins and numbness ends.

The red-haired innkeeper lay still, counting his breaths. A pain pulsed through his ribs, waiting for movement before deciding if it was real. Deeper, joints murmured their old complaints, and not all their muttering was from yesterday's beating. He had been many things in his life, quick and clever and more, but today he was simply sore.

Yesterday, he'd run on borrowed strength. He'd swept the floor and served supper on the back of adrenaline. For Bast. For Chronicler. For the memory of himself. But stamina keeps its own ledger and the reckoning always arrives.

And so pain greeted him now with the familiar patience of an old collector. Cruel. Exacting. Thorough.

He tried to rise, and failed. It was not the dramatic collapse of a stage tragedy, nor a fall worth laughter. Instead it was graceless and heavy. No one watches a man fail in private. That's what makes it real.

He sneezed. Smoke from last night lingered, the bitter tang of scorched cloth and coal. Coalsmoke is not like woodsmoke, not warm, not gentle. It is something harsher. Bitter as iron. Familiar as folly.

He breathed. Gritted his teeth. Tried again.

This time he made it. No grace, no heroics. Just a small success carved inch by painful inch. He moved like a man playing through a part once memorized. Sit. Wait. Stand. Wait again.

As he passed the foot of the bed, his eyes dropped almost thoughtlessly to the floor. To the space once occupied by his thrice-locked chest. It was gone now. He knew it was gone. He'd moved it himself.

But the space stared back at him.

That was the cruelty of absence. How it left certain corners more full than any presence ever could. The floorboards beneath were paler, the grain untouched, unmarred. The quiet witness to years of weight now removed.

There were grooves too, faint scars where Roah wood had kissed the floor overlong. They'd fade, in time. Just like everything else.

He sneezed again. The air caught. His back popped twice.

Stupid.

He remembered how he'd hurt it earlier in the predawn hours, foolish and fevered from insomnia. Too proud for patience, too tired for care. He'd dropped his walking stick under the chest and levered it an inch at a time, breath hitching all the while. Then the trapdoor and the cellar yawning beneath. A dark windless place meant for secrets. He'd opened it with both hands and let the chest drop. Just like that. A clean, heavy fall.

The sound should've thundered, but it didn't. The Waystone swallowed it whole. It ate noise the way stone eats heat. What should have been a crash became something worse. A silence too deep to echo.

He'd stared after it for a time before following. Listening for anything. Waiting, maybe, for something to answer back. But the dark only answered with more dark.

The dawn had been near when he crawled out again. Empty in the way that isn't hunger. Hollow in the way a bell is hollow when it forgets how to sing.

Another ache surfaced. Not sharp, merely insistent. Pain can be set aside. Regret will wait its turn. But nature, blunt and honest, will not be bargained with. There are some indignities an aged man cannot debate.

\* \* \*

When he returned, the kettle waited. It was soot-black, solid, and familiar. The sort of companion who expected nothing but notice. He set it on the iron ring and lit the flame beneath with careful hands.

From a paper pouch, he pinched dry leaves that were bitter as myth and green as regret. Nahirout. Rare, sharp, and blunt in equal measure. It didn't cure. It didn't heal. It stole. It robbed pain of speech for an hour and left you too empty to argue.

The kettle began to whisper long before it sang. This was not the whistle of a young, eager flame. Instead, this was a strained breath. Even boiling water had learned to keep its voice down in the Waystone.

When steam rose, he brewed it darker than ever. No honey. No sweetening. Nothing but heat and silence. He sipped once, then again, and felt the ache in his ribs dull to a whisper. He felt the trembling behind his eyes hush for now.

He did not feel better. But he could move.

Praise cleverness, he thought, with a bitterness to match the tea. Clever enough to find his own supply when no tinker was in town, and clever enough to tell himself that a daily cup was nothing more than an old habit. Clever, even, for forgetting whether the ache in his chest was old magic gone to rot or simply broken ribs.

He dressed in silence. Each motion was measured, each breath a quiet bargain. Outside, the light eased its way across the window. Its golden fingers hesitantly prodding the room for life.

He left the room without straightening his shirt, and without reclaiming his mask. They knew him too well by now.

And pain, after all, was its own mask.

\* \* \*

The common room met him with its usual silence, but this morning, the quiet had edges. Not the hush of early hour or unlit lamps. This silence was waiting. It clung to the space where ritual usually lived.

The hearth held only ash. No firewood had been brought up from the shed. The bread board lay empty and clean. The pump hadn't been primed. No kettle hissed on the stove.

The red-haired innkeeper paused in the doorway, seeing all of it, and did nothing.

Some mornings, the shape of the day came in flour-dusted fingers and kettle steam. Today, it did not.

Across the room, Bast's eyes flickered toward the unlit hearth. His mouth opened slightly, then closed again. His normal mischief bowing to the uncertain start.

Chronicler sat hunched low at a table. His page was half-written, half-smudged, and worrying itself into ruin beneath a trembling hand. He was far from ink and farther from words.

"Reshi, you look like death," came Bast's voice from behind the bar. "And that's not a compliment." A folded cloth dangled limp in his hand. He hadn't been wiping anything. Just holding a gesture that had long since lost its reason.

"I'm standing," Kote said evenly, moving cautiously toward Chronicler. "Well, mostly."

"Barely," Bast retorted. "Sit. Before the floor claims you and the drama gives Chronicler a nosebleed."

When Kote sat, he did not groan. At least not loudly. Then, clasping his hands on the worn table top, he stared past them as though listening for something in the stillness.

"The tea helps," he offered.

Bast rolled his eyes and folded into his own chair like someone sitting beside a wound.

Chronicler twisted in his seat, quill hovering, hand waiting.

Kote sneezed. He wiped his nose with the back of his hand, slow and tired.

"I thought," he said, "that with my purse full, nothing could stand in my way. That hard times were behind me."

He let the silence linger. His voice grew softer, more gentle.

"But answers are never so kind. They were just out of reach, and I was smug enough to imagine they might come without a cost."

He looked toward the windows, then farther. Beyond them. Beyond the village. Beyond himself.

When he spoke again, his tone had shifted, spilling into something deeper, something older. "Gather round and listen well," he said, his words quiet but commanding. "For this is no triumphant song, no grand tale. This is a story shaped from sorrow. A tale of tragedy."

The words came to rest. Subtle, but colder than silence. Chronicler bent to the page, pen trembling once more into motion, and Kote, the man who hid behind that name, spoke the first true words of the day.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE FRAGILE WEIGHT OF PEACE

**F**OR THE FIRST TIME since the road swallowed my family and spat me into its dust, I found peace. Not the brittle kind that vanishes with the slightest breath, but something richer and heavier. The Maer's coin had loosened the tight, strangling fingers of debt around my throat. My deal with Riem had let me breathe easier still. Together, they made the world feel almost manageable.

This is what peace looked like. Mornings heavy with the scent of ink and parchment. Afternoons caught in tangled chords and experimental rhythms. Evenings thick with honey-gold light and silken laughter. I studied. I played music that made the heart rise and falter. I charmed women whose fire matched my own. Time felt like water cupped in my hands, precious and fleeting.

But I was young, and youth burns like kindling. It does not plan nor ask questions. I thought myself clever, brilliant even. I believed I could shape the world to my will, one turn of brass and one twist of wire at a time. And that unbridled confidence, as with so many stories, is how *The Stainless* was born.

\* \* \*

It was summer, and Kilvin's workshop buzzed like a hive. Gears ticked, water bubbled, and the air swam with the tang of hot copper and grease. I was hunched over a delicate spring mechanism at my station, sweat beading on my neck. My fingers toyed with a coil of tempered brass, its bright sheen mocking me with each brittle snap.

"If I could," I muttered, then caught myself. My lips pursed as if that would hold back the frustrated edge in my voice. My hands shifted to my notebook, and I scrawled some furious notes across the page.

"Deflect the force. Don't resist or break it."

"Bend just enough, like a reed."

"It snaps back, how to temper its force?"

"Needs better attachment. Wears out too fast."

For hours, I chased the idea around in circles. My peers came and went. They dipped iron rods in oil and muttered Alar to stubbornly glowing lamps. They marveled at the mechanisms

that failed on my table, but no one lingered, and I preferred it that way.

It took weeks, the kind of weeks that dissolve all thought of food or rest. But when the idea finally clicked, it sang through me. *The Stainless*. The device consisted of an elegant coil combined with a tempered brass surface that bent to punishment. Then, a collection of garnets smoothed the gears that safely metered back the resulting force.

Its purpose? Nothing profound. Just to endure.

It became a small wonder at the University. Students tested its limits with glee, finding it all but unbreakable. My first demonstration of it drew a dry laugh from Kilvin as he watched it with what I mistook for simple fondness. But when the laughter faded, he turned the small contraption over in his hands, inspecting every detail with those thick, deliberate fingers of his.

"It is beautiful, Kvothe," Kilvin said in a calming tone. "But beauty is never untangled from its costs."

I stiffened, confused. "Costs, Master Kilvin? It's harmless. It can't hurt anyone. It's just a demonstration of resilience."

Kilvin shifted his gaze to me, his eyes shadowed beneath his heavy brow. "Harmless?" he said softly, his thumb brushing the polished brass. "Resilience is strength, strength is power, and power rarely keeps to itself."

Before I could defend myself, he continued, "You are too quick, Re'lar Kvothe. Quick to make and quicker to solve," he said. "But wisdom is slow to grow. Always slower than the fire of cleverness."

I wanted to snap back, but the weight of his words landed where I did not expect. My chest, my stomach, my hands. I felt Kilvin's gaze press into me when I left the workshop with *The Stainless* tucked under one arm. Its polished surface was cool and smooth against my skin, yet strangely heavy on my heart.

\* \* \*

That weight followed me into the Archives the next morning. The stillness there always brought a kind of solace, the light filtering through narrow windows soft as a secret. That day, I sat with Chancellor Herma at a wide table littered with Yllish knots. Their cords curled like spilled ink over the desk, beautiful and beguiling.

Herma's hands trembled as they worked the rope, his fingers brushing over a tangle of knots like they were alive and needing soothing. The tremor was small at first, a faint note in the symphony of the quiet room.

Then, *snap*.

The knot came undone, loose fibers unwinding with a sharp finality. Herma's breath hitched, and his shoulders tightened. The strands in his hands lay limp as dead snakes.

"Master?" I stood, suddenly aware of the stillness my own movement disturbed. "Should I summon someone from the Medica?"

Herma lifted a slow, deliberate hand, as if turning away a tide. "No," he said, his voice quiet but resolute. He drew a deeper breath and let his fingers rest against the limp cords. It was a gesture of comfort, meant perhaps for them, but more likely for himself.

"These little betrayals," he said after a moment, his usual steady baritone only slightly rough, "are nothing new, Kvothe. A bit like old friends who overstay their welcome. Bitter

draughts and black poultices are our ways of shaking hands.”

I frowned. My mouth wanted to smile. My heart wanted to flinch. Was that a weak attempt at humor or his hurt laid bare by accident? “Perhaps if you—”

Herma cut me off, his voice growing firmer though his smile remained. “Kvothe, there’s nothing to fuss over. I am as I need to be. Some knots slip. The world keeps spinning.”

He leaned back then, his gray eyes catching the light like polished stones, and said something softer. “Who would have guessed, all those years ago? The stubborn boy sitting before me, sharp as flint, proud as a crow. Who could have known he would be unraveling knots alongside me one day?”

The humor in his voice felt warm, but I heard something beneath it. A trace of wistfulness. Of finality.

I forced myself to smile. My shoulders shrugged as if to shed the moment’s weight. “Good friends and teachers make all the difference,” I said. “I am proof enough of that.”

Herma nodded slowly, a touch of pride softening his expression. “And good knots,” he muttered, drumming his fingers over the failed rope, “are worth the effort, too.”

The moment passed, leaving only the faint creak of his chair as he turned back to the tangled cords.

\* \* \*

Hours later, as I slid the last book back into its slot on the Archive shelves, I allowed myself a moment to breathe. The day was quiet, save for the faint rustling of pages and the occasional murmur from students shuffling between aisles. Yet a weight lingered at the outer edges of things, the kind no sunlight could dispel.

I shouldn’t have ignored it.

As I left the Archives, the afternoon breeze did little to shake the knot nudging restlessly at the back of my mind. Questions murmured there in whispers too dim to parse. Chancellor Herma might have dismissed his tremors, but a man steady as stone doesn’t crack without reason.

The world rarely grants peace without a cost. And even then, the toll is never paid up front but instead settles on you slowly, like ash after a far-off fire.

# CHAPTER 3

## THE SILENT TOLL

**T**HE ARCHIVES BREATHED around me, quiet and heavy.

I had claimed a narrow table beneath an arched window, where the light of last bell spilled through old glass like liquid amber. It wasn't warm. Not really. But it had the suggestion of warmth, the way the word home might rest on your tongue even when the fire's gone out.

Around me, I built a small fortress of books. "Numbered Names." "Feyda's Legacy." "Child-Charms of the Western Vale." "Hashar's Curtain." Each one a brick, placed carefully, lovingly. A scholar might have called it comparative research. A sympathist might have said I was drawing lines, looking for patterns. But the truth was simpler, I was chasing shadows. Shadows wearing old names.

I was three pages deep into "Numbered Names", working my way through a tangled verse of Mid-Shaldaic couplets, when Ambrose Jakis stepped into view. His robes were a bright Vintish red that did nothing to flatter the smug tilt of his lips and his hair was swept back with such deliberation it looked like it cost gold. His scent arrived before he did, cloying with rose oil and a hint of whatever powder arrogance is made from.

"Re'lar Kvothe," he said, stopping three paces from my chair. "Conquering the Archives one aisle at a time, I see."

He stood and waited, the silence pacing beside him. When I did not rise to the bait, he shifted, like a man seeking dry ground.

"You've laid siege to half a shelf of Shaldaic ramblings." He gestured at my nest of books, his mouth twisting in a mockery of admiration. "What is it now? Lullabies for restless children, or researching adolescent fancies?"

I did what any man does when he finds a roach loose on his dinner plate. I set my eyes hard upon my notes, as if, by staring, I could burn a hole straight through the page.

He leaned closer, "Still charmingly tight-lipped. Must be exhausting, all that silent brilliance."

He reached forward, slow as disdain, and rested his hand on the open copy of "Numbered Names".

I looked up at last.

"I'm using that," I said evenly.

Ambrose smiled. Not the gentle smile of courtesy. Not a smile at all, really. It showed his teeth, tops and bottoms, without any kind of fattening on the upper cheeks. "And yet you did not check it out," he said, producing a small vellum slip sealed in the red wax of the Arcane Bursar's desk.



“Filed properly. Logged and stamped,” he said, placing it atop the book like a winning hand in a game I hadn’t known we were playing. “Dreadfully unfortunate, isn’t it? Your claim only counts if you mark it.”

“You did this on purpose.”

“Of course I did. It makes me ill to see Edema Ruh fingers paw at the University’s archive. Scrivs gave years to those shelves, turning dust into order. And you stroll in, thinking you deserve what they built.”

He withdrew the book, gently, lovingly, like he meant to mount it on a plaque. He turned a few pages as he did, pretending to skim.

I reached for “Feyda’s Legacy” instead, but Ambrose just tutted and lifted the carved leather from the stack. “Ah, this one too, I’m afraid.”

He turned to go.

“I still need those,” I said.

He paused. The set of his shoulders softened, just slightly. As if he carried a private joke, and it warmed him from within.

“Then you’ll need to learn to place requests like grown students do. Hunched over your scrolls doesn’t make them yours. This isn’t a midden.”

He walked away then. Not quickly. Not reluctant. He moved with the resolve of a draccus deciding to cross a grove. A thick silence crept in behind him. The sort of hush that settles after something has been stolen, expertly and unfairly, leaving behind no course for the victim to remediate.

Renner’s eyes flicked up. Just for a moment. Then back to the ledger, as if nothing had happened. As if watching justice slip past had become commonplace, stitched into the quiet rhythm of his days. Rules over reason. Rules over mercy. Always the rules.

I let my fingers rest on the empty space where “Numbered Names” had been. The wood was cool under my skin, the empty space colder still.

I hadn’t logged the books. It was as simple and foolish as that. But part of me hadn’t wanted anyone knowing what old shadows I was chasing. That’s the trouble with pride. It blinds you to foxes wearing silk smiles.

My hands shook.

Before I could still them, the bell rang.

Not the brassy chime of a class change. Not the shrill peal of fire or folly.

The Iron Bell. Low. Slow. The breath of stone lungs. The heartbeat of an old god turning over in sleep.

I froze.

The knell did not falter. It did not echo and fade. It did not merely pass through the hall. It filled it, slow and steady as a tide. Students stilled. A scroll slipped from one hand and drifted down. A book found its place on the shelf, without thought or reason. Even Renner looked up, caught by the sound.

The Iron Bell sang only one note.

Mourning.

The true kind. The kind that folds the world in half, sharp as a closing book.

\* \* \*

The stillness of the Eolian that evening was unnatural. The tavern, usually alive with song, music, and the clink of mugs, sat dulled and subdued. Even the chandeliers seemed dimmer, their waxy yellow glow hesitant to reach far into the corners.

No one played Tinker Tanner. Not tonight. Not even badly.

Wil, Simmon, Mola, Fela, and I sat in our usual corner booth. It was not the shadowed hollow of comfort it normally was. The air hung too still. The old wood of the table felt cold beneath our hands. We had the hollowed feel of a song struck just off key.

Classes had been canceled for the span, an occurrence that rarely happened. The official notice mentioned administrative shortages, reassignment of duties, and necessary meetings. But everyone knew better. The University never made space for grief unless it absolutely had to. And the absence of Herma, who had been kind, measured, and constant, left a gap you could hear in the silence of the bells.

Wil raised his mug first, the gesture slow, deliberate. "To Herma," he said, voice coarse with something quieter than anger, sharper than sorrow. He didn't look at us. He stared down into the dark ale like it might answer a question he'd forgotten how to ask.

"To a steady hand," Sim added, gentle-voiced. His drink paused halfway to his mouth, hand hovering. A flicker of tension in his jaw. He drank anyway.

"To a good man," Mola said. She kept her eyes on the candle as she did, the flame reflected in the smooth gloss of her gaze.

Fela took a long breath. Her voice, when it came, was soft and dry at the edges. "To a proper Chancellor," she murmured. "Whatever that means now."

I hadn't meant to say anything at all. But their words hung like threads waiting to be tied. To add nothing would've made me feel like the knot had slipped.

"To Herma," I echoed, though the words left my mouth without weight. They were air across a cold mirror.

We drank.

A bottle arrived a few minutes later, silent and unannounced. The dark glass was shaped like a hushed thought, the cork already split. It was Vintish brandy, the good kind, not something a student could afford even on a lucky term.

The barkeep nodded toward the bar without being asked.

Deoch stood there, glass in hand, not drinking. He wasn't watching us directly, but he was keenly aware of everything. He hadn't known Herma. Their circles barely touched. But he knew us. Knew the air of loss when it hung around a table. He sent the bottle and left us alone. That was just like him.

We poured careful portions. No one spoke for a while.

The candle between us leaned in its wax cradle, its flame thinner than usual, as if mourning had its own gravity. My eyes fell to its uncertain flicker, how it trembled without wind.

"Men and their walls," Fela said at last, not looking at anyone in particular.

Wil's brow furrowed. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Exactly what it means," she said. "You toast like someone marking names off a list. Neither of you could wring a feeling into words if your life depended on it."

Wil opened his mouth, then closed it again. Sim raised both eyebrows but kept wisely silent.

Fela met my eyes and didn't blink. "You usually mean your words. When you speak, Kvothe, people look up. That toast? I barely heard it."

I let my fingertips graze the side of the glass. Cool, smooth, untouched. I could have fashioned a clever retort. Some right-sounding answer to feather over the cracks. But I didn't

have any. Not the good kind.

“He was the first man at the University who didn’t treat me like I’d arrived by accident,” I said. “He remembered my name before I earned it. That sounds small, but it wasn’t. Not to me.”

Mola pressed her fingers briefly to my wrist. It grounded me more than I expected.

“He gave me the kind of silence that doesn’t shame you. You know the kind. The silence teachers use when they want to give you space to think instead of to apologize. He knew how to tie meaning with empty thread.”

No one interrupted. Nothing needed to be added.

We sat there for a while in a shared silence. That’s when the raw words came. The ones I couldn’t give voice.

The truth is, I hate losing things. More than that, I’m terrified of it.

Herma’s death wasn’t just a loss. It was a knot left half-tied, a pattern begun but never finished. And I couldn’t stop picking at it. My mind circled back, over and over, searching for the thread that might unravel it all and make it make sense.

It’s a sickness, I think, this need to fix what was never my doing. The ache to lay the world flat on the table and name its shape when all it wants to do is twist. I don’t know how to grieve gently. So instead, I dig.

I didn’t speak those thoughts aloud.

But I think Fela saw something in my face. That open, unfinished part of me I work so hard to bury.

She didn’t say anything else. She just looked at me like she understood that my toast, while incomplete, was as much as I could give. And then she looked away, letting the moment fold itself down like a letter no longer needing to be read.

\* \* \*

The morning after Herma’s death arrived without ceremony. No sunbeam haloed the windows. No birds dared etch the silence. I woke late, liver aching and mouth filled with the taste of last night’s sorrow. Brandy had blunted the edge, but grief had filed it sharp again while I slept.

I didn’t rise at first. I lay still beneath the thin blanket in Anker’s attic room, watching the ceiling crack along a lazy seam, the timber beam above me like a distant road I could never walk.

Memory returned slowly, not as a rush of pain but as a damp cold seeping into the joints. Herma’s face appeared, not with the sharpness brought by illness, but softened in the half-light of recollection. A crooked smile came to mind, along with the way he tilted his head when puzzling over a knot, as if it might reveal its secret if he waited long enough. There was also the rare, warm patience he offered to students who deserved none of it, myself among them.

He was gone. And the world had the gall to keep turning.

\* \* \*

A week had passed and Herma was still gone.

I crossed the stone span to the Archives just before second bell, my best coat pulled high against a lazy wind. The sun blinked through thin morning mist, gray-gold and washed out.

Inside, the quiet felt different today. It wasn't reverent exactly, just simply drained. The scent of parchment and dust seemed thinner. The tension in the air no longer tingled with curiosity. Instead, it hung slack and unstrung, like a harp left untuned.

I offered a nod as I passed the Scrivs' counter. Only Tempi was on duty this early, his eyes bracketed with weariness. He gave a perfunctory tilt of the head that might once have been a greeting.

My feet turned of their own accord, leading me through the lower stacks, down a marble-inset hallway I'd come to know well. I moved without thinking, the same way your hand finds half-forgotten scars.

There had been a table toward the back, half-hinged and warped with water beneath its varnish, where Herma and I had spent three measured afternoons parsing knot-codes from the Barony of Okorran. We had argued, though gently, about redundancies of vowel-float and semantic inversions embedded in the spacing.

I reached it again. Still warped, still quiet.

Even the dust hadn't been disturbed.

No record slips. No books left waiting for re-shelving. And most telling: no coils of knotted rope.

My blood ticked louder in my ears.

At the nearest counter, I waited until a scriv noticed me. She had short-cropped hair and the pallor of someone raised on too much lamp-light.

"Excuse me," I said as easily as I could manage. "I was working with several Yllish texts, mostly unbound knotworks sourced from the Maer's third donation. They were shelved on level three, alcove M-fifteen. Are they being restored or are they available?"

She barely looked up. "That collection's been recategorized."

I blinked. "Recategorized?"

"Administrative reassignment," she clarified, brushing a ribbon of ink from her hand. "Now under the direct supervision of Archivist Brandeur. Restricted until further notice."

"Restricted?" I tried, casually enough. "I've been working with those individual entries for over three terms. I've cited them in three separate admissions reviews."

She shrugged, the motion small and unconcerned. "Doesn't change the classification. Anything under Archivist supervision requires written clearance."

That word again. Clearance. A thin veil over countless locked doors.

"And the ledger slips?" I asked, voice just a shade cooler. "There should be records of each knotwork's circulation."

"That's strange," she frowned scanning the logbook. "Your name should be here. Was there another designation you used?"

I didn't answer.

Because I had used my name. I logged them distinctly and consistently. Herma had even approved one under his seal for an independent study admission. That knotwork had been my connection to him these final months. And it had been erased.

I didn't thank the scriv. I walked away before my mouth could come to any ill-considered conclusions.

Back in the upper stacks, I took a different stair. Not the eastern one, where the marble had worn soft in the center.

I needed to clear my head.

Instead, I found my fingers tracing ink along familiar paper. Not a journal, not exactly. Just a slim folio, always tucked beneath the table's left shelf. Barely hidden, never sealed.

It wasn't formally protected because it wasn't meant to be. It wasn't an archive. It was something more private, a kind of working sketchbook that Herma used to warm his hands against the cold of translation. It was a half-scribed place to stretch the mind before working real knots.

More than once, I'd watched him undo loops, scrawl alternate glyphs, knot half-thought riddles like seeds scattered in dry soil. It was equal parts study and scribble. The kind of space only someone serious about understanding ever bothers to make.

He always left it here, half-buried beneath old parchment, like a bookmark between afternoons. Not forgotten. Just routine. A kind of ritual. His way of picking up the rhythm of last week so his hands wouldn't wander today. I'd left margin-scribbles there myself before. Questions beside his thoughts, left like seeds. He never answered. Not in ink.

Then, on the third-to-last page, there is a single, complex glyph. It was knotted in both forward syntax and reversed. It was repetitive. Redundant. Wrong.

I stared at it. The longer I looked, the less sense it made. And yet it wanted something. Not speech, certainly. But structure. It echoed a kind of purposeful confusion. The way a cipher sometimes doubles back and eats its own tail.

"You left me pieces," I whispered to the page.

And then I noticed it, a smudge. Faint. Not ink, not quite. A grayish crescent was tucked beneath one glyph's loop, perhaps a thumbprint. It was not Herma's. The shape was too thick, too firm.

I turned the journal gently in the light.

Branded parchment.

One watermark, just visible, ghosted along the page. It was the Arcane Bursar's own. If ink could tell you who owned it, this page would shout of Hemme's gatekeeping.

My fists itched. I could feel something slithering into shape, but I had too few pieces.

"You were never just failing," I said to the ghost of Herma's hand. "Were you?"

Nothing in the book answered. But absence speaks too.

Outside, bells marked third bell with a softer voice. On this side of grief, I heard it differently. There was a pattern here. I could feel it tug, taut as breath. And I wasn't letting it slip.

\* \* \*

The common room at Anker's was quieter than usual, with no bellowing arguments over dice and no half-drunken students trying to rewrite ballads louder than the competition. Just the low hum of voices and the knock of tankards on old oak. Life moving forward, as it always does.

Simmon saw me first. He raised a hand from our corner table, two fingers lifted in lazy greeting. Wil was already seated across from him, arms crossed over his chest, one boot up

on the bench. A small pile of dice sat between them, the evidence of a game grown tired or one interrupted.

I slid onto the bench beside Sim and laid Herma's folio carefully on the table.

Wil gave it a glance. "We drinking tonight or introducing bedtime reading to the betting table?"

"He's brooding," Sim murmured too gently to sting.

"I'm," I stopped. No clever deflection came. "There's something wrong."

They both looked at me.

Wil's brow lifted. Sim's creased with concern.

"Of course there is," Wil said, leaning back. "The Chancellor's dead. Hemme's stomping around with a seal he doesn't deserve, and Brandeur's pretending to matter."

Sim cut in before I could answer. "Whatever you think's crawling under the floorboards, Kvothe, it isn't going to undo a funeral."

I pushed the journal toward them, past the line of dice. "Look anyway."

Wil didn't reach for it. Sim did. His fingers brushed against the page I'd marked, one of the later ones where Herma's writing began to slip sideways into gibberish and broken rhythm.

"I saw the knotwork log erased this morning," I said. "Three terms gone. Herma's seal gone too. And now one of his last notes is written on paper from the Arcane Bursar's desk."

Wil snorted. "What's the theory? Hemme poisoned him mid-syllable? Brandeur sent a cursed fruit bowl?"

Sim didn't smile. He turned another page.

"I'm not saying I know," I said, my throat tight. "But something doesn't fit. These are the last notes Herma left. They're unfinished, cryptic, written like he meant to return to them. Now, just days after his death, they're locked away, and there's Bursar ink on one of the final pages."

Sim looked up, his voice careful now. "Kvothe, do you think you're following a thread?" He hesitated, clearly trying not to hurt me. "Or are you just trying not to let go?"

That hit harder than I expected. Not cruel. True.

But I said, softly, "Maybe both."

Wil leaned back, arms crossed. "When does anything ever fit together for you? Honestly, half your cleverest ideas come from stuffing square pegs into round holes."

"I know, but this," I began, my mind tangled and my eyes never leaving the journal. "This knot is different."

Wil groaned. "This is going to end well. So very well."

# CHAPTER 4

## EARS IN THE WIND

I DID NOT KNOW WHAT I expected to find in the Chancellor's gram. Only that Mola had called it off-key, broken in a way she could not name. I needed help, something unorthodox. Eyes that might see what hers had missed. Ears attuned to secrets strung quiet and strange, humming just beneath the surface.

And so, my feet carried me to Devi's door. I hadn't even knocked twice before she opened it.

"Kvothe. Always a delight." She said, her smile already half a dare. "Have you come to lose more of your rare and celebrated dignity? Or merely to bask in my natural radiance?"

"Neither," I said, stepping inside as the cinnamon warmth curled around my boots. "Though if you're offering radiance, I'll take a double helping."

She rolled her eyes but didn't stop smiling. "Go on then, sweet boy. What charming trouble have you brought to brighten my doorstep?"

I brought out the request casually, threading enough truth into it to pass for honesty.

"Ah," she said after I finished. "So we're experimenting, are we? With borrowed alchemy at midnight? How convincingly not suspicious of you."

I laughed. "Devi, you've always been my preferred source of suspicious materials."

She considered the shelf with performative thoughtfulness for a beat, took the vial, and let it catch the light.

"No coin," she said. "No blood markers. Not for such a little thing. But you'll owe me. A favor. One of my choosing."

I hesitated. "That sounds vague."

"Vagueness, dear Kvothe, is the spice of life. Consider it a seasoning I'll sprinkle on at some future date. You'll say yes, of course."

"And if I don't?"

"Then I'll never make you tea again," she said, bright and terrible. "And you'll be forced to rot in ignorance, alone and unloved."

I kept my smile in place, though my gut twisted at the idea of owing her anything undefined. Still, something in the set of her eyes made it feel less like a trap and more like a tally. She wasn't hunting me. Not today. So I took the vial, bowing slightly. "You are insufferable."

"Oh, darling." Her smile widened. "But you suffer so beautifully."

\* \* \*

Silence filled the Medica, as if the building itself were holding its breath right along with us. Lanternlights hissed at the walls, flickering over polished wood, glinting off copper, glancing off glass. Shadows stretched themselves long and narrow across the floor, slipping away as if they, too, did not belong. The hush pressed in around us. It was too quiet, too careful. We stood where we ought not to stand, and even the air seemed to notice, as if the Medica was waiting for someone to find us out.

"This is ridiculous," Sim hissed, as close to a shout as a whisper could be. He kept his arms tight against his sides, as if trying to contain the panic threatening to spill over. "Weeks of perfectly good decisions undone by one bad idea and more bad wine. I'm filing a grievance with the world."

"Two gallons of wine," Wil corrected, his voice low and steady. Despite his calm, there was a purpose to his steps, the sharp sound of his boots betraying more effort than ease. "And when Arwyl skins us alive, rest assured, I'll not say a word in your defense. You first, then him, then me."

"No one's catching us," I murmured, feigning confidence. My hands curled and uncurled at my sides, itching for work, aching to quiet the restless knot twisting in my chest.

Ahead of us, nestled unremarkably against the wall, stood the Chancellor's gram in the Medica's display case. Plain glass, plain brass, easy to overlook. I told myself it was nothing, just another bit of University clockwork, but nerves have a way of finding shadows where there are none. As I stepped closer, my skin prickled. My breath felt shallow. The air pressed close against my ribs, thick and strange, though I knew it was only my own fear. I crouched in front of the case, hands careful, heart beating louder than it ought to. The lock met my gaze, all clean lines and simple metal. Practical. Precise. The sort of design that didn't trust anyone who got too close.

"You're sure about this?" Sim muttered, a little too loud. His breath brushed against the back of my neck.

"Honest answer?" I said, keeping my hands moving as I spoke. I didn't look up, and my voice was quieter than I felt. "Not remotely."

The lock gave way, its well-oiled mechanism yielding without so much as a groan. I lifted the lid. My fingers slipped into the darkness and found the gram waiting there. It was perfect, at first glance. Symmetrical, smooth as riverstone. Polished to a mirror's shine. A thing built to last, to endure. But it was wrong. I felt it, small as a splinter beneath the skin. Subtle, yes. Almost hidden, almost nothing at all. But once I noticed, I couldn't unfeel it.

I tipped Devi's vial over the gram. Slow and careful. The liquid was pale gold, thick as honey. It slipped across the sigaldry, winding into every groove. At first, nothing. The air held still. Then light crawled along the lines, thin and sharp. Each edge glittered like frost finding new glass. Bright, cold, undeniable.

Behind me, Sim inhaled. The sound caught. I heard fear coiling in his breath. "Is that normal?"

"No," I said, though I felt like I was speaking from somewhere else. "It's not normal. It's not expected. And it's definitely not grief."

I wiped the gram clean. My movements were careful, practiced, leaving nothing behind. Not a smear. Not a whisper. My hands worked faster than my mind, tugging at the edge of the question that pressed close and heavy. Who could have done this? And, worse, who would? The craftsmanship was clever. Elegant. Dangerous.

I tried not to leap to conclusions. Tried not to let suspicion settle. Yet Hemme lingered at the edge of my thoughts. He had the skill. He had the motive. Sometimes, that is enough.



“Done now?” Wil whispered. He watched the hallway, shoulders tight, each breath drawn shallow.

“Yes,” I said, fitting the lock back into place with a final click. My hands felt steady, my voice even, but inside, my blood ran far from calm. As we slipped back into the darkened halls of the Medica, a single thought emerged and settled low in my chest, heavy as an iron weight. This had been deliberate, and it wasn’t over.

\* \* \*

The night was cold in the courtyard outside, the air crisp and unforgiving. Moonlight spilled unevenly over the cobblestones, pooling in alcoves where ancient gargoyles studied us with chipped and weathered eyes. The chill bit sharper after what we had seen.

“This is where it stops,” Sim said at last. His voice was low, his hands buried deep in his pockets. He leaned against the courtyard wall, close but distant, like he desperately needed something solid. I could hear the weariness in his tone, a line stretched too far and trembling. “We don’t push this. We’ve already gone too far.”

I didn’t respond right away. My fingers toyed with an edge of my cloak, as if they needed to move to keep from curling again into fists. My thoughts twisted, folding and refolding themselves like restless water beneath a frozen bank.

“Hemme won’t admit to anything,” I said finally, each word sharp and distinct, like I’d spent hours shaping them. “Men like him never do. But I don’t need his confession. I just need him to slip.”

“To slip,” Sim repeated, flat and unimpressed. His voice, so often warm, felt far away now. He lifted his head to look at me, his eyes searching for something in my face. “And then what? You want him to tumble down the stairs of your cleverness? When has that ever worked?”

I gave him a faint smile, something quick and dishonest, already moving toward the shadows. “Careful work,” I said. “That’s all it will take. Careful work, and the right ears.”

“That sounds like a terrible plan,” Wil said darkly, crossing his arms as he leaned against the fountain. “Leave Hemme’s name out of it. If you lose control, I don’t even want to imagine the consequences.”

\* \* \*

Later, Mola would tell me she never looked up. She simply sat at her usual place beneath the cracked stair lamp, pretending to read a *Medicae botanica* text like she wasn’t listening for footfalls she had no business hearing. Her face calm, back straight, mouth pressed into the kind of line usually reserved for uncooperative patients.

She didn’t stop us. That was the important part. A single glance in the wrong direction, one question asked at the wrong time, and the whole thing would have collapsed like bad lungwork.

“I didn’t lie,” she told me, later still. “I just redirected Ezra when he started his rounds early. I told him there was a misfiled note in the apothecary. There wasn’t, but it seemed

wiser to avoid letting the archives argue with whatever's left of a pulse."

She didn't say it just to justify herself. Mola never needed my approval, not since the day she saved my life in the Medica. But that night, she chose silence over certainty. That choice required more than courage. It called for quiet belief. She believed in me, in Herma, and in what might still be uncovered.

She didn't write down what she saw. She didn't even turn her head. But in that hush between lantern flickers, her presence held steady like the last safe breath before drowning.

The kinds of truths we found that night don't get admitted to ledgers. But without Mola, we'd never have walked out on our own feet. We might not have walked out at all.

\* \* \*

The next afternoon, Brandeur's measured monotone droned in the lecture hall, filling the air like bad music. He tinkered with theories too dry to spark interest, too dull to linger in memory. Most students stared blankly, their minds somewhere else entirely. I sat near the front, making certain my presence unspooled against his awareness like a snagged thread.

"Hemme might've thought this was clever," I muttered, just loud enough to be heard. My lips brushed the words softly, almost to myself, though I chose them with care. "It seems so simple. But it's always the cracks. Things slip there first."

To his credit, Brandeur's voice didn't stumble midsentence, but the brief flicker of his eyes told me what I needed to know. Some threads, even careless ones, pulled tighter than others.

Hours later, I caught him moving across the cobblestones. His gait was sharp and purposeful, his steps cutting through the twilight gloom. He moved toward Hemme's office. I trailed him at a distance, my own movements quiet as I made my way to the gargoyle fountain.

The night deepened around me, my breath curling faint in the cold as I crouched low beside the fountain. I reached out with my Alar and coaxed the overcurious wind to weave its thread. One side drifted toward Hemme's shuttered office while the other slipped toward Kilvin's. Calling the wind was not force. It was seduction, a kind of charm you encouraged gently, as if leading a bird to your open hand. Slowly, I teased softness into firmness and murmured until it yielded.

Hemme's voice rode the current first, sharp and clipped. "It was delicate work, nothing more. Not sabotage. A gentle nudge. Something no one should have noticed."

Another voice, softer, less distinct. "And Herma?"

Hemme's voice carried through the wall. "Herma was old." There was a thread of exasperation in it, pulled thin. "This didn't kill him. Time did. I only helped it along."

The wind trembled. It slipped free of my words, and the voices dissolved into the night. Still, I had heard enough. My teeth clenched against the weight of it. Hemme's confession was soft. Ordinary. But true. Herma hadn't needed to die. I could only hope the current I had set loose would carry his words to Kilvin.

\* \* \*

The trial took weeks to wind its way into motion. Weeks where I made myself stay quiet, an unseen Cthaeh easing pieces into place while others bore the weight of suspicion. Kilvin carried the case where I could not, pulling together threads I'd left carefully loose behind me, his calm authority reshaping what I couldn't touch directly.

When Hemme finally stood beneath the shadow of the Iron Law, I remained in the gallery, one face in a sea of quiet onlookers. Kilvin testified with grave simplicity, recounting a trail of evidence that pointed unmistakably toward tampering, and toward Hemme. Arwyl followed, dragging the room through his detailed reexamination of Herma's body. Signs of malfeasance. Tiny, deliberate patterns.

It wasn't the confession itself that struck Hemme down. It was the weight of too many threads woven against him, and the smallest fray in his infamous control. The records of materials purchased from the Artificery. The faint patterns in Herma's decline. His accomplice's silence. It was inevitable, like a rope drawn tight enough to strangle.

But even as the trial resolved, I found no satisfaction. Justice wasn't sharp, not like guilt. It wasn't clean. It was heavy and dull, something that settled slowly into grief's hollow weight. I told myself it was enough, though I could not say for sure if I believed it.

What I know is this. I spent long nights awake, staring at the ceiling, chasing the thought. Wondering if I might have found it sooner. If I had tugged at the thread before it knotted. If it would have made a difference. If it would have mattered.

# CHAPTER 5

## THE ART OF LISTENING

**I** LINGERED OUTSIDE THE Archives after the trial. I hadn't meant to. My feet found their way there, tracing old steps, following a thread I could not see. The quiet hung around me, heavy and damp, like wool soaked through with rain. Each breath pressed down against my chest. Thick. Close. The walls leaned in and tightened the space, taking the easy air and leaving only the weight behind.

Somewhere, a bell called out. Its voice came soft and distant, blurred by stone and the stretch of empty halls.

Silence settled over me and refused to leave. It pressed close and closer still. It pressed out the world, the questions that had no answers, the frayed places in my memory, the guilt that clung like a second skin. Silence smothered it all, leaving nothing but its own cold comfort.

"You've been thinking too loud."

I turned and found Elodin standing there, framed by the shadows of the passage behind him. He didn't so much stand as inhabit the space, like he had been part of that silence all along and had simply chosen now to emerge from it. His robe hung crooked, one shoulder bare. His hair was as wild as his expression was calm, eyes bright as cut glass but unreadable, like they reflected some light I couldn't see. For an instant, as my gaze met his, I thought there was something strange about the way the shadows moved around him, like they leaned into his edges instead of away. But the moment passed before I could pin it down.

"Walk with me," he said. There was no inflection to his tone and no hint of invitation. It wasn't rude. It simply assumed.

Then he smiled, small and sly, as though he'd just told a joke only he was clever enough to hear. Before I could answer, he turned and began moving along the uneven cobbles, his steps an easy glide. I didn't even have to think before my feet followed.

Elodin wove through the campus like the wind: careless but deliberate. Cobblestones gave way to gravel, gravel to dirt as we twisted beneath low archways and tight alleys, past buildings bathed in shadow. I couldn't say if he led us by instinct or some private knowledge of paths no one else noticed. Whatever the case, the ground felt uneven beneath my boots, but Elodin walked over it like it wasn't there.

At last, he broke the silence. "You're thinking about Herma." He didn't ask. His tone was measured and inevitable, as precise as artifacting.

"Of course I am," I said, though the words felt too clumsy for the weight I wanted them to carry. "It feels wrong. Too quick. It's like rushing through a verse before the final chord has time to settle."

Elodin hummed in answer. It was not a tune. It was something low and strange, more vibration than music.

“He hated chaos,” Elodin said. His words were soft, half a thought spoken aloud. “But not the way you expect. Herma hated what chaos did to people. Books are simple things. Ropes and rooms can bear disorder. They do not mind. People are different. He tied us together, Kvothe.”

I frowned at him. “Tied how?”

Elodin’s lips curved slightly, like I’d stepped onto the edge of some verbal trap. “Have you never noticed it? The scholars, the errant students, the fools trying to wrap themselves in wisdom too large for them? Herma pulled at their ends. Drew them steady. Anchored them. You never even saw it. Not until now.”

“And now?” I asked, careful.

He did not smile this time. He only looked up, studying the sky as clouds unraveled into long pale threads. Mist drifted, draped, tangled on the wind.

“Now his knots are loose,” he said. “Some still hold. Some slipping, some coming undone.” He watched the sky as if waiting for something more. “I wonder which will last. Which will pull tight and never let go.”

We walked on. When the cemetery came into view, I realized for the first time where Elodin had been leading me.

\* \* \*

The grave was wrong. Not in its size. Not in its shape. Not in the way the stone sat, cold and square and still. Herma never wanted grandeur. He never wanted statues or carved names. But this ending felt wrong in a different way.

The stone lay flat. The edges were too straight. The lines were too clean. It all fit together, smooth and silent, like a finished song.

But where was the knot? Where was the thing that gave it meaning, complexity, weight? It was no grave for a man as full of untied stories as Herma had been.

Elodin stood beside me. He did not move. The wild restlessness I knew so well was gone, pressed down beneath the hush of this place. His shoulders slumped, bowed by something I could not see. For a long time, neither of us spoke. When at last he found his voice, it was low, almost gentle, as if a word alone might rip the silence like cloth. As if the silence itself was fragile, easily broken.

“The art of listening,” he said, “is more than Naming. You already know this. Even if you don’t know you know it.”

Did Elodin know I’d had a hand in Hemme’s downfall? Had Kilvin woven together my loose threads? But as I opened my mouth, I felt the air itself pressing against my words. I let them fall away. The answer wouldn’t change anything.

Elodin stayed a moment longer, murmuring something that felt more like a prayer than a comment. Then he turned and walked away, leaving me there with my thoughts and the weighted silence of the burial ground.

\* \* \*

That night, Elodin's Naming class was the opposite of the graveyard. Where the grave had been still, the class crackled with restless energy. Firelight from the torches danced across the stone walls, throwing shadows that writhed like living things.

"Kvothe." Elodin's voice cut through the air, snapping my name like a bowstring. "To the center."

I hesitated, but only for a heartbeat. Every eye in the room traced my movements as I stepped forward. I stood in the circle of space Elodin had carved out for moments like this, beneath the heavy gaze of ancient stonework and brighter, watchful eyes.

Elodin paced slow circles around me, his movement oddly graceful, like a bird inspecting its prey after deciding it wasn't, in fact, dead. "Tell me," he said quietly. "What do you see in a Name?"

His tone was too calm, too deliberate, and I braced myself. "I see truth," I replied, my voice measured, even.

Elodin stopped pacing. The faintest smile curved along his lips. "Clever. And true enough. But truth is not simple. It is not clean." He began to move again, circling me steadily. "Truth is layered, Kvothe. A fragile thread wrapped in lies, in doubt, in sharp things eager to snap under tension."

I opened my mouth to respond, but Elodin wasn't waiting.

"A Name," he said, "is more than truth. It is balance. It is connection. It is weight. It is the thing beneath all things."

He paused then, looking straight at me, eyes bright and sharp. "If you pull too hard on one thread," he said. He gestured, and a breath of wind moved through the room. It came light as a whisper, brushing against my cheek.

"Everything comes undone."

The air thickened. I could feel it winding tighter around me, impossibly heavy.

Elodin leaned closer, his voice soft as silk. "Say it."

The Name hovered on the edge of sense, spinning just beyond my reach. And then, like plucking a string I couldn't see, it rang through me. Not as sound exactly, but as a trembling resonance that pulled through my chest and fingers. The wind moved, shifting in perfect harmony with the name I didn't so much call as breathe. A melody hidden within silence, waiting to be played.

For a moment, it lingered at my side, light as breath, alive with motion. Then, thin as glass, it formed a ring around my finger before dissolving.

The room fell still. Papers that had scattered in the sudden wind settled softly to the ground. No one spoke.

"Beautifully done," he said, his tone a strange mix of reverence and regret. He stepped closer, tilting his head like a bird both curious and wary. "A ring of air. A rare thing. The first step toward something." He hesitated, studying the space where the wind had been, then nodded faintly. "A pity. So lovely. So doomed."

I barely heard him. I was still caught in the moment before, held captive by the raw and fragile truth of what I'd just touched. It wasn't just a moment or a trick. It was proof that I had crossed some invisible line.

# CHAPTER 6

## THE BREATH OF THE PEAKS

THE HUM OF VOICES and the clinking of tankards seeped upward from the packed common room at Anker's, muffled but steady, like the pulse of a living thing. It was a sound I should have been part of, thickening the air with chords from my lute, stoking laughter with stories. Instead, I sat on the edge of my narrow bed, staring at the pack I had thrown together in no more than ten minutes.

The bag was simple, almost too simple for whatever I hoped to accomplish. Inside: a waterskin, a too-dry loaf of bread, a tightly rolled blanket, and my lute in its case, strapped to the side. The lute looked at me as if it disapproved.

Still, I hesitated. The air hung heavy in the room, thick with the stale tang of ale and old wood.

It was foolish, I thought. Irresponsible, even. But a voice sharper than wit whispered back: "When has that ever stopped you before?" Responsibilities move like rivers—slow sometimes, roaring torrents at others—but always pulling you further along whether you wade or swim.

Before I could change my mind, I grabbed the pack and slipped my lute into its worn leather sling. The weight of them across my back settled something in me, if only briefly. The dim sounds of the tavern below paused for a moment—an unplanned lull in the noise—and I imagined Anker's voice half-laughing, half-accusing: "*Off so soon, boy? We've a full house tonight.*"

But I didn't answer the phantom question. Instead, I scrawled a hasty note and set it neatly on my bed:

*Anker—Something needs tending at the University. I'll return in a few days. My thanks, as always.*

The note, I knew, wouldn't satisfy him. But Anker wasn't a fool, and I could imagine him directing his irritation where it would most profit him—into fuller mugs and thicker slices of bread for the customers. Still, the faint pang of leaving pressed harder against my ribs than my pack ever could.

I stepped out into the night, the air striking my face with a cool relief that startled me after the stale warmth of the upstairs room. The street was quieter than I expected, though the distant hum of Imre's evening life lingered faintly on the breeze. Overhead, the sky yawned wide, the edges smeared with purples and blues that would soon deepen to black. And beyond that, the mountains loomed in memory more than sight—distant peaks that called me, sharp and steady as a plucked string whose vibrations carried too far to fade.

I took my first steps, slow but sure, letting the rhythm of the walk ease my restless thoughts. The trail wound ahead like a song waiting for its first note.

\* \* \*

The wind met me halfway to the Six Sisters, restless and sly. At first, it was gentle, threading playfully through my hair and snapping at the edges of my hood. But as the land began to slope upward beneath my boots, so did the wind's mood change. It tugged harder, sharp and impatient, as if testing whether it could pull me back or push me onward.

By the second day, its playful nature had vanished entirely. The mountains rose jagged and solemn ahead, their rocky faces indifferent, their uppermost peaks capped faintly with snow that glinted in the weak light. I climbed carefully, my footing deliberate, each breath drawn thinner as though the air itself were shrinking. At times, the wind screamed between the crags, a wild and furious thing. There was no question about whose domain I had stepped into. The wind wasn't just weather here; it was alive, a raw force that questioned my right to trespass.

Each night on the mountainside, I found myself beneath a blanket of stars so wide it seemed as though the world might collapse under their weight. I huddled beneath my blanket, my body aching from hours of climbing, my thoughts circling themselves like a hungry hawk. The wind howled in the night, singing its secrets I was too deaf to hear. What did I think I would learn? Did the wind even have a secret, or had I left Imre chasing ghosts of my own imagining?

The ascent grew steeper with each passing day. By the third morning, I felt utterly alone. The trees had long fallen away, leaving only jagged stone and patches of black ice that glared up at me from the ground like unkind mirrors. I measured my breath in shallow bursts, each careful step anchoring me to the moment.

It was on that morning—when the wind was sharpest, the air cold enough to sting at my cracked lips—that something happened.

I had stopped to rest on a rocky ledge, perched precariously far above the world I had risen from. The wind clawed at me with ferocity, battering my chest and legs, blinding me by whipping my hair into my eyes. And then, suddenly, it stopped.

The absence was so sharp it startled me, as if the world had exhaled once and held its breath in anticipation. My heart pounded in my chest. The wind didn't vanish entirely, not a retreat, but a pause—still and deliberate. Something brushed my cheek then, soft and faint, not forceful or cruel. Its touch wasn't tender, but it wasn't angry, either. I could not name what it was, only that I felt something beneath it—a recognition or the suggestion of one.

The thread hummed just out of reach. For the first time, I didn't try to pull it closer. I simply listened.

When the wind shifted again, it almost felt like it lingered a moment longer before moving on.

I descended the slopes with steps that were lighter, though no less cautious. I carried nothing with me but my breath, my lute, and the small, thrilling certainty that when I truly called, the wind would come.



When I returned to Imre, it was near twilight. The city lounged beneath a sky painted in soft pinks and grays, the evening air cool against my skin. My boots found their way through familiar streets until the rest of the world seemed to fade behind me.

Auri's rooftop was where it always was, quietly hidden, holding its breath just for me. When I climbed the last set of stones, I found her perched on the edge, her legs swinging over a gap as carelessly as a child dangling them in water. She turned at the sound of my boots, and her face broke into a wide smile, as though the sky itself had gifted her the sight of me.

"Welcome home, Kvothe," she said, prim and polished, as though I had kept her waiting for precisely this moment.

I returned her smile, setting my pack down with a low thump. "You always know," I said.

"Of course I do," she replied, tilting her head with a smug twist to her lips. "The wind told me. Did you catch it?"

I laughed, shaking my head. "Catch it? That's the wrong question altogether."

Auri raised a finger, as if to challenge me. "But did you *ride* it?"

"No." I sighed, dropping to sit beside her. The stone was cool beneath me, a quiet contrast to the warmth her presence brought. "But I got closer."

"That's good enough," she said lightly. "You'll be Taborlin the Great before you know it."

Her eyes drifted to the bulging sack at my side, and she gasped. "Oh! What did you find this time?"

"A few things," I said, reaching into my pack. "And this." I pulled free a bundle of rich blue fabric, folded neatly and tied with a thin strip of leather. "A gift for you."

Her hands flew to her cheeks in delight. "For me?" she asked, her voice hushed the way one speaks of something sacred.

"You said you liked my cloak," I said, unfolding the fabric. It caught the fading light, the color deepening to the shade of evening skies just before the stars wake. "And since you don't like used things, I thought you deserved one of your own."

She let me swing the cloak around her thin shoulders. It settled softly, wrapping her like dusk falling at the close of day. Her small hands clasped the edge, brushing its folds with reverence.

"What's it made of?" she asked, her voice full of longing.

"Goose feathers and whispers stolen from summer clouds," I said, my face as solemn as hers.

She giggled, the sound like bells in the quiet air. "Goose feathers are scratchy. How thoughtful of you to use clouds instead."

"And what did *you* bring me?" I asked, invoking our ritual.

Auri's sly grin returned. She reached into her pocket with great deliberation and pulled out a small, weathered book. It was plain but old, its edges browned and its cover faintly embossed with swirls, like frost curling over the surface of glass.

"This," she announced. "It's made of shadows and murmurs from long ago."

I took it carefully, running my fingers along its textured surface. It felt strangely warm, as though it had absorbed sunlight no one else could see. "What's inside?"

"Secrets," she said simply. Her tone was so casual, so matter-of-fact, that it made me pause.

“Secrets it keeps?” I asked, curious.

“Secrets it *tells*,” she said, the words spreading like ripples in a still pond.

Before I could ask more, Auri sprang to her feet, the cloak swirling around her like a storm caught in a teacup. “Play for me!” she said, twirling once, her arms spread wide.

I pulled my lute from my pack, the familiar weight rough in my hands. The first chord rose into the air, soft and buoyant, and she began to turn, her toes brushing the stone with practiced lightness.

The notes carried us both. My fingers guided the melody, weaving it through the cool evening air. Auri spun and spun, her bare feet tracing patterns on the rooftop as though they were writing something too beautiful for words. The stars above blurred with her motion, their light winding together with the sound of my music.

Her laughter echoed briefly before fading into the stillness. When at last her movements slowed and my music trailed off, she collapsed into a heap of soft blue cloak and tangled golden hair, grinning up at me as though she’d captured the sky itself.

# CHAPTER 7

## A SONG WITHOUT WORDS

THE NEWA ARRIVED QUIETLY at first, like the faint rumble of thunder through distant hills. It moved in whispers, trailing through the Courtyards and across the stone benches of the Medica, brushing against ears and tightening brows. By midmorning, it gained weight, carried on the sharp gestures of students gathering under the shadow of the Archives.

Kilvin was Chancellor.

The enormity of those three words hung in the air, too strange to settle. Kilvin of the workshop—Kilvin, with his fire-scarred hands and thick, deliberate voice—standing at the head of the table in the Masters' Hall? It felt like imagining a bear presiding over a library: capable but not natural.

I heard no proclamation. No formal announcement rang across the University, but evidence was everywhere. In the Hall of Stones, Herma's name had been carefully filed away into history. On the slab of dense, polished rock that bore the names of Chancellors past and present, Kilvin's name gleamed freshly carved, sharp-edged like it might cut you if pressed too hard.

I had seen him before Admissions that morning, scribbling something onto a long roll of parchment, his thick fingers wrapped tight around a quill too fragile for his hands. He didn't look up when I passed. At the time, I thought only of my tuition—eighteen talents and six jots, not my worst term but close enough to feel bruised. Now, the smallness of my concerns made me wince.

Herma was gone, and Kilvin stood in his place. I imagined his voice huddled behind the weight of that long table, giving counsel in that calm, rumbling tone of his. It wasn't a bad thought. Kilvin, after all, was what people called *reliable*. But a whisper tugged in the back of my mind like a thread: Did Kilvin know what to do when the knot unraveled?

\* \* \*

Denna was back in Imre.

I never know how these things find me—whether it's an overheard word or the strange way the air changes when she's nearby. But I knew. I felt it as surely as the first sharp note of a song.

I found her perched on a low stone wall outside a shop boasting perfumes too delicate for my palate and cigars too expensive for my purse. She was dressed simply, her dark hair dancing faintly in the breeze. But there were signs of elsewhere in her. Subtle changes tucked into the way she carried herself, secrets hinted at in the faint streak of amber kissing her hair and the soft spice clinging to her skin.

“Are you off to dine with kings?” I asked, lifting my voice just enough to break her quiet.

Her gaze found me, and she smiled like light glancing off a blade—quick, sharp, and gone in the next breath. “Only if kings don’t bore me first,” she said, hopping down from the wall with just enough grace to make it seem accidental.

Something about her was different, but not in the usual way Denna was always different, like a song changing key. This was quieter, more deliberate. She was here, but I could tell that some part of her was still elsewhere, drifting outside what I could reach.

We spent the evening walking the streets of Imre, dipping in and out of gilded restaurants where the service came with silver platters and smiles just shy of condescension. I told her stories, absurd things that made her laugh, and her laugh made the night feel lighter. I played for her too, here and there—a simple tune at one table, something fast and clever at another. And though her falls of laughter and easy smiles filled the spaces we shared, I couldn’t shake the weight of what always followed: the quiet. The part of her I could never touch.

By the time we left the last café, I’d spent more of the Maer’s coin than I cared to count. She walked at my side, her hands folded loosely behind her back, her steps as light and careless as falling leaves.

Farther down the street, the dark ribbon of the Omethi River curved its long body through the city. A light caught my eye—the lantern hanging at the bow of a small boat. Its pale glow marked the figure of Sovoy, paddling along the lazy current, his movements smooth as ink spilling over a page. His hat tilted forward, and his hunched shoulders made him look like an absent thought adrift in the slow water.

“That’s rare enough to catch the eye,” I murmured.

Denna turned her head toward the water but didn’t stop walking. Her voice came softer than the river’s rhythm. “Rare things have a way of vanishing.”

She reached for my arm and tugged me away from the café lights, leading us into quieter streets, and then quieter still, until the shadows of Imre deepened, and the soft hum of the city slipped behind us like a dying breath.

\* \* \*

We found ourselves near the standing stones just beyond the far edge of the city, where the air turned sharp and stars hung closer to the ground. I had walked past these stones many times but never lingered. Tonight, though, something about their presence seemed different. The world felt quieter here, as though holding its breath.

Denna leaned against one of the stones, the faint moonlight pooling silver over her dark hair. She had her arms folded loosely, her usual laughter gentler now but no less sharp. “Why don’t you play me something new?” she asked.

It wasn’t a suggestion.

I hesitated, my fingers trailing over the strings of my lute as I unslung it from my shoulder. I wanted to reach for something easy, the steady comfort of a familiar tune, but

there was no comfort in the way she looked at me. Her gaze pinned me to the spot, weightless but unyielding.

Finally, I reached for something older—an unpolished melody from days I rarely dwelled on. Its edges were rough, its rhythm uneven, like the staggered steps of a man staggering home alone on an unfamiliar road. I had written it in hunger—both for food and for answers too heavy for a boy to carry.

The song spilled into the night, and Denna closed her eyes, listening. She tilted her head slightly, as if hearing something beyond the notes. When the final chords faded, she opened her eyes, and for a moment she seemed distant—farther than the stars strung above us. Without a word, she stepped forward and brushed her lips against mine.

It was light. Fierce. Unexpected. She lingered just enough to let me feel its absence the moment she stepped back.

“I always knew you were like this,” she said softly, her voice curling into something between satisfaction and sorrow. Before I could speak, she turned toward the distant lights of Imre, the faint spice of her trailing in the breeze.

I stood there, my lute still in my hands, the silence of the stones all the more deafening in her wake. If there was anything sacred left in me, it was sitting in the space where the song had lived for just a moment longer.

# CHAPTER 8

## RARE THINGS VANISH

I FOUND HER NOTE WHERE I should not have expected it but somehow did all the same: pressed beneath the edge of my lute case at Anker's.

It wasn't there the night before. Of that, I was certain. But when I reached for my lute that morning, my fingertips brushed the faint curve of paper. I pulled it free, breath catching slightly, the way it always did when she left something behind—a word, a glance, a thread she had no intention of tying.

The note was short, almost careless, though Denna was never careless. The ink smudged at the edges as though it had been folded and unfolded a hundred times before it reached me. Two words waited on the page: *Next time*.

I turned the note over, searching for more, even though I knew there wouldn't be. There wouldn't be an explanation. No mention of why she had been near enough to place it where I would find it, yet not near enough to let me see her do it. That wasn't Denna.

It was her way of saying goodbye and not saying goodbye. An acknowledgment without weight. A promise as thin as gossamer.

I stared at the paper until the letters blurred together. For a moment, I let myself imagine the scene: Denna slipping into the upper rooms at Anker's, her steps light, her sharp smile tugging at the corner of her mouth as she nestled the note beneath my lute case. She wouldn't have lingered—wouldn't have done anything so sentimental—but part of me wanted to believe she had.

Sighing, I folded the note and slipped it between the pages of a worn book I had been halfheartedly translating. That, I thought, was what people like me did to survive: we preserved. Every fragment, every smudge of ink. If we couldn't touch what we yearned for, we could at least keep its shadow close. But shadows were thin company.

By midmorning, I found my feet drifting toward Devi's. Not because it was wise, and certainly not because it was fair—neither to her nor to myself—but because the bitter hollow Denna left was unbearable.

\* \* \*

Devi's room always felt alive, but in a way I could never entirely trust. Cinnamon softened the sharper edges of whatever alchemy worked in the shadows, but it did little to

cover the tension coiled within the space itself. It was the kind of room that invited curiosity the way a sharp knife invites wandering fingers.

Devi lounged in her chair, her hair spilling over one shoulder in a lazy river of ink, legs tucked beneath her like a cat waiting to pounce. Her grin, sharp and knowing, widened as I entered. “Kvothe,” she said, drawing out my name like a silken thread. “To what do I owe this rare and radiant delight?”

“You flatter too easily,” I said, leaning against the doorframe.

“Not a word of it is undeserved,” she countered, propping one elbow on the table beside her. “And don’t think you can distract me from the most pressing matter at hand.”

“Which is?”

She waved a finger toward me. “Your hair, darling boy. It’s practically shouting mischief.”

“Mischief,” I said, stepping further into the room, “is just what happens when genius doesn’t sit still.”

“And trouble,” she chimed, “is what happens when it does.”

Our laughter warmed the air briefly. With Devi, words became a game—a rhythmic trade of edges and smiles. For all her talk of danger, she had a way of softening sharp conversations into comfortable unsteadiness.

But soon, as was often the case with Devi, the talk turned deeper. It wasn’t long before the Four-Plate Door came up, that lingering riddle at the heart of my days and nights in the Archives. Devi’s grin shifted, growing tighter, though her eyes grew hungrier. “Do you know what no one tells you about the Archives?” she said, voice low and conspiratorial. “It’s *pruned*.”

“Pruned?”

Devi tilted her head, the firelight catching one side of her face in gold and leaving the other in deep shadow. “Books are locked away. Secrets buried. Oh, they’ll let you play with what’s safe, sweet boy. But the rest? Tucked far out of reach.”

Her grin stretched as she added, “Far from hands like yours.”

There was something different in her smile this time. Something tighter, restrained. It didn’t sit right. “And you know this... how?” I asked, my voice light but probing.

Devi didn’t answer right away. She reached for a jar on the low table beside her, gently tipping it back and forth, making the liquid inside swirl and shimmer. “Sweet boy,” she said, her voice soft, “you’ve barely crawled through the door, and already you want the whole house.”

“What are they hiding?” I pressed.

“You’re not ready for an answer like that,” she said, her voice low and thick as honey. “And I’m not in the mood to offer one.”

Her deflection didn’t surprise me. Devi loved her secrets too much to give them up easily. But my instincts were growing sharper, and I watched her face closely as I steered the conversation toward Lorren and his brass keys. Just the mention of his name was enough to make the corner of her mouth twitch, her fingers stopping mid-tap. There was a story there, I could feel it.

“Careful, sweet boy,” she said, her voice soft but her eyes dangerous. “Some stones aren’t meant to be turned. You might find sharp things hiding underneath.”

The grin on her face never wavered, but her voice held a chill I hadn’t expected. I pressed her, slowly, delicately, and she let something slip—deliberately or not, I couldn’t quite tell.

“There’s power in keeping things hidden,” she said, her words like a thread caught on a rough edge, fraying just a bit. “But not everyone who hides something deserves to be trusted.

Men like Lorren... well, they only show you the parts of themselves that they want you to see.”

It wasn't until much later, after I'd left her, that I realized Devi had been speaking less to me and more to the twist in her memory. Her words rang louder in the spaces between them. They always did.

\* \* \*

I left with more questions than I came with. That's how walking into Devi's den always worked—easy in, heavy out. But she had pointed me just enough toward the threads I couldn't resist pulling.

Back in my small, rented room, I retrieved Auri's book: the plain, weathered cover that hid its strange warmth and faint sense of *rightness*. The kind of warmth not everyone would feel but that I imagined Auri had known the moment she'd placed it in my hands.

I worked quickly, binding it with a sympathetic thread marked faintly with my own blood. A tool needs to be tied to its maker, and I intended this book to serve a singular purpose: to disappear.

The next day, I approached Lorren's Giller, Dystrol, holding the book as though it had been unearthed from a dusty corner of some forgotten collection. “A donation,” I said, tracing its etched scrollwork as I spoke. I murmured something about the Amyr as his practiced, neutral face gave away nothing. Only the smallest hesitation when his fingers touched the cover gave him away—a slight pause, a momentary tightness in his grip.

Within days, it vanished, just as I had hoped.

\* \* \*

The compass remained steady in my hand, its needle pointing resolutely as I slipped between shelves and down familiar corridors of the Archives. It pulled with the certainty of someone who knows a secret and doesn't care to explain it.

And when it froze, I found myself in front of the Four-Plate Door.

I stopped, my pulse roaring in my ears. For a moment, I hoped that the compass had faltered, that I'd miscalibrated or made some fatal error. But no. The needle's stillness was absolute. I pressed my trembling hand against the cold, unyielding stone of the door, its edges sharp and precise under my fingertips, as if taunting me for misunderstanding its purpose all my life.

The book was here. Beyond this impenetrable barrier.

My stomach twisted. I had spent years inside these endless halls of parchment and ink, trusting that the Archives contained all truth, all knowledge, open to those worthy and persistent enough to find it. The University had sold me the dream that all the world's wisdom lay waiting for those who sought it with diligence and care. But this? This made a mockery of that.

I felt heat rise in my chest—a slow, simmering anger. They called the Archives a library of everything, but that had been a lie. This door, this smooth and silent barrier, was proof that



knowledge wasn't just kept out of reach; it was hidden. Censored. Scrubbed clean.

I had believed in Lorren's rules once. Trusted his cold, immovable logic. But no longer. The door was a betrayal of that trust. A trick. A sleight of hand designed to make fools of the curious. The thought left me hollow and seething at the same time.

I felt small then, standing in the vast, quiet belly of the Archives. Foolish for having bought the lie so completely. And yet beneath the sharp sting of betrayal, determination began to simmer. The truth had been withheld from me, but it was still there, trapped behind this unbreachable wall like a secret whispered into stone.

"This wasn't how it was supposed to work," I muttered under my breath. My voice barely registered in the stillness. But the door didn't care. It wouldn't answer me, wouldn't unlock, wouldn't relent.

The Archives were a lie.

My hand fell to my side, curling into a fist. I stayed there a long moment, staring at the door. The urge to scream or strike the smooth, unyielding surface flashed briefly, but I swallowed it down. Anger would accomplish nothing. Not yet.

I turned on my heel and left without looking back. But as I wove through the darkened stacks again, one thought began to solidify beneath all the others: the door may have kept me out, but it couldn't do so forever. They had hidden something behind that stone to stop people like me. And now, more than ever, I was determined to know why.

One way or another, I would find a way inside.

# CHAPTER 9

## A FOOLISH BARGIN

I FOUND MYSELF AT Devi's door again, and this time, I couldn't conjure a reasonable excuse for it—not to my pride, nor my better judgment. Perhaps I came because she'd baited me so perfectly, dropping breadcrumbs of the Four-Plate Door into my restless mind. Or perhaps I came because I was tired of pacing my room, tired of spinning thoughts without a thread to follow. Either way, there I was, hands loose at my sides, shame bitter on my tongue.

When Devi opened the door, she barely glanced at me before stepping aside, letting me cross the threshold into her world of peculiar contradictions: cinnamon warmth clinging to cold alchemical glass, the fragrant hum of something half-forgotten simmering on her desk. Her hair was drawn into a loose knot, her lips just slightly crooked, like a blade half-sheathed.

"Kvothe," she said, letting my name stretch and curl off her tongue. "Back so soon? People will start to talk if you keep this up."

"Let them," I said, trying to match her casual tone as I stepped further inside. But her knowing smile and the glint in her eye made me feel caught, as though she already knew I was here at her mercy.

"And?" she prompted, waving a hand languidly. "Did you find what you were looking for?"

"There's more than you're telling me," I blurted, every ounce of control snapping under the weight of my frustration. "You know more about what Lorren's hiding, and you've been holding back."

Devi tilted her head, her smile cutting sharper. "Sweet Kvothe, that's a bold accusation. And here I thought we were friends."

"Friends don't play games like this."

"Oh, Kvothe, they absolutely do," she said, leaning back against the edge of her desk like a knife balanced on its tip. "But friendship doesn't come cheap. You want to know what Lorren is keeping locked away? Get me into the Archives. Then we'll talk."

"No," I said, my voice firm and unflinching. "Not a chance."

Devi arched a skeptical brow. "So sudden, so certain. Why not, darling boy? Surely there's room enough for two clever, hungry minds in your hallowed stacks."

"There are places you don't belong, Devi. Some doors wouldn't close so cleanly after you passed through them."

Her expression didn't falter, but her fingers drummed slowly against the edge of the desk. "I expected better of you, Kvothe. I really did. I thought you'd understand a simple bargain between civilized people."

"We're not even having this conversation," I snapped, pacing a short, tight line. "I won't risk—"

"You owe me," she said, her voice cutting through mine like a blade.

That stopped me cold.

We argued after that, the words rising sharp and reckless between us. I tried to wield reason like a shield, but Devi cut through it with precision. She was a professional trader of secrets and debts, and I was at best a stubborn apprentice.

By the end, I caved.

"Fine," I said, the word almost burning on its way out. "But on my terms."

Her lips twitched into a smile. "How startlingly reasonable of you. And what, pray tell, are your terms?"

"No action until we've settled on a solid plan. One we both agree on."

Devi inclined her head, her fingers resuming their rhythmic tap. "Fair enough," she said, her grin softening but never leaving her face. "Lucky for you, I've already given this some thought."

From the pocket of her robe, she produced a small vial no larger than her thumb. The liquid inside caught the lamplight, deep red with a faint shimmer that pulsed like a heartbeat.

"This," she said, holding it aloft, "is a little marvel I've been tinkering with. Tasteless, odorless, and precise. A few drops in Lorren's wine, and he'll fall into the kind of slumber that dreams are jealous of. More importantly, he'll remember nothing when he wakes."

"And while he's unconscious?" I asked, though her intentions hung in the air like a blade above a neck.

"You borrow the keys," she said, her tone light as if discussing the weather. "No fuss. No noise. Surgical."

"Surgical," I repeated, the word bitter in my mouth. "I can think of other words for drugging one of the Masters."

Her wicked smile curled as she replied, "You know, Lorren keeps the keys to the Four-Plate Door under his robe with little else. Curious place to tuck something so important, don't you think?"

The room seemed to twist around her words. My first thought was disbelief: impossible, I told myself. Lorren was far too careful for something like that. My second was less certain.

"What are you saying?" I asked carefully, the words drawing tight like a string.

Devi's smile stretched, slow and deliberate. "Nothing, darling. Just facts." Her tone was breezy, but something dark and knowing simmered beneath it. "And let's just say, I'm rather good at getting close to people who think they're untouchable."

The implication hung in the air like an unanswered question, daring me to pull at its threads. I couldn't decide if I was unsettled by her knowledge or by how easily she wielded it.

"I still don't like this," I said finally.

"I'd be worried if you did," Devi said, setting the vial carefully on the corner of her desk. "But unless you've got a better plan..."

I wanted to argue. Everything in me itched to push back. But I couldn't. I didn't have another plan, and I was desperate enough to ignore how the sand beneath my feet was already shifting.

"Fine," I said finally. "But there's one more condition. I insist on testing it first. On me."

Devi's sharp laughter filled the room, fading almost as quickly as it began. When she saw my face, her amusement curdled. "You have my assurances. It works."

“That won’t do,” I said, my voice more certain than I felt. “If we’re doing this, it’s my skin at stake. If it doesn’t work exactly the way you promise, I need to know now.”

For once, her mask of confidence slipped. Her free hand curled tight at her side before releasing, and her eyes flicked to the vial.

“Fine,” she said after a long moment, the word clipped and cold as forged iron. “Come back in three days. I’ll have everything ready.”

The weight of her words pressed on the space between us. For a moment, neither of us moved. Then she dropped the vial into her pocket, extinguished the green-tinted lamp, and sent me back out into the biting night air.

\* \* \*

Three days felt like three years.

The first day was unbearable, my thoughts circling endlessly. Vashet’s voice crept into my head, sharp and demanding: *Which path lies closer to the Lethani? The one that endangers everyone, or the one that preserves what you hold dear?*

By the second day, it wasn’t Vashet’s voice haunting me but Wil and Sim’s. They cornered me in the dim shade of the Courtyard, their words bouncing off my already fragile resolve.

“People are talking,” Sim said, always too loud. “You’ve been seeing Devi an awful lot lately, you know.”

Wil shot him a glare before turning to me. “This isn’t like you, Kvothe. Do you even know why they expelled her?”

“I heard it was dueling,” I said casually, though the words were thick on my tongue.

“Alchemical experimentation,” Wil said. “Dangerous experimentation. She swore revenge on the Masters after they caught her.”

“And now you’re working with her?” Sim asked, wide-eyed and fidgeting.

I brushed them off with words I couldn’t bring myself to believe.

\* \* \*

By the evening of the third day, that knot of doubt had grown into something far worse: a living, twisting thing that gnawed at me whenever my thoughts strayed too close to it. It followed me as I wandered the edges of the Underthing and settled beside me while I played my lute for Auri.

The notes I coaxed out of the strings were clumsy and half-forgotten, lacking the shape or certainty I usually found in music. Still, Auri listened, her knees drawn up delicately, her small face tilted toward me, an unreadable expression alight in her too-bright eyes.

“You’re tangled,” she said as the last note faded into the still air. Her voice was soft but certain, as if she could see the snarl of my thoughts laid bare before her.

I ran my fingers lightly over the strings, pretending to tune them. “Just restless,” I said with a thin smile that couldn’t quite find its footing.

Auri tilted her head the other way, her pale hair catching the faintest glimmer of light. “No,” she said simply, her voice the quiet certainty of a secret well kept. “Not restless.”

She unfolded herself with the fluid grace of something quick and wild. For a moment, she hesitated, balancing lightly on the balls of her feet. Then, as if some invisible cue had whispered to her, she stepped away into the shadows, her movements soundless, belonging entirely to the dark world beneath the University.

I stayed where I was for a long time, staring at the weathered stone where her feet had danced moments before. Auri didn’t ask questions, but her presence was enough to remind me of the trust she placed in me: a fragile and fleeting thing, like blown glass held in too-tight hands.

This was why I had to be careful. Why I had to be better. The weight of her unspoken faith, thin as it was, added an unbearable heft to the decisions winding around inside me.

But that night, as I stood and made my way back across the river, I buried those doubts beneath the all-too-familiar tug of my own desires.

\* \* \*

The closer I got to Devi’s, the more my thoughts twisted. The nervous rhythm of my steps matched the churning in my chest. And yet I didn’t stop. I couldn’t stop. The archives had loomed before me for so long, locked and unattainable, that the thought of missing this one chance outweighed every hesitation.

I knew I was moving too quickly, trusting too easily. I knew my plan was patched together with fraying threads. But greed has a knack for muting better instincts, and mine whispered sweet lies: *This will work. You’ll figure it out. Devi’s just a means to an end.*

I knocked on Devi’s door with a resolve that cracked at the edges, but I refused to acknowledge the strain. She opened it quickly, her sharp smile already in place, her eyes alight with purpose.

“Come inside,” she said, her satisfaction dripping from each word.

For a fleeting moment, I hesitated. My mind conjured Auri’s unguarded smile, her weightless laughter twirling through the dark. The delicate trust she placed in me to keep her world safe. Then my thoughts returned to the archives, to the answers just out of reach, and I swallowed my hesitation whole.

Devi stepped aside, and I walked in. Greed pressed me forward, and doubt trailed behind like a shadow I refused to see.

# CHAPTER 10

## KEYS TO THE PAST

**B**REAKING INTO LORREN’S rooms was a terrible idea. Dangerous. Foolish. Likely to end with me thrown from the University like an unwanted book. But what’s one more terrible idea in a life already full of them?

The real danger wasn’t sneaking into the administrative wing of the Archives. It wasn’t slipping through shadows or carefully manipulating the lock on Lorren’s door. Those things were simple mechanics, familiar steps in a dance I’d practiced before. No, the danger came from the tiny vial nestled in my pocket—the one Devi trusted me to test on myself.

I could still hear her voice, crisp and confident: *“Once you know how it works, we’ll move forward. No surprises.”*

But surprises were inevitable. Because Devi didn’t need to hear the results of my test—not yet. Lorren would be my unwitting subject. If the vial worked exactly as she promised, I could wring something meaningful from my misstep, finding my own way forward while still keeping her ambitions at bay.

The night was black as ink as I crept through the Archives’ quiet belly. The hallways swallowed sound, each step pressing into thick silence. Lorren’s door stood like a dark sentinel at the end of the hall, its simplicity concealing the danger it held.

The lock was old but not primitive, the kind of mechanism designed to outwit impatient fingers. Kneeling, I pulled the leather pouch of my lockpicks from my pocket and worked with practiced care. The tumblers whispered their uncertainties before finally yielding, not with a click, but a sound quieter, softer—a sigh of surrender.

I eased the door open, slipping into the shadowed space beyond.

Lorren’s quarters were as stark as his demeanor. A narrow cot stood at perfect right angles to the wall, its sheets crisp and taut as a bowstring. The desk was unadorned, save for a quill resting in such precise stillness that I felt certain he measured its placement nightly. The books lining the walls were arranged immaculately, their spines unbroken, their contents surely marked in some master catalog to ensure none ever shifted out of place. The room was a monument to order, to discipline. And standing in its center, I felt like a stain.

But I had work to do.

The water jug on his bedside table was plain pottery, as unpretentious as the man himself, though its placement felt deliberate. Even the slight angle of the drinking cup beside it seemed calculated, as though to test if anyone dared disrupt his routine.

I drew the vial from my pocket. Devi had assured me it was potent yet subtle—a slipping into sleep so quiet it could fool even its victim. I uncorked it carefully, the tang of alchemy nipping at my nose, sharp and faintly medicinal.

For a moment, I hesitated. The thought of Lorren drinking from the jug felt like stepping past a line I hadn't fully admitted existed. But no good story comes without risk. I tipped the vial gently, letting its green shimmer mix into the water. I swirled it with deliberate care, watching the liquid settle into calm transparency, then returned it to its place as if it had never been touched.

Beneath the cot, the world narrowed. Dust clung to the sharp scent of varnish, the space a stifling, airless bubble. My breath quieted into measured beats as Lorren's absence stretched into a silence so thick it might have been alive.

And then, at last, the door creaked open.

Lorren's footsteps were deliberate, steady. Not loud, not hurried. The sound of someone who expected his surroundings to obey him. He paused at the bedside, his silhouette cutting across the faint light spilling through the window.

He poured a cup of water and drank it all in three steady swallows.

I waited. Not long. The draught worked as advertised—though its subtlety unnerved me. There was no dramatics, no sharp collapse. Just a gradual slowing of motions until Lorren sat on his cot, his body sagging under the weight of sudden sleep. Soon his breathing turned deep and measured, slipping into the natural rhythm of unconsciousness.

I slid from beneath the cot as quiet as a ghost, my eyes already on the keys around his neck. This next part would test more than my skill—it would test my conscience.

\* \* \*

In the end, I couldn't bring myself to do it. And letting go of that greed allowed me to think clearly for the first time in days. The door didn't guard *knowledge*. It wasn't a treasure beyond the grasp of lesser minds. It held something simpler: ink and parchment. The physical manifestation of words. If this was what I truly sought, why try to open a locked door when I could bring the words to me?

Sleep eluded me that night, no matter how I turned or how tightly I closed my eyes. The room was too loud in its silence, and my thoughts moved like wildfire in the dry grass of my mind. A plan bloomed there, hot and insistent, despite the haze of exhaustion.

When morning came, I stumbled to Devi's door, bleary-eyed. She answered in kind, her hair untidy, her face pale with the look of broken rest.

"Well?" she asked, her words cutting through the fog of my thoughts.

"The dosage was wrong," I lied. "I woke too early. Lorren will know if we do this."

Her expression shifted—somewhere between skepticism and guilt. Perhaps it was that expression, so out of character for her, that made me hesitate before admitting my deeper failure. She insisted on no follow-up questions, almost sheepishly sending me on my way. Curious.

On my way out of Imre, I bought enough *nahirout* to keep me alert for days. I had work to do.

\* \* \*

A burst of inspiration can feel like magic to a fool. But I have spent enough time under a magician's hat to know better—it's not the spark. It's the hours, the work, the sacrifice. That is the true cost of turning a spark into a flame.

For seven sleepless days, I lived by that truth. I ate thin food, drank *nahirout* tea in place of water, and drowned myself in the work. My goal was clear: to take the physical edges of ink and make them *move*. Like rubbing charcoal on paper to trace the raised surface of a coin, I would create a sympathy that translated ink from far away to an empty page in my hands.

When I presented my near-working prototype to Master Kilvin, his silence was worse than rage. He stared at the device, listened as I explained its crude workings, then finally spoke: "Cleverness," he said, as though the word itself were a warning, "is no substitute for wisdom. Promise me, Kvothe, you won't tread this road again."

He didn't order it locked away. He didn't tell me to refine it. He didn't even ask to test it. He simply melted it into molten slag with the forge bellows. Hot metal, wasted time, failings lost. That night, I stumbled back to my tiny room and collapsed on the floor.

I slept for two days.



# CHAPTER 11

## THE PRICE WE PAY

I WOKE TO the groan of a chair, soft and uneasy, like an argument left unresolved. My room swam around me as I blinked myself into awareness. Devi sat a few feet away, hunched forward, her elbows balanced on her knees. Shadows pooled under her eyes, and her sharp edges seemed dulled, as if her usual confidence had been shaken loose and left somewhere I couldn't see.

"Devi," I croaked, my voice brittle, scraping against the dryness in my throat. The sound startled me, jagged and unfamiliar, like it belonged to someone else entirely. "What... what are you doing here?"

She didn't answer right away. Her hands were busy weaving and unweaving her hair like restless spiders threading and unthreading their web. The motion wasn't precise, not the efficient and deliberate movements I expected from Devi. It was unsure. Nervous. When she finally looked at me, her eyes glinted with something I wasn't used to seeing in them. Regret.

"Kvothe," she began. Just my name, quiet and weighty as a stone dropped into still water. Then, softer, "I'm sorry."

The words hung in the air between us, fragile and unfamiliar. Devi didn't apologize. She negotiated. She angled. She teased, and she pried, but she never apologized. Hearing it now unsettled me more than anger would have.

"S-sorry?" I managed, leaning on my elbows to push myself upright. The room tilted as I moved, and it took everything I had not to collapse back onto the bed.

She pressed her lips tight. I could see her deciding, weighing how much to say and how to say it. Finally, she breathed sharp and fast through her nose. "The potion." She spoke the words carefully, like they might snap in her teeth. "I miscalculated the nahirout dosage."

The air stilled, and I felt my chest tighten. "Miscalculated," I repeated, though my mind had already raced ahead, pulling threads, tying knots.

Devi nodded once, her hands still tugging at loose strands of her hair. "I tested a smaller dose on myself after hearing your... report," she continued. "I thought maybe it was weak. The balance between the sedative and the stimulant was wrong, so I adjusted the formula." She hesitated, her voice momentarily caught on the next words. "Turns out, it wasn't weak at all. It was too strong."

My stomach tightened, but I forced myself to ask. "What happened?"

"I slept," she said, her tone flat, as if she could iron out the anxiety in her chest by keeping her words smooth. "For an hour. Maybe two. Then I woke up. Wide awake, Kvothe. Three days of it. My thoughts—" She stopped, her hands stilled in her lap, knotting

themselves together instead. “My thoughts were like wildfire. They moved too fast. My body...” She shook her head. “It felt like a bowstring drawn too tight.”

The nausea rose suddenly and violently, crashing over me like a wave. Three days. A smaller dose. What had I done?

My hands moved on instinct. I rolled to the edge of the bed and stumbled toward the basin near the window. My legs felt like half-filled waterskins, awkward and unwieldy under me. I fell to my knees, heaving into the basin, the sour burn of bile tearing at my throat.

Behind me, Devi stayed still, the way you stand too near a fire but don’t dare touch it or move away. She didn’t speak, didn’t try to help. But she didn’t leave, either.

When my stomach was empty, I lay against the cool stone wall, breathing heavily. I reached for the calm I’d spent years cultivating—the deliberate focus—a skill honed as much in fireside survival as in sympathy. It came sluggishly, but it came all the same.

“Devi,” I said, my voice low and cracked. I didn’t look at her, but I felt her stiffen slightly. “I’ve figured it out.” I forced my trembling hand to mirror steadiness. “A way to reach the Four-Plate Door without ever opening it.”

She hesitated only a moment before rising from her chair. The scrape of wood on the floor made my teeth ache. She didn’t reply as she stepped toward the door. Then, just as it swung open, she glanced back, a mixture of hope and caution written in her raised brow. “Don’t tease me, Kvothe,” she said with her usual sharpness, but her voice softened as she disappeared down the stairwell.

\* \* \*

Hours passed, or maybe only minutes. Time bent in strange ways when my thoughts spiraled like this. Lorren’s face lingered at the edges of my mind: his measured steps, his steady hand pouring water from that jug, the bowstring too tight, the sleep not coming.

Finally, I forced myself out of my room and into Imre. The air felt sharp against my skin, crisp as paper freshly creased. Buildings rose like sentinels around me, their shadows cool against the warm stones of the streets. I walked without looking at anyone, keeping my head down, my thoughts louder than the bustle around me.

It wasn’t long before I found Sim and Wilem at their usual spot. The chairs they sat in were old, wooden things with more creak than structure left in them, clustered in a lazy circle outside one of the quieter corners of the Eolian. There was something grounding about finding them there as though the universe had conspired to keep one place steady.

“Look who finally crawled out of whatever deep, dark hole he found,” Sim said, grinning as he clapped a hand on my shoulder.

“I thought you’d burned the Archives to the ground and left town,” Wil said, his grin softer but no less warm.

“Missed you too,” I replied with a thin smile that landed somewhere between forced and genuine.

Their laughter came like water over rocks, smoothing what had been rough for days. But something gnawed at the back of my mind: the silence. No one mentioned Lorren or spoke of strange outbursts in the Archives. No rumors had reached their ears of sleepless nights haunting the Master Archivist. That silence carried weight. It pressed on me, heavy and unwelcome.

Still, I drank in their company. For a short while, I let myself laugh. It wasn't easy, and it wasn't full, but it was something.

\* \* \*

Devi's door loomed before me again, familiar now in its strange way. This time, when she answered, her grin was firmly in place. The softness from earlier had burned away.

"Back already?" she said, her brow arching. Even before I spoke, I could see she knew why I had come.

I wasted no time. "I've figured it out," I said, the words spilling out almost before I could stop them.

Her grin sharpened, her posture shifting. She angled forward, her eyes narrowing like a hawk locking onto prey. "What exactly has that clever little mind of yours figured out, Kvothe?"

I took a long breath. My heartbeat picked up again. "How to reach past the Four-Plated Door."

Her eyes sharpened immediately. Her posture changed, leaning forward like a hawk locking onto prey. "You're serious."

"Serious as anything," I said. But my voice held its own hesitation. My work wasn't done. A storm gathered inside me, flickering with shame and ambition in equal measure. But for now, I had a foothold. And I wasn't done climbing yet.

# CHAPTER 12

## THREADS UNRAVEL

DEVI'S ROOM SMELLED sharp, like ink left too long on a hot iron. There was a hunger in the air, a thin tension that vibrated in the spaces between oil-slicked brass, faintly glowing sympathy wax, and pages full of frantic, scrawled equations. It felt like the room itself was restless, as though our sleepless nights had seeped into the wood of the walls.

Our creation sat on the only cleared surface in the room, cobbled together from wire and wood, shaped not with elegance but desperation. It was a strange, squat thing, a birdcage mangled and bent into something new. It whirred quietly, its uneven rhythm filling the room like the breath of something alive.

Devi sat cross-legged on the table next to it, her hair loose and wild, like she'd run her fingers through it too many times to count. Her sharp eyes were locked on the device. I was leaning over its delicate lattice of bindings, adjusting its sympathy alignments with the kind of care I usually reserved for tuning my lute. One wrong move and the whole thing might collapse.

"Again," Devi said, her voice like the snap of a bowstring.

I took a slow breath and steadied myself. Across the room, an old ledger sat closed on another table, its leather cracked and worn. It wasn't important—inspired, if I remember right, by some undermerchant's petty scribbles in Imre. But it served its purpose, thick and heavy enough to mimic something far more valuable.

Devi leaned forward as I activated the device. It made a faint, sighing sound, like an old man turning over in his sleep.

At first, nothing. Just the low, patient hum of the creation. Devi's hand flexed against the table, her fingers tapping out a sharp rhythm. "Come on..." she breathed.

Then, slowly, the blank parchment quivered. Lines began to appear, faint and hesitant, like a ghost rising from a familiar chair. But soon, the words solidified. Letters flowed across the page in thin, uneven strokes, curling and jagged in places but unmistakable in their meaning.

Devi let out a laugh that broke into something sharper, halfway between triumph and relief. "It worked," she murmured, leaning over the parchment as though it might vanish if she looked away. Her hand hovered over the page, hesitant, almost reverent. "Kvothe, this is it."

I didn't reply immediately. My mind was already hopping ahead, cataloging flaws. "The range is limited," I said, even as my chest tightened with excitement. "The replication isn't clean. The alignment could degrade if—"

“Hush, Kvothe.” Devi’s grin spread slowly, sharp as a cat’s stretch. “Must you insist on seeing the errant strokes in the masterpiece we’ve just painted? Listen to me carefully: we pulled words out of a book without touching it. We took hold of the intangible, darling boy. Let me have this moment before you bury me in your perfectionism.”

I couldn’t help it. My mouth curved into a smile that felt too sharp to stay on my face. She was right. Beautiful in concept, ugly in execution—yes. But it worked. Light and life, it worked. And if it worked here, it would work in the Underthing.

\* \* \*

Later that evening, I came up for air. I hadn’t been to the Eolian in days, possibly weeks—it was getting harder and harder to tell. The fresh air didn’t help clear my head as much as I had hoped, but it was sharpening enough to let me make my way toward where I knew Sim and Wil would be.

As usual, they were sitting outside one of the quieter corners of the Eolian, hunched over drinks in chairs that were two misplaced gusts away from collapse. The sight of them gave me that faint thread of relief I hadn’t known I needed.

“Look who’s emerged,” Wilem said as I slumped into the chair across from them. “And here I thought you’d been locked away by the Masters.”

“Locked away? Hah.” Sim leaned forward, his grin maddeningly wide. “That’s not it at all. He’s been busy courting a fairy queen in Imre. Or haven’t you heard?”

It took me half a second too long to realize what they were talking about, and the look on my face immediately set Sim off into laughter. Wilem smothered a grin of his own, taking a deliberate sip from his mug.

“Devi?” I finally said, forcing my best frown of incredulity. “You honestly think I’m sneaking off to Devi’s room every night for some grand, torrid affair?”

“Well, you’re certainly sneaking off somewhere,” Sim countered with far too much satisfaction. “And all signs point to Imre. I’m not saying I disapprove, but I’m also not saying I want to know the details. I’m trying to respect her privacy.”

I groaned and cast a strange look at Wilem, waiting for a rescue. But Wil simply smirked and leaned back in his chair, content to watch me dig my way out of this one.

“Okay, enough,” I began, but before I could finish, Sim raised a hand solemnly.

“But you should know,” he went on, quieter this time, “Denna was in town. She came by the Courtyard. She asked about you.”

The world stilled, as if all the air in Imre had folded itself into that moment. My grin faltered so slightly I doubt they caught it, but Wil’s brow knit almost imperceptibly, a flicker of understanding passing behind his eyes.

“And?” I said, feigning a lightness that felt like playing a lute with broken strings.

Sim shifted uncomfortably. “We, uh... we told her we didn’t know where you’d run off to. But... uh...” He rubbed the back of his neck in that peculiar way he did when searching for tact, but tact was always Sim’s second-best instrument. “We might have accidentally implied you’d... been busy with someone.”

They waited expectantly, tension stretching between us like a string being tuned too tight.

I summoned my charm with deliberate precision, hoping my smile would hold. “You’re not wrong,” I said, the words falling easy and practiced. But I could feel the shadow of my

own lie pressing cold against my chest.”

Sim blinked, open-mouthed. “Wait. You’re saying you—”

“I’m saying you should give Devi more credit as a companion,” I finished smoothly, sipping from Wil’s neglected mug. “She’s... not entirely intolerable company.”

Sim was too flustered to respond, but I noted the flicker of relief darting across Wil’s features. He was the sharper one. He saw the turn, but didn’t push it.

The conversation moved away. But my thoughts didn’t.

Denna had been looking for me. And now Sim and Wil—my friends, my ever-loyal, well-meaning friends—had ensured she would never try again.

\* \* \*

Weeks blurred, bound together by endless nights of fine-tuning the Duplicator and days spent navigating whispers and rumors. Sim and Wilem had grown accustomed to my absences, chalking them up to long nights in Devi’s company. They teased me for my vaulted “romantic escapades,” and I let them believe it. Rumors were safer, a smoke screen that obscured the truth from casual prying.

Devi and I refined the device in increments, adjusting its reach and precision, adding new functions to ensure it met our ultimate goal. A pantograph-like rig allowed the device not just to transfer content but copy it at half-scale, requiring less parchment and ink. It worked on open pages, closed books, and eventually even manuscripts locked behind layers of leather and brass—as long as we were close enough to form our link.

At last, when the Duplicator could transcribe from books through both proximity and layers of separation, we took it beneath the University.

\* \* \*

The Underthing held its breath as we moved deeper. The narrow corridors and winding tunnels felt different with Devi close, her sharp presence pricking at the fabric of this sacred silence. I felt it like a song played out of tune, the too-loud scrape of her boots jarring against the rhythm of the quiet.

When Auri walked these halls, the air itself seemed to part for her, soft and giving as water bent around a stone. But with Devi, the walls pressed closer, the shadows feeling less like companions and more like witnesses unsettled by her presence. I hated bringing her here. This wasn’t hers. This was a place of small, fragile trusts, and Auri’s soft, sacred breath echoed in the corners. Devi was a storm where there should only be stillness.

I justified it because I had no choice. There was no better staging ground than the Underthing for our experiment. No better position to reach the forbidden corners of the Archives. But even as we moved deeper, even as I convinced myself of the necessity, guilt stalked close behind, trailing us through the twisting stone.

Finally, we found our staging ground: a hollowed-out space where wall and earth felt thinner, pulsing faintly to those who knew how to listen. Here, just beyond the Four-Plated Door, we set the device into place and began.

At first, it was slow work. The Duplicator was precise but blind. We prodded into the scope of what lay beyond the Four-Plated Door without knowing what we would catch. Each page mirrored came from a book I couldn't see, a half-glimpse at the world beyond the lock. We catalogued scraps of information, pieced together small fragments of a greater picture.

And then, one day, the Duplicator whispered a name.

The document was ornate, the letters formed by firm, deliberate strokes. They bled onto our prepared page with an almost regal sort of weight, the impression far darker than the usual artifacts of ink. Devi's breath caught audibly beside me, her sharp inhalation echoing slightly against the stone walls.

"The *Order Codex*," she murmured. Her words wrapped around the name like it was a treasure dug up from beneath a thousand years of soil.

I leaned closer to the parchment, my fingers twitching with instinct. I recognized some of the symbols embedded there, hints of authority and secrecy that spoke of power deliberately hidden. My palms were damp, and my heart beat like a muffled drum in my chest.

I adjusted the Duplicator's targeting carefully, narrowing its focus until the next page emerged. My shoulders tensed as I leaned in again, this time finding words I had hoped for and feared at once.

*The Amyr.*

The letters crawled across the page, dragging every suspicion I'd ever harbored into the light. They weren't just a story. No mere artifact of bygone lore. Here they were, marked in layered ink—a hidden order, bound and sworn by terrible oaths, cloaked beneath both secrecy and silence.

My stomach churned as questions made themselves known: Why this knowledge? Why now? Did Lorren protect these books to prevent understanding—or to preserve it for himself? Sudden clarity and doubt hit me all at once, sending my mind tumbling through the possibilities.

Devi broke through my reverie with a hand pressed firmly against my arm. "Kvothe," she said quietly, her voice almost reverent despite its usual bite. "We've done it."

I nodded, the weight of that accomplishment settling over me like a heavy cloak. But this was merely the first thread pulled free. The unraveling had only begun.

# CHAPTER 13

## I WILL NOT BE HELD

LOVE IS A soft and precarious thing, often born in silence, nurtured by proximity, and sharpened by shared purpose. I didn't realize it at first – how my feelings toward Devi had grown roots, twining quietly around the edges of my thoughts. It was easy to ignore at first. She was quick-barked and bristling, as dangerous as a double-edged knife: brilliant, beautiful, and cursed with a sharpness that kept most people at arm's length.

But in the snug chaos of her small room, beneath the hum of sympathy wax and the bite of hot iron in the air, I discovered her warmth in quieter gestures. How she tucked a stray lock of hair behind her ear when she was thinking, her sharp gaze softening in the firelight. How her laughter, rare as a frost-lotus bloom, carried an edge of steel but landed soft all the same.

And there was purpose. A shared endeavor sharpens trust like no whetstone can. Together, we had crafted a new art: pulling knowledge from behind impossible doors, bending what shouldn't be bent. And for all her rough edges, she never felt like a threat.

Devi became the only person in my life who seemed to understand the hunger inside me. For knowledge, for answers, for more. And it was beautiful, wasn't it? To share this kind of closeness with someone who didn't just tolerate my ambition but matched it, stroke for stroke.

If you'd asked me then, I'd say I didn't love her. At least, not in any way I could have explained. But looking back now, I know better.

\* \* \*

Devi's room felt tighter than usual, the air heavy with the smell of ink and hot iron. Her makeshift library loomed around us, stacks of ragged, half-stitched books leaning drunkenly against one another like a forgotten city wall. Once, their roughness bothered me—their bare spines and uneven stitching a quiet affront to the elegance of knowledge. Over time, I'd come to see them differently. Not relics to be admired, but tools meant for use.

I ran my hand over one of the stacks as I passed, my fingers catching on the threadbare stitching. Each page felt liminal somehow, ready to become more yet just shy of completeness. Maybe that's why I found it so easy to scribble and scrawl all over them, circling words, underlining passages, folding corners. Perfect knowledge demands reverence. But these? These felt like conspirators—and I was not above using them ruthlessly.



On one such night, restless with the threads of our work, I leafed through a copy we had pulled from the Archives just days prior. It wasn't much to look at—thin and unassuming, its copied letters uneven in places like a poor man's shadow. Yet something in its contents caught on the edge of my thoughts.

At first, it seemed a list of common superstitions: lights blue as flame, shadows moving unnaturally, and a grin too wide to be human. But buried deeper, sharp and tangled, I found stranger things.

A shattered wheel.

A broken song.

A scar of iron.

I doubted their accuracy. Still, the thread was impossible not to follow. It led me into an unfamiliar corner of the Archives, a particularly dim and dusty section I had little cause to visit before. There, nestled between volumes on agricultural charms and burial rites, I found the book.

Black leather, cracked with age. The edges crumbled like old pastry as I slid it from the shelf, and I held my breath as the spine groaned in protest. Lighting my thief's lamp, I opened the cover gingerly, savoring the musty fragrance of ancient parchment. The title greeted me in fading Temic—*En Temerant Voistra*.

My pulse quickened as I began to read. Most of the text was indecipherable, a ravaged artifact of time and translation. Yet certain words leapt out, sharp as flint against the dark void of my ignorance.

*Chandrian*.

My hands trembled as I hunched over the tome. Proof. Not censored. Not hidden behind the Four-Plated Door. Here it had been all along, waiting to be uncovered! I skimmed as quickly as I dared, though the fragile pages resisted my eagerness. The passages spoke of things I did not yet understand—enigmatic connections, places, people.

Then, in the edge of my vision movement caught my eye. A student sat bent over a stack of loose pages at the next desk. At first, I thought nothing of it—there's an efficiency to solitude in the Archives, and you learn to ignore its other occupants. But something tugged at my attention.

His hands glided over the manuscript as if searching for meaning. And then I saw it: the stitching. Crooked, uneven. Those ragged, naked spines. My spines. My stomach twisted, sharp and sudden. Devi had sold the copy.

For a moment, I hesitated, lungs pulling shallow breaths as my options narrowed sharply in the still air. Confrontation was dangerous in the Archives; Lorren's rules were absolute, and this manuscript—ours—was no less dangerous in ways no one else yet understood.

I forced my breath steady. "Excuse me," I said, stepping closer. My voice was bright, light—a friendly tone perfected over years of winning favors when I had no right to ask for them.

The student startled, glancing up like a cornered hare. His face was thin, pale under the faint glow of the thief's lamp on my belt. "What?" he managed, guarded but not wary enough.

"Fascinating piece you've got there," I said easily. "Those loose manuscripts—where did you find them? I've been trying to track down something nearly identical."

His hand instinctively tightened over the edges of the parchment. "It's... for study," he said evasively. "I found it at a merchant's stall down in Imre."

"Ah, Imre," I replied with a conspirator's confidence, slipping into another well-worn role. "One of the undermerchants, I'd wager?" I leaned casually against the desk, as if it were

mere curiosity driving me to linger. “Had to be. The proper stalls would never deal in something so rare.”

The flattery worked; he eased slightly, lifting the corner of the page so I could catch a better glimpse. “Yes, I suppose so. It cost more than I’d have liked...”

“But worth every coin, clearly,” I said quickly, nudging past his faint hesitation. I let my voice dip into a reverent hush, a trick I’d learned long ago when coaxing a shopkeeper into retrieving their best wares. “Tell me, would you mind if—just for a moment—I looked? I promise, I’d be careful.”

His expression wavered, the instinct to protect giving way beneath the weight of my practiced charm. “I don’t...” He hesitated, finally loosening his grip on the manuscript. “Just for a moment.”

My fingers brushed the edge of the parchment as I reached for it, careful to let my touch seem light, deferential. But as soon as it passed into my hands, my stance straightened—confident now, unyielding as stone.

“Thank you,” I said, my gratitude genuine. “You’ve done the University a great service.” The words carried enough ambiguity to blur their meaning, and I didn’t wait for him to realize just how carefully I’d chosen them.

Without another word, I turned sharply on my heel, the manuscript held close to my chest, and made my way out of the Archives before he could voice his confusion or protest. If he dared report me, he’d find himself in the same precarious trouble as I.

By the time the great brass door of the Archives swung shut behind me, my knuckles ached from the strength of my grip, and my fury at Devi burned hotter than ever.

\* \* \*

The cobblestones of Imre echoed under my boots as I approached Devi’s shop. Each step carried me closer to a confrontation I hadn’t yet planned but burned to have. I was brimming with rage, anger so thick it coiled in my gut like an angry snake about to strike. But as I neared her door, I stopped short.

Devi stood in the street, barefoot and furious, her hands loose at her sides. Her silhouette cut sharply against the dim light spilling from the streetlamp. Even without seeing her face, I knew something in her had come unmoored. But she wasn’t alone.

Across from her stood Master Lorren. His calm façade shattered, his usual measured grace replaced by raw force and single-minded purpose. He was nothing like the Lorren I had ever seen. Backlit by a dim streetlamp, his stance was broad, his arms raised like steel girders.

Devi stood opposite him, barefoot and wild-eyed, her disheveled frame seemingly untouched by the late hour or the tension that hung between them. Her grin was jagged as a splintered mirror, as though rage and triumph had struck her simultaneously.

Lorren’s voice rang out, sharp as breaking ice: “Enough, Devi. This is your last chance to end this peacefully.”

Her laugh was cutting, high and brittle. “Peacefully?” she echoed, her tone dripping venom. “Spare me. I know how this ends. You don’t care about peace. You care about *control*.”

For the first time, Lorren faltered—nearly imperceptible but unsettlingly real. His Alar, an invisible tide pressing outward, stuttered momentarily. Devi seized the opportunity, her own Alar surging forward. The air seemed to ripple, visibly distorting for the briefest moment as though the two forces were tearing the world apart between them.

“I won’t be held,” Devi hissed, her voice raw with something that sounded almost like despair. “Not by *you*. Not by any Master! Never again!”

Her will lashed out like a whip, forcing Lorren to drop into a defensive stance. His breaths grew heavier, frost forming in his exhalations. Yet even as she pressed him, I could see it: Lorren wasn’t fighting to win. He was fighting to contain her. The difference was plain in every strained line of his face.

It was her wild defiance against his measured inevitability. And she was winning.

“Devi!” I called out, my voice breaking the silence of the knife-edged conflict.

She turned, her Alar briefly brushing against mine. The force of it was staggering, a wave that nearly sent me reeling. I caught myself, reaching deep into the space between us with my own threads of intent. Barriers. Shields. Anything to stand against her.

“Stop this.” My voice was hoarse, robbed of its deeper confidence. “This isn’t what you want.”

Her smile twisted into something between pity and scorn. “Kvothe,” she said, her voice dripping acid. “You don’t **know** what I want!”

Her Alar surged, grinding against mine like iron against flint. My head pounded as the binder’s chill crept deeper, turning my limbs heavy with frost. Across from us, Lorren rose to his full height, determination etched into his pale, dampened face. Together, with our forces combined, Devi began to stumble.

I don’t know how long it lasted—the three of us locked in that silent, suffocating fight. Time ceased to matter in that place. Piece by piece, Devi’s strength faltered, though not from anything we did directly. She simply spent herself, burned too brightly for too long.

When she fell, it was as though someone had cut her strings. She crumpled to the cobblestones, her chest rising and falling shallowly as strands of hair clung to her sweat-slicked face.

I didn’t move. Couldn’t. The chill in my veins spread faster now, turning each heartbeat into a slow, painful echo as darkness pulled at the edges of my vision. In the corner of my eye, I saw guards assembled, their presence both reassuring and ominous.

And then, all at once, the blackness took me.

# CHAPTER 14

## NAME IN THE WALL

### BELLS.

They rang at odd intervals, distant and hollow in one breath, unbearably close in the next. They split the world into sharp, uneven slices, carving time into something thin and wrong.

I woke between them. Or maybe I didn't wake at all. Maybe I had always been here.

The walls loomed smooth as quarried glass, damp pressing cold fingers into my skin. A thin sliver of light fractured the air above, but it was pale—too pale—as if it had traveled so far to find me that it had worn itself thin along the way.

I frowned, or I thought I did. My face felt unfamiliar. My limbs, unsteady.

A name surfaced, sticky and slow. Haven.

Or had I only dreamed that word?

I sat up fast, too fast. The motion sent a sick, swaying weight through my stomach. The silence between the bells pressed in thick and unbearable, swallowing me whole.

That was when I noticed him.

A figure hunched in the farthest corner—thin, folded, his frame drawn with loose, too-long lines. His clothes clung to him in ragged layers, darkened by dust, tangled at the edges. His head hung forward, muttering. Words slipped from him in a sluggish drip—slow, lilting, circling back in quiet, too-familiar rhymes.

I tried to speak, but my own voice curled dry and useless in my throat. My fingers twitched toward water that wasn't there. I swallowed, tried again.

“Who—?”

The word struggled to leave my mouth, like I had to pull it from a great distance. It barely breached the air between us. His murmuring did not stop.

I tried to piece together his words, but they tumbled over themselves—half-verses and broken couplets, meter folding on itself like a thing too worn for use.

Rhymes.

The realization crawled over my skin. My stomach turned cold.

I closed my eyes, breathed in, out, slow, careful. Not a madman. Not a—

“I was never the first to follow,” the muttering unravelled between us. “Nor the last to call the name.”

I swallowed. Pushed to my feet.

“Stop,” I rasped. My voice cracked, ancient with thirst.

The rhyming voice continued. Another verse curled between the heavy weight of stone.

I stepped toward him. Then closer still.

The first thing I noticed was his hands—pale and thin, moving with the rhythm, shaping soft answers to words I had not asked.

The second thing I noticed was me. The moment stretched. My breathing frayed.

I reached forward, hands shaking for something solid. My fingers met his shoulders, pressed against fabric worn too thin. He shifted. His head lolled forward, rolling loose before turning upward, slowly, carefully.

I saw him.

I saw me.

He smiled first. Of course he did. That's what I would do.

He tilted his head, sharp and knowing. His eyes were something else entirely.

"Oh," he said lightly, as if I had come late to something inevitable.

And in a voice that was my own, he asked:

"If you were mad, would you even know?"

\* \* \*

Time in Haven twisted itself into thin, brittle threads, impossible to hold. I measured it by breaths, by the fickle slant of light that bled through the high window and stretched across the floor like a dying thing. Bells rang at strange intervals, distant one moment, deafening the next.

Somewhere between those bells, he appeared.

Elodin. Maybe.

He lounged lazily against the doorframe—if there was a door. If there was a frame. His grin flickered in and out, too wide, too knowing, too sharp. "Good morning," he said, amused. "Or good evening. But it doesn't really matter, does it?"

His words should have startled me, but they didn't. I had heard voices before—whispers in the walls, rhymes in the dark, my own laughter curling back at me from some corner of my mind. This was just another game Haven played. Another hallucination.

I closed my eyes. Counted. One. Two—

"You always did like bending rules," the voice yawned like a stretch, bored and easy.

I cracked one eye open. "You're not real."

That made him laugh. And when did he move? He had taken a step, or maybe the room had shifted. He was closer now but still not close enough to touch.

"Real is such a flexible thing," he said. "Here, even more so."

"You shouldn't be here," I rasped. My throat was still raw, my voice scraping out of me. "Or I shouldn't be here. I don't—" My own thoughts tumbled over themselves. "I don't remember—"

"Ah." He raised a hand and pointed a dramatic finger at me. "There it is. The first thing to unravel." His expression turned rueful. "A shame you were expelled. I had such hopes for you."

I frowned. Or I tried to. My face didn't feel quite right. "Expelled?"

"For stealing secrets," he said. "For breaking sacred trusts." His voice blurred at the edges, overlapping itself. He was speaking ahead of me, as if I wasn't keeping up. "Not that I was really listening. I don't enjoy polite outrage. Too performative."

“No,” I said, shaking my head as if that might shake loose something useful. “That’s not —”

He sighed, waved a hand as though brushing dust from his sleeve. “Lorren is dead,” he said lightly. “Some say poison. Some say an alchemical imbalance. But speculation is so exhausting, don’t you think?”

The words hit me wrong, a step missed on a staircase, a knife put back in the wrong drawer. I stared at him.

“Dead?” I repeated.

His head tilted. “As dead as your prospects at the University,” he said, wearing a jagged little smile that didn’t belong on his face. “Really, Kvothe, you should pay more attention.”

I swallowed. My mind felt like wet paper, unable to hold anything without warping. I had known this—hadn’t I? Hadn’t someone told me? Or had I dreamed it?

He took another step forward—too smooth, too effortless, his shape pulling toward me as if stretched. The room didn’t shift with him this time. That small change shot through me with quiet alarm.

I gripped my temples, willing clarity, willing something solid. “I didn’t—” My voice wavered, thinned. “I didn’t mean—”

“Didn’t mean to,” the voice echoed, softer now, like a lullaby sung to a dying ember. His grin didn’t return this time. “Knowledge isn’t free, Kvothe.”

He turned, though I hadn’t seen him pivot. The door—*had there been a door before?*—snicked shut, even though I hadn’t seen him touch it.

I sat there long after he was gone, heartbeat in my throat, walls leaning inward with the weight of silent things. I could almost hear them breathing. I could almost hear me, still laughing from a different corner of the room.

Real. Flexible.

\* \* \*

The shadows curled. The bells rang again.

Or they hadn’t.

My pacing had long since collapsed into nothing—a shape worn into the floor, a rhythm with no music. One step. Two steps. Back again. I had forgotten where it started. I had forgotten where I had started.

In the quiet, my own breath felt untethered. It stirred the damp, then fell still.

And then, the smallest sound. A whisper, curled in the crack beneath the door.

“You sound rather undone,” it said.

I froze.

Words didn’t come from nothing. Words had to belong to someone. But I had seen my own echoes before, I had spoken in places far from my mouth. This could be another trick, another splinter of myself come to taunt me.

Slowly, like a limb stiff from sleeping, I let my voice uncoil.

“Auri?”

There was a pause. Then, as if nothing in the world had ever been more obvious, she answered:

“Yes. And you are still you.”

The words struck something deep in me, something buried beneath the fractured lines of my thoughts. You are still you. My ribs tightened. A strange breath caught in my throat.

I pressed my back against the wall and swallowed. "I don't feel like me."

She made a quiet sound. Not quite sad, but something close enough that I wanted to close my eyes against it.

"Mmm. Well," she said lightly. "Even if you've misplaced a few pieces, you're still here."

I wanted to laugh, but I had forgotten the shape of it.

The pause stretched long. Then, softly, there was movement—a whisper of air beneath the door as something small slid through, catching against my foot.

I stared. A silver ring, delicate and thin, glinted faintly in the dim light. Its pale amber stone caught the weak glow and turned it warm.

I hadn't moved, but suddenly, it was already in my palm.

"What's this?" My voice sounded strange again. I didn't know if I was asking her or the empty walls.

Auri sighed, as if I had said something frustratingly obvious.

"To keep safe," she said.

"For what?"

"For safe-keeping."

The words curled soft around me. The pressure in my chest eased but didn't fade completely. I turned the ring over between my fingers, watching it catch the slivered light. Keep it safe.

But even with the ring cool against my palm, I couldn't trust it.

She had been here. Or she had not.

I could still hear my own voice from where she had been, repeating her words back to me before she had said them. Somewhere near the door, stone creaked as though she had only just stepped away.

Or had she ever been here at all?

I opened my mouth, stopped, hesitated—but she was already gone.

\* \* \*

The voices wouldn't stop.

They curled over each other like ivy strangling a ruin, creeping in through cracks, pulling, tangling, pressing in soft as breath against my ear.

One murmured, "You lose everything, you know. Always losing, always left behind."

Another hummed, lilted, sang of bitter things: "Broken and buried, never to rise, little fox trapped under trembling skies..."

And then—

"She won't come again, you know."

It slid into me before I could question who had spoken. But something about it was out of place. A discordant note in a familiar song.

A second passed. Too long. I stalled.

I shook my head, pushing it away.

\* \* \*

The bells had rung again.

From somewhere far outside, a sharp voice snapped like a hinge breaking.

"Oh, for fuck's sake, Kvothe!"

A pause, seething. Then—

"She's gone."

It came again, frustration cracking at the edges, trying to push his way into my thoughts.

I felt my lips move before I thought about speaking. A faint echo of his name—nothing more than breath. But then the voices took him, too. Swallowed him in the tide.

"She's gone, Kvothe—"

His words distorted as they hit me. Warped in the space between hearing and knowing.

"—a girl in a cage—"

"Chains, fox, she's caught in the trap—"

"Taken, forgotten, stolen, lost—"

"Gone, gone, gone, gone, gone—"

I winced, pressing my hands over my ears, but it didn't help. The words twisted and broke on the way down, shifting from urgent to singsong, threading themselves along the meter of my madness.

"She's—"

"—gone."

Someone exhaled sharply.

"Tehlu's teeth, Kvothe." Their voice was barely more than a breath. Tired. Resigned. Defeated.

I turned my head toward the door. I meant to look for them, to really look, but the walls shifted wrong, and I caught nothing but a shadow moving. Leaving.

The cell door clanged.

\* \* \*

The empty space left behind collapsed in on itself, folding neatly back into the rhythm of ruin.

My false selves moved into the silence like scavengers.

"He's gone," one of them mused mildly.

"Gave up. Like everyone does, in the end."

"Maybe it's better," another murmured. "What would you even do, little fox? Claw at the walls? Call a name you don't remember?"

"She won't come again, you know."

The words threaded through me before I fully heard them. They landed and settled like dust.

Something was wrong with them.

It was small at first, nothing more than a missed step, a brief and distant wrongness. My mind moved sluggishly, unable to grip the thought. The words had been spoken before. Just now. A moment ago.



I shook my head, as if that could shake away the splinter of unease.

“She won’t come again, Kvothe.”

It wasn’t one of them.

It wasn’t a whisper from the walls. It hadn’t come with the lilt of madness. It hadn’t curled from my own lips in some twisted echo.

It had been spoken. Someone real. Someone with weight.

The wrongness sharpened. Everything inside me recoiled to attention.

Elodin.

Elodin had said it.

My pulse kicked hard in my throat.

I gripped the silver ring, crushing it against my palm. The ache of it burned me back into myself.

Elodin had been here.

This wasn’t some deep dream, some trick of Haven. I hadn’t conjured him from the marrow of my mind.

He had stood in this room.

And I—I had done nothing.

Like ice fracturing under sudden weight, the realization split through me.

I had let him leave.

I had let Auri’s name fall into the void.

The sickness in my stomach turned sharp, violent. My hands shook against the stone. I wanted to dismiss the thought, shove it away like all the other twisting illusions. But this thought didn’t warp like the others. It didn’t shift when I tried to pin it down. It held.

Auri.

Taken.

The moment stretched thin. My mind resisted one last time, trying to retreat back into the safety of madness. It would be easier to sink. Easier to be lost.

But this was real. This was real.

The weight of it pressed hard against my chest, too much to ignore, too much to fade.

I clenched my teeth. Clawed breath back into my lungs. My fingers curled tight against the floor—not to search for balance, but to hold myself here.

I forced my head up.

The voices still circled, splintering and snarling, but now I saw them for what they were.

I turned on them—on myself. My own specters, my own fragments, my own ruin.

They didn’t retreat at first. They pressed close, whispering their last venomous doubts. One of them sang a lilting piece he called The Moon Fae’s Plight. Another murmured of horrors that made my stomach lurch. The madman in the corner kept time, nodding, muttering, chanting.

I bared my teeth and fought them.

It was not a clean battle—it was not a sudden reckoning. I lost foothold. Slipped. Fell into silence and had to claw my way out again, again, again.

Piece by piece, I drove them back.

Even when it left me raw and hollow, I fought.

Even when shadows closed in seeking purchase, I would not be unmade.

And in the end, the voices faded. The muttering dissolved. I had only my own breath, my own body, a weak light that stretched thin across the floor.

It was enough.

And in the silence, at last, I found it.

The stone of the wall, worn and cold, whispered to me in a way I didn't understand. My hands traced its surface blindly, my ears straining against its quiet resistance until, at last, a name surfaced.

*"Cyaerbasalien."*

I spoke it hesitantly, then with certainty, and then with the weight of stone.

The wall answered me.

It broke.

The rush of dawn air left me dizzy, and I let it carry me to the edge of the world. Pressing the ring to my lips, I whispered into the wind, "Wait for me, Auri."

# CHAPTER 15

## MISSING

**F**OR SOMEONE ON the run, I made a wretched fugitive. My legs buckled with every step, hollow and trembling under me. The plain rags from Haven clung to my skin, torn and wet, carrying the damp, sour tang of sweat and mildew. I should have planned better—I should have rested. But planning and resting would have meant thinking, and I was doing my best to avoid thinking.

The streets of Imre bristled with danger. Every clatter of a wagon on cobblestones, every half-glimpsed shadow cast by flickering lantern light sent my heart leaping to my throat. The city felt sharp and alive, ready to cut me down for daring to walk openly. When an overhead shutter swung closed with a snap, I flinched violently, careening sideways like a spooked horse. It was absurd. A younger, wiser version of me would have laughed at how I'd become a mirror of the madmen I thought I'd escaped.

Yet here I was, shivering and broken, standing before Simmon's door. My knuckles hovered over the wood, hesitant. I could already imagine the rumors: *Kvothe expelled. Kvothe locked away in Haven. Kvothe, half-mad and guilty of...* What? Murder? Theft? The truth seemed worse when I couldn't name it. I didn't deserve Sim's help.

But I needed it.

I knocked twice. It was a feeble sound, apologetic in its rhythm.

A pause. Then footsteps, light but deliberate, approached from within. The door creaked open just enough for a sliver of light and a single, cautious eye. That eye was Sim's, and though the door chain held him back, his worry came through plainly. His gaze landed on me—on the tangled mess of my hair, the rags clinging to me like grave clothes, the look that must have burned itself into my face after days of living on desperation alone. His hesitation cut worse than if he'd slammed the door altogether.

He unlatched the chain and opened the door wider. "Kvothe," he said, quiet and unsure. For a moment, I thought he wouldn't let me in—but then he stepped back, pulling the door open fully. "Come in."

The warmth struck me like the sun after a cruel winter, the firelight spilling across the room painting walls and table golden. For the briefest moment, I could almost believe this was normal. That I was simply visiting an old friend. But the weight of everything crashed in on me all at once—the sleepless nights, the haunting echoes of Haven, the enormity of what I had to do. My legs buckled, and I nearly fell, catching myself against the doorframe with shaking hands.

"Sit," Sim said quickly, gesturing toward a chair by the fire. His tone was steady, but his brow furrowed sharply as he shut the door behind me.

I sank into the nearest seat, my legs trembling as though the weight of the world had finally been allowed to come crashing down on them. Sim remained standing, hands fidgeting nervously and his face tight with worry. But he didn't speak. It was his patience that undid me.

"I made a mess, Sim," I said at last, my voice low and raw, more like a confession than a greeting. "I've done things—" My throat closed over the words before I could finish, and for a moment, I couldn't meet his gaze. Then, with a slow, heavy breath, I began talking.

I told him everything.

\* \* \*

I told him about Devi—the initial blood favor, the warnings I ignored, the mistakes I made—and how it all unraveled. I told him about the terrible way Lorren's strength faltered and failed in front of my eyes, and about the Duplicator, how I'd used it to steal from the Archives, tracking secrets that should have been left buried.

I told him how Haven had swallowed me whole, how Elodin had left me with nothing but riddles and warnings. And when the words grew harder to speak, with memories of Auri fragile and luminous in my mind's eye, I told him about her too. I told him about the carriage that had spirited her away and the pale ghosts I had conjured, murmuring reminders of failure at every turn. I didn't deserve his listening ear, yet Sim stood there across from me, silent but resolute, drinking in every fractured thing I had to say.

When I finished, silence stretched thin between us, broken only by the crackle of the fire. Sim's hands twisted together in front of him. His face was pale, and his lips pressed into a tight, straight line. Finally, he spoke.

"Kvothe..." He stopped, pressing his fingers against the bridge of his nose. Then something softer slid into his voice. "You should have told us about Auri before. We could have helped her sooner. Protected her. Didn't you think we'd care?"

I swallowed hard, knotting my fingers in my lap. "You don't understand," I said, desperation creeping into my voice. "If anyone had found out about her, they would have taken her to Haven. I couldn't... I couldn't let that happen. But I failed her anyway."

Sim let the silence hang between us before nodding. "All right," Sim said softly, folding his hands together like a man gripping something fragile. "Tell me about her. Give me her ghost, her shadow, her echoes. I'll shake the world until it sings her back to us."

I told him about Auri the best I could: the moonlight sheen of her hair, the soft quickness of her movements, the way she seemed to breathe through the cracks in the world without disturbing it. Even as I spoke, Sim's face knit into quiet doubt. I could tell he was trying not to betray how improbable this all seemed.

Still, when I finished, he stood. "Stay here," he said simply. "Get some rest. You look like you could fall apart at the slightest push. I'll go see what I can find."

\* \* \*

I woke to the sound of quiet movement. Sim sat nearby, silhouetted by the fire, his face shadowed but unmistakably weary. He looked at me for a long moment before speaking.

"I found something," he began, his voice low.

I sat up, every muscle aching. "Go on."

He hesitated, running a hand through his hair. "Someone matching her description was seen—crying, struggling. And... the carriage she was in, it bore Ambrose's seal."

My stomach dropped. "Ambrose," I said, the name curling bitterly on my tongue.

Sim nodded reluctantly. "His coachman was seen heading toward Renere. I don't know what it means, Kvothe, but... it doesn't look good."

I leaned forward, resting my head in my hands. Waves of anger and guilt surged through me, each pulling sharper than the last. "If it's him..." I whispered, trailing off.

Sim leaned closer, his voice firm. "You can't rush this. You're already on thin ice with... everything. He could be baiting you."

I clenched my jaw. He was right, of course. The thought made my blood boil. "I'll handle it," I said, more evenly than I felt. "I can't just sit here doing nothing."

Sim studied me carefully. "Then promise me you'll be smart about this, Kvothe. Don't rush into his trap."

"Smart," I repeated, the word bitter on my tongue. "I'll try."

Sim nodded, though his concern lingered in his expression. He didn't believe me. I didn't entirely believe myself.

\* \* \*

The clothes Sim lent me hung awkwardly on my frame—loose in the waist, tight in the shoulders—but they were dry. They didn't smell of Haven's damp rot. That was enough.

I had no plans to return to Sim's quiet firelight. He'd have tried to stop me, I think, or at least slowed me down. He was a good friend, perhaps too good. The kindly weight of his concern was something I couldn't afford right now.

Instead, I went to my apartment above Anker's. Getting there was a risk. If Ambrose suspected I'd come back, his lackeys might have already dug their claws into it. But I wasn't about to leave without my lute—not again. Not with what lay ahead.

The streets of Imre didn't feel safe, though I used them sparingly. When I finally reached the back ways near Anker's, I kept to the shadows, ducking under grain chutes and sliding over walls slick with frost. From below, my apartment above the inn looked dark, quiet. Still, my skin prickled with the thought of traps waiting inside, some unseen thread that might snap beneath my weight and betray me.

I scaled the stone carefully, pausing at the window's edge. The air inside smelled faintly of wax and wood smoke—a strangely unchanged smell, as though I'd only stepped out for a drink. I scanned the room, but nothing stirred. No traps sprung at my weight when I pulled myself inside.

The lute hung on its peg, waiting for me, and seeing it there loosened something tight in my chest. I pulled it down gently, running my fingers along the worn case before setting it into my bag. I emptied the rest of my small room—a few coins, spare strings, my last clean shirt—and slung the bag across my shoulder.

The stillness struck me again, louder now. The fear that lingered beneath it. The knowledge that leaving this place meant leaving the last remnants of stability behind me.

I stood carefully, my bag heavy against my shoulder, and made my way back to the open window. If the room was trapped, whatever teeth it bore had missed their chance.

Ambrose had her. Auri. A thought that iced my veins.

One way or another, I'd follow that thread to the end—through cold, through dark, through every shadow of that damned city he might flee to. Holding my lute close, I slipped into the night, leaving behind what little I didn't carry.

# CHAPTER 16

## INTERLUDE

### BY COVER OF NIGHT

**T**HE DECK BOARDS outside the Waystone creaked, groaning with the weight of age and weather, or perhaps with the secrets they held. Inside, the low hum of conversation fell abruptly silent, the way it does when people feel the eyes of the night pressing too heavily against the windows.

A moment passed, and the door swung inward with a weary reluctance. Old Cob stepped through, familiar and worn as an old coin, his boots scuffing against the hardwood as if even the floor itself resisted interrupting the quiet.

“A pint o’ cider, Kote,” he grunted, stomping dust and dead grass from his boots before making his way to the bar. He slid into his usual place, the grooves of the stool seeming to fit him by now. “Helluva long day. Don’t s’pose there’s any o’ that pie left?”

“No pie, I’m afraid,” Kote said, his voice polite, apologetic. But his hands worked with the assurance of long habit as he pulled a tankard off the shelf, wiping its rim reflexively before pouring the cider. Each movement was efficient, unhurried. If the creak of the boards outside had put a sliver of tension into him, it didn’t show.

Cob clicked his tongue, disappointment quick and sharp. “Pity, that. Best thing to end a day, you know. Something warm and sweet.”

Kote slid the cider across the counter with a nod, and Cob took it with both hands, drinking half in one pull. He let out a satisfied sigh, setting the tankard down with a soft thunk against the wood. “Now, that’s good. Nothing like cider to settle the dust in your throat.”

He leaned against the bar, his face shifting into something more serious, though it stayed shaded by familiarity’s easy mask. “By the by, I had a talk with the Bentleys earlier. Seen ’em packing up all their things. Big wagon hitched out front, stuff tied down like they meant it for good and proper leavin’.”

“Did they say why?” Kote asked, still polite, still calm. But the way he set the now-empty pitcher aside—soft, deliberate—felt like the fading echo of a dropped pin.

Cob nodded, his lips pressing thin, as if chewing on something bitter. “Aye. Said they saw a man skulking in the woods behind their place last night. Or—not a man, exactly. Sarah said it didn’t walk right. Legs too long or too lean, and the arms hanging all too low, like a willow tree just about to touch water. Gave her the shivers summat fierce.”

His eyes darted to the window, as if expecting to see the shadow of his words pressed against the glass. "Couldn't talk her outta it. Said she knew what she saw and didn't want to stay and see it again."

Kote didn't move except to stifle a yawn with the back of his hand. He set the bar rag down, folded neatly over his fingers. "That's a bit of bad luck," he said mildly.

Cob snorted, finishing off the cider with a flick of his wrist. "Luck?" He set the tankard down and jabbed a thumb toward the door. "Luck ain't got a whit to do with it. It's all this blasted nonsense springin' up. Shep gone, Carter bringin' in that odd thing from the woods, soldiers n' bandits thick as flies on the road. I tell ya, Kote, the Bentleys might have the right of it, runnin' while they've got the legs for it."

He pushed away from the bar with a groan, his joints popping loud enough to carry in the quiet. "Anyway, I'd best be off. Things to tend to, as ever." He gave Kote a short nod and turned toward the door, boots heavy against the floor like punctuation to his words.

The door closed behind him with a finality that seemed almost rude and left behind a louder silence than before.

\* \* \*

Kote remained behind the bar, poised in his stillness for just a moment longer. There was nothing unusual in what Cob had said—superstitious mutterings, the usual fears of things that slink under the moon. People had left town before. People had come back.

Still, he leaned slightly, listening until Cob's footfalls were no longer audible on the deck boards outfront. Then he moved back to the table at the far end of the common room, where the Chronicler waited. The man's quill hung above the page, its tip blotting a small dot of ink onto the margin.

"Where were we?" Kote asked, his voice lighter now, casual as a well-worn cloak.

The Chronicler didn't answer immediately; he was too busy scanning the last few lines of what he'd written, his fingers hovering over the edges of the page. "You were on your way to Renere," he said at last.

Kote nodded, but the moment to begin didn't come right away. He rested his hand idly on the table, his fingers just brushing the edge of the wood. The fire's light chased shadows down the wall, their shapes twisting and flickering in ways Kote didn't much care for. He let himself glance at the door, just once, before reaching for the story again.

"Yes," Kote said softly. "Renere."



# CHAPTER 17

## OF DANCING STONES

THE FROST THAT painted the edges of windows and cobblestones seemed like quiet promises, each filigree curling into itself, delicate and doomed. It gripped at the world like it might shatter under the weight of the next breath—and in this, it mirrored me. The air was thin beneath the stars, the night thick with a kind of silence that made it easy to believe I was the only soul left breathing.

The road ahead was little more than a gray scar stretching into the night. The lantern I'd borrowed from Anker hung heavy in my hand, its light carving a small, uncertain circle in the darkness. Above, the stars blinked faintly, smeared across the sky like chalk, their pale light offering nothing but a vague sense of distance.

Renere seemed impossibly far, its name a faint murmur in the back of my mind, soft and slippery with doubt. Somewhere ahead of me, Ambrose lived and breathed. And somewhere beyond even his reach, Auri waited—or didn't. Thoughts of her drifted close, insistent and bright, like moths brushing a candle flame. But I couldn't afford to think of Auri. Not yet.

I kept walking, each step on the uneven dirt road was a small rebellion against common sense—and better footwear. My boots were borrowed, and they let me know it constantly, gnawing at my heels like an insult I couldn't shake. If my feet bled, at least they had the decency to match the rest of me.

That's when I saw them. Figures on the horizon, gray shapes surfacing against the dark. My first thought was a trick of the lantern, its erratic light twisting shadows into men. My second thought was more immediate, more solid: I was in danger. But before I could step away, one of them called out.

"Still warm," It was Wil's voice, sharp and cutting as his silhouette came into focus. "Better fix that."

The fist came quick and crooked, a punch full of fury that smashed into my jaw before I could breathe his name. My vision cracked wide as the taste of plum and nutmeg burst bright and bitter in my mouth. For a moment, I swayed, swamped by dizziness, my limbs flailing like a sapling bent too far in the wind.

Anger rushed in hot, as sharp-edged as Wil's knuckles. My fists clenched on instinct as I took a step forward, but before I could move, Simmon slipped between us. His hand caught Wil's wrist midair—firm enough to restrain, loose enough to let go.

"Damn the both of you," Sim said, his voice strained not by volume but by weight. His body was trembling, whether from anger or the cold I couldn't tell.

Wil looked away, breathing hard, though the fire hadn't completely left him. When Sim was certain we wouldn't lunge at one another again, he stepped back and turned to face us

both.

"You are right to be angry," Sim told Wil. "I don't condone what he's done either. But black hands, Wil—when I told you he was safe, I saw the look on your face. You were relieved. Don't act like you don't care."

Wil met his glance but said nothing, his jaw clenched hard enough to snap bone. When it was clear Sim would neither budge nor bark, Wil pulled back, but the anger in his eyes smoldered still, banked but not extinguished.

Sim watched him retreat, then turned to me, his face caught halfway between worry and disappointment. "Kvothe," he started. My name fell soft, like a pebble into water, rippling outward.

I raised a hand, stopping him. My voice crawled up my throat to meet the suffocating silence. "If I could have saved Lorren, I would have." The words cracked in the cold air. Shame tightened around my chest and lodged in my tongue as I added, "If I..." I couldn't finish.

Wil's expression barely shifted. His anger carved lines across his face, but his tone grew colder when he finally spoke. "It's not just Lorren, Kvothe. It's the Archives. You put generations of reputation at risk of being tainted, and for what? Your curiosity?" He spat the word like it burned to even hold it in his mouth.

"It wasn't just that," I said, defensive without meaning to be. But how could I explain the weight of what I'd found, the truths I had only begun to uncover? They wouldn't believe me. Tehlu help me, even if I told them they wouldn't believe.

"Then explain it," Wilem said, his voice brittle and low. "You can't keep everything buried. Not this. Not anymore."

"You owe us the truth," Sim added gently, though his gaze was firm. "After everything, tell us."

I breathed out, heavy and slow, as if exhaling might purge the shame lodged in my ribs. I opened my mouth to argue, to deflect, but stopped. They were right. More than that, they deserved it. So I let the fight drain out of me, shoulders slumped under the weight of my words.

"You'd better get comfortable," I muttered darkly, the words trying and failing to carry humor.

Sim gestured down the road. "Tell us on the way."

I blinked. "You're coming with me?"

"Of course we are," Sim said, incredulous. "Do you think we'd let you do this alone?"

Wilem nodded, his hand darting out to pull me upright with a strength that was startling. "You're an idiot, but you're our idiot."

Something warm and messy knotted itself in my chest. I turned away quickly, shielding my expression from their eyes. "You know I'm going to Renere, right?"

Sim smiled faintly. "And Ambrose," he said. "I figured that much out."

"Then you know this ends poorly," I managed, biting back a choke of laughter that bordered on tears.

"We've stuck beside you through worse," Sim said, patting me on the shoulder. "We're your friends, Kvothe. Stop being so surprised by it."

With that, the road ahead suddenly felt lighter—not shorter, but lighter all the same.

\* \* \*

A few hours later, we caught a ride with a passing fetter cart. Sitting in the back, we jostled along the uneven road, our silence broken only by the rhythmic creak of wood and the occasional grunt of the old farmer at the reins.

It was there, as the dust rose in lazy wisps behind us, that I finally cracked the wall I'd held between them and the truth. I shared everything—the life of my parents on the road with the Edema Ruh, their murder, and the awful, shivering truth of the Chandrian. They didn't interrupt. Wilem sat still, his dark, thoughtful eyes pinned on a spot somewhere on the horizon. Sim stared down at his feet, as if unable to meet my gaze.

When I finished, it was as if I'd drawn something poisonous from my chest. Teccam once wrote about such things, the way confessions could lessen the weight of pain. Some of that poison was gone now.

Not all of it. Wil's skepticism was briefly hidden, but as the air quieted, I caught the faint flicker of doubt shared between him and Sim. I said nothing about it—what was the point?

I shifted focus instead, drawing on my growing skill with Naming. They watched in quiet fascination as I called a ring of stone into being. I slipped into onto my finger beside and the simple amber one Auri had given me.

"Rings like these," I murmured, flexing my fingers, "are meant to give my enemies pause."

"Or make them laugh," Sim quipped with his customary optimism.

Wilem just shook his head. "You'll draw attention, good or bad. That armor cuts both ways."

We all knew he was right.

\* \* \*

It was Wil who saw them, his sharp eyes catching the circle of greystones on a bluff ahead. He gestured, drawing our attention to the ancient monoliths. We bid goodbye to the farmer and made our way toward them.

Standing beneath the stones, I couldn't help but feel their quiet power. They stood like giants too tired to move, their surfaces worn smooth by the slow fingers of time. I was reminded of a passage I'd read in *En Temerant Voistra*, whispering about their use as gates to the Fae. That memory had barely surfaced before I rushed to retrieve the book from my travel sack. Wil, Sim, and I pawed through it under the afternoon light.

By moonlight, we finally made progress. Wilem was the better scholar of us by far, his patience and proficiency with Temic outmatching my rushed translations. But even he stumbled on one word, pausing.

"Dance?" he murmured with disbelief, scratching his head.

"Dance?" Sim scoffed.

But I said nothing. Denna's voice stirred in memory, her question rising like warmth: *Do you know the secrets of stones?* I placed my hands on the nearest surface and leaned into the hum.

The Name didn't come as a sound but a shape. Soft at first, round at the edges. Then sharp. The weight of it spread out, vast yet contained, pressing back against me like the tide. When it came whole, it left my lips before I could stop myself: "*Cyaerbasalien*."

The stones shifted beneath my hand as the Name took root, a low tremor rippling through the circle. The world paused for a breath, then stilled.

“It didn’t work,” I began, frustration threatening to surface—

Until Sim’s sudden touch on my shoulder stopped me. “Kvothe, look,” he whispered, pointing to the sky.

I followed his gaze. The stars above were wrong. They drifted in unfamiliar patterns, trembling faintly, as if unsure whether they belonged. The air clung thick and sweet around us, like the memory of distant music.

We had crossed into the Fae.

# CHAPTER 18

## DEFINE LOST

**T**HE SKY UNRAVELED, thread by thread, as if an unseen hand were plucking it apart. Stars wheeled and drifted through it like embers shaken from a dying fire, their positions subtly, maddeningly wrong. The constellations twisted, caught in some unseen current, spiraling deeper into the dark.

A watching sort of sky. A waiting one.

I led us dayward, or what should have been dayward in a place where no sun shone. Felurian had once told me that moving dayward in the Fae brought you closer to stability, but the air here rang like plucked glass strings, and the ground sloped in ways that changed between blinks. If this was stability, I wanted no part of it.

Sim stumbled at my side, filling the silence with nervous chatter, his voice straining to sound casual. Wilem kept behind us, scanning the horizon with dark, flat eyes, like a wolf pushed too far into the open.

“We’re lost,” Wilem said, quiet and certain.

I almost denied it. I had found my way through worse. Tarbean’s alleys had been crueler than any wood, and the Archives more tangled than any maze. But the Fae did not work like streets or bookshelves neatly aligned. It was something else entirely—shifting, layered, a road that twisted as you walked it, slipping through your fingers like river mist.

“Say it,” Wilem pressed.

“We’re misplaced,” I muttered.

Wilem shook his head. “Well, we’re not found.”

Before I could argue, something changed. A sound threaded through the trees, light as a breath, quick as a shiver. Not a voice. Not quite. It curled into the hollow of my ribs like a song I had known once but could not name. It didn’t draw me forward so much as *wait* for me to come.

“What now?” Wilem asked, his voice sharpening.

I didn’t answer. I stepped toward the song.

“Kvothe!” Wilem caught my arm, fingers digging into my shoulder. “You know what this is.”

“We can’t keep wandering,” I said, pulling free. “It’s something.”

“It’s going to be something that kills us,” Wilem snapped.

I turned to face him. “Then I’ll go alone.”

Wilem’s jaw clenched, but he didn’t argue. I stepped into the trees. By the time I reached the clearing’s edge, I realized I wasn’t alone.

“You really thought we’d stay behind?” Sim asked, appearing beside me, his pale face a mix of curiosity and unease.

I wasn’t surprised when Wilem shoved through the undergrowth behind us, muttering in Siaru under his breath.

\* \* \*

The clearing spread before us, a window into somewhere older and stranger than we had any right to stand. Firelight flickered hungrily around shapes that were almost human—twisting, graceful limbs, faces smooth as river glass, eyes shifting silver-green in the dim glow.

For a moment, they were dancers wrapped in firelight, each movement seamless, poetry made flesh. But as the light shifted, their difference bared itself in cruel detail: ribs that sloped too thin, fingers jointed in the wrong places, heads that dipped too sharply in amusement or curiosity.

“They’re Fae,” Sim whispered.

“The Faen Court,” I murmured, “Felurian described it to me.”

A silver-haired figure stepped forward, hollow cups balanced in long, narrow fingers. Their lips curled as they looked us over, their voice humming like wind over strings.

“No iron. No ugly things,” they said. It was not a request.

I hesitated a moment before unsheathing my knife and placing it at my feet. Sim and Wilem followed, though Wil’s grip lingered over his blade longer than was wise.

The cup tasted of honey and thunder, thick and electric as it slid down my throat. I had barely set it down when another figure stepped forward—sleek and sharp, hair like living flame, eyes like smoldering amber.

“If you want safe passage,” she said, her voice musical and precise, “you will dance.”

Sim blanched. “Dance?”

I stepped forward, trusting to luck that I would not embarrass myself. “We’ll dance.”

The first steps were deliberate, measured. But the music had other intentions. The rhythm folded over itself and pressed against my ribs like a second pulse. The ground hummed beneath my feet. And before I knew it, the dance was inside me, turning movement into necessity.

Beside me, Sim faltered, stumbling out of step with something like sickness on his face. I caught his arm and pulled away from the fire.

\* \* \*

We had barely cleared the tree line before Sim collapsed to his knees and retched into the undergrowth.

“Remind me *never* to drink something handed to me by strangers,” he groaned.

I crouched beside him, shaking off a lingering dizziness. Something flickered at the edges of my vision—deep orange, half-hidden between the twisting shapes of the trees.

An orchard.

The gnarled branches draped low, their fruit gleaming like molten copper. The shapes of them stirred something deep and half-remembered, like a song in another language.

Sim stumbled forward before I could stop him.

“Don’t—”

Too late. Sim plucked one of the fruits and bit into it. Juice dripped down his chin, catching on his lips like fire-lit gold.

“It tastes the same,” he murmured in faint surprise, turning to look at me. “You should—”

I slapped the fruit from his hands.

For a moment, we stood in silence, his expression caught between confusion and hurt. Then, somewhere behind us, there was a sound. A snap of branches. The quiet, deliberate weight of approaching steps.

A Fae figure emerged from the trees, silent and watching, their spear leveled at my throat.

Black eyes. Long, twisting limbs. The Thiani.

Sim went still, breath caught. The Fae’s dark gaze flicked from him to me to the half-eaten fruit lying in the dirt. Her mouth opened, and a shrill, furious sound carved through the forest.

I raised my hands slowly. “Wait—”

But the air was already filling with voices, moving closer.

\* \* \*

The hum of voices swelled and shrank, a tide of sound rising sharp and eerie as we were herded into the wide center of the clearing. Everything felt strange, far-off, untethered. My stomach swayed beneath me like a boat taking on water.

“The Talamas Grove has been defiled,” the Thiani leader growled, striking the butt of her spear against the ground. The sharp *thunk* of it rattled in my skull. “There must be justice!”

The assembled crowd muttered and spat, the sound of it thick and wrong in my ears. I half-registered it, but my world was still sluggish, spinning from too many spirits, too much laughter, all of it soured now.

Then, a voice. Soft, calm. Absolute.

“Bring them forward.”

The crowd parted.

There was a man standing there, tall and still. He wasn’t wearing a crown or armor, but he didn’t need to. His presence alone pulled everything to him, like a silent command.

I blinked at him. Something about him felt important. Sharp-edged and inevitable.

“High Lord Remmen,” the Thiani intoned, her voice a blade cutting through butter. “These humans were caught eating from the sacred grove.”

*Remmen*, I thought vaguely. *That’s bad, isn’t it?* The name curled sluggishly in my mind, like I ought to recognize it. A story, half-remembered. Something about twilight, something about... *oh*.

Right.

Lord of Twilight. The Telwyth Mael.

A weight settled uneasily in my gut.

Remmen tilted his head slightly, those burning violet eyes considering us. Not cruel, not theatrical. He didn’t need to *act* like he held power. He simply *did*.

"Is this true?" he asked.

Sim made a sound. It might have been a word.

Remmen's gaze turned to him, expectant.

"No," Simmon managed, stumbling over the single syllable. His voice was thick, unsteady, barely more than a breath. If I had been sober, I might have shut my eyes in despair.

Remmen simply sighed. Not angry. Not pitying. Just... tired.

"Your hand," he said, extending his own.

Sim blinked at him, swaying slightly. "Huh?"

Remmen didn't repeat himself. He just waited.

A long, awful moment passed. Then, hazily obedient, Simmon held out his hand. His fingers were smudged in the low light, stained deep in the lines of his palm. The soft orange of crushed flesh, half-mashed under his nails.

A sharp intake of breath. The sound of hissing, low and seething.

"A thief and a liar!" someone spat.

Remmen did not raise his voice. He did not need to.

"Hang them over the Black Morass," he said, already turning away.

\* \* \*

Thankfully, when Remmen had demanded we hang, he hadn't meant by the neck, instead we were thrust at spearpoint into a large, elaborately woven orb of roots and vines, and left to dangle over a putrid swamp. Our initial relief that we weren't to be fitted for nooses, gave way after a few hours inside our cramped and uncomfortable cage, the whole thing twisting and creaking when any of us so much as moved.

Sim groaned. "My head feels like Kilvin clamped it in a vice."

Wilem, tense beside him, didn't look up. "Next time, don't eat fruit that glows."

Sim let out something close to a laugh. Then, quieter, "I haven't had persimmons since I was a child."

Wilem stilled for a moment, then turned to him. "Persimmons?"

A hesitant nod. "My parents had an estate outside Renere. They grew wild along the cliffs. That's why," he muttered, glaring at nothing in particular, "they named me Persimmon."

A slow beat of silence stretched between the three of us.

"You're joking," I said.

"Hardly."

Wilem let out a sharp breath, the faintest flicker of a smirk at the edge of it. "And you've let us call you Sim this entire time?"

Sim shifted. "I prefer it."

"Hearing this now feels like a betrayal, Persimmon."

Sim groaned and slumped back against the cage, resting his head on his arms. "Are we going to die here?"

"No." I hadn't meant it to come out so sure, but there it was. Woven from a deeper place than reason. "I promise you—we'll find a way."



As they drifted into exhausted quiet, my focus drifted elsewhere—to the pack left unattended on the wooden platform. Wilem’s knife. Perhaps, if I could call the Name of Iron—if I could *reach* it—

I felt Wilem watching me.

“That’s your plan?” he said incredulously.

I said nothing. His gaze lingered, testing me for an answer I didn’t have yet.

\* \* \*

Time in the Fae does not pass. It pools. It thins. It twists itself into ribbons and knots. There is no sunrise, no ticking clock. But gradually, the air around us *brightened*, not as if dawn had come, but as if the darkness had simply grown tired and slunk away to gather itself elsewhere.

We were cut from our cage before I had time to stiffen against the fall. The ground met my feet too soon, too suddenly, as if it had been farther away just a breath before.

The Court was gathered again, though it was quieter now. Even the ever-present hum of unseen things was subdued, as if the world was waiting for our story to resolve.

Remmen sat upon the great twisted roots of a massive tree, his sharp features carved from twilight-stained stone. Even at rest, his presence *waited* in the air around him, thrumming with quiet authority.

The Thiani stepped forward like a blade drawn from its sheath. “They have defiled the Talamas Grove,” she announced. “There must be justice.”

“What,” Remmen mused, “must be done?”

“They have no place here,” the Thiani intoned, “One clean stroke. The head will do.”

Sim made a strangled noise in his throat.

I stiffened. “You would kill a man over fruit?”

Laughter—quiet and knife-sharp—ghosted through the crowd.

The Thiani did not smile. “It was no mere fruit. It was a sacred offering.” A beat. “Such theft is blasphemy.”

The word dropped like a stone into deep water.

Remmen shook his head.

Sensing she’d overstepped the mark on what was deemed fair punishment, the Thiani proposed another form of retribution.

“Cut out this one’s tongue,” she said, pointing to Sim.

“No,” I said, and there was iron in my voice.

Remmen eyes narrowed, “No? And who are you to decide in matters of this court?”

I swallowed. You cannot argue with the Fae. Logic is a poor weapon against stories older than stone.

But *games*.

I lifted my chin. “I challenge the sentence in the old ways.”

There was a stir in the gathered crowd. Some murmured in interest, others in something closer to amusement.

Remmen’s lips curled faintly. “You would challenge me?”

I held my ground, though my heart had begun a slow, warning drum in my chest. “I would.”

Remmen regarded me solemnly for a long moment. Then, with a gesture sharp as falling leaves, he summoned a group of attendants.

They moved quickly. A small wooden table was set before us. A board was placed upon it. My breath hitched in realization. *Tak*.

The humming murmur of the Fae around us told me everything I needed to know. This was no idle amusement here. This was not a courtly game for bored nobility.

Tak mattered. And now it mattered more than anything.

Remmen's violet gaze met mine. He reached forward, placing his first piece.

I let my breath settle. Slow. Sure. Not too careful. Not too slow.

I laid my first stone cleanly upon the board.

*Play to be good.*

Remmen played his next piece, studying the board, studying me. There was no hesitation, no deliberation in his movements. He played like the board was already set in his mind, each piece clicking into place according to a rhythm I could not hear.

I laid my next piece.

*Play to be better.*

Remmen's strategy bent and shifted like water moving through cracks in stone—fluid, effortless. Each move carried the weight of something deeply practiced.

I adjusted. I did not try to match him piece for piece, speed for speed. Instead, I played something looser, something uncertain. I tilted my head, let my fingers hover just a moment too long over the board. I let hesitation glimmer at the edges of my expression. Not too much. Just enough.

Doubt is a baited hook. Fear is a blade.

A single small crease formed at Remmen's brow. He took my hesitation as carelessness. My looseness as lack of understanding. He leaned into the opening I gave him.

*Tak is not about winning*, I reminded myself. *It is about making a beautiful game.*

With a final, measured movement, I placed my stone. It settled with a deliberate, whispering click.

The fire crackled. The air between us held still.

Then, softly, I spoke. "Tak."

The board rested between us. The crowd murmured.

Remmen studied the Tak board for a long moment. Then, with the slow certainty of an autumn wind shaking leaves free from their branches, he brushed the stones aside.

"Well played," he murmured.

I allowed myself a breath. A slow blink. A moment to believe I had *actually* won.

Remmen turned toward the gathered court. "A victor must receive their due."

I forced myself to keep still. "My due?"

His violet eyes lifted to meet mine, unreadable. "A wager was made. A cost set. Payment is mine to give."

In this moment I had little doubt that, had I lost, the price would have been carved from my body—the smooth certainty of the Fae's sense of fairness had all but assured that. I had won, and so they assumed I expected some compensation. Safe passage, perhaps. A trinket with more history than it rightfully should have.

But then the Court stirred.

A figure stepped forward from the press of watching Fae, and everything in me went still.

He was young, thin and bright as a candle flickering in restless air. His hair was a mess of inky curls that caught the firelight at their edges, glinting deep blue like raven feathers. His

eyes—*God's body*, his *eyes*—burned a bright, impossible blue, clever and wild. They locked onto me without hesitation, without uncertainty, without *fear*.

Not a child's gaze. Not entirely.

"This is your prize," Remmen murmured.

A cold knot formed in my chest. "A child?"

Remmen smiled. "Such a small word for what he is."

Around us, the Court rumbled with a low, lilting murmur. Some curious. Some amused.

I glanced down at the boy—this impossible boy—half-expecting him to look uncertain, surprised, confused. He did not.

Instead, he studied me with a careful, assessing sort of curiosity. Testing. Separating me into pieces with those uncanny blue eyes as if he could weigh my worth in a single glance.

"*What exactly have I won?*" I asked, suddenly unsure of where I stood.

"My son," Remmen said simply. "The Prince of Twilight."

Something inside me *pulled*, as if some invisible thread had just been looped into the stitching of my life.

Simmon staggered upright beside me, his breath caught in his throat. Wilem swore in Siaru, flat and inevitable.

I opened my mouth. Closed it. I fought for a thread of sense. There was none.

I turned back to Remmen, narrowing my eyes. "Why?"

Remmen studied me. "You called for the old ways."

"And in what old tale does a game of Tak win a man a prince?"

Remmen tilted his head, a slow, knowing motion.

"In *all* of them."

And I *understood*.

This was not the world I had known. Not a place governed by the rules of merchants and men, where debts wore neat ledgers and promises broke like brittle twigs.

This was the Fae. Their laws did not live on paper, but in *story*. I had claimed an old right, demanded justice by an older law. And in stories—true stories, the lasting ones—what did victory bring?

A wife. A throne. A great beast to be tamed. A lost prince waiting to be shaped.

The son of a king.

In this world, it made *perfect sense*. Because nothing here was given. Only earned. And I had earned *him*.

My throat tightened. "You would give me your son, just like that?"

Remmen's smile did not reach his eyes. "No. I would give you my son *because of that*."

I turned back toward the boy, expecting defiance or resistance. But the scruffy urchin only grinned at me, bright and sharp as a blade catching moonlight—a grin like trouble tied in silk and lace.

\* \* \*

Within the Waystone, Bast looked over the table indignantly. "Who are you calling an urchin?"

# CHAPTER 19

## AMBER AND IVORY

**T**HE AIR BIT at my skin as we stepped out of the Fae. Sharp, cold, honest.

I hadn't realized how thick the air had been there, thick as amber poured too slowly. How warm and sweet the light had been, pressing against my skin like a hand held too long on the back of my neck. I hadn't noticed, not until it was gone.

Now the world was crisp again, cut clean in hard-edged light and scent. The earth felt real under my feet. My own body felt heavier, my limbs made of flesh and bone instead of silk and story.

I let out a slow breath. We'd made it.

Wil and Sim shifted beside me, stretching the way a man does after too long in bed. I could see the moment they registered the weight of their own limbs again, the sharpness of the world.

Then there was Bast.

Unlike the rest of us, Bast did not move as if shaking off some unseen burden. He simply stood, still and considering. His eyes drifted shut for a moment, his hands loose at his sides.

Then he took a slow breath—long and deliberate. Testing.

A small sound escaped him, something almost like amusement, almost like pleasure.

"Ah," he murmured. "Now I remember how heavy all this is."

I turned to glance at him, and there he was: wholly unchanged, yet entirely different. Here, in the mortal world, the shape of him meant something again. Everything about him was a careful act: his stance, his slouch, the precise way he breathed.

To his credit, his glamourie was well-woven. It had to be. The Fae do not belong in the mortal world, and the world knows it. Sometimes in whispers. Sometimes in screams. But always in blood.

Bast knew this better than most. So he crouched, adjusting where the seams of himself blurred too thin. A flick of fingers across his cheekbones, dulling their sharpness. A smooth drag down his side, settling the curve of boots that hid the cloven hooves beneath.

When he straightened, he rolled his shoulders like a cat waking from indifferent sleep. Not satisfied, not comfortable. But finished.

Behind him, the waystones loomed—a towering cluster of gray pillars. Their shape twisted strangely if you looked too long. A path not meant for mortal eyes.

Sim exhaled slowly. "I still don't understand how you knew where we'd come out."

Bast grinned, teeth flashing. "Don't you?"

Sim frowned. "No."

“Good.” He clapped Sim on the back. “That will make it twice as difficult when you try it on your own and fail spectacularly.”

Sim looked no less confused, but as Bast moved forward toward the ridge, he followed.

I did as well.

Because the truth was, whether or not I understood it, Bast had led us true. And now, we stood in the high hills overlooking Renere.

I turned my gaze toward the city spread before us, tangled with bridges and canals, vast beneath the bent light of the afternoon sun.

“Vast,” he said, tasting the word as though he might swallow it whole. “Knotted. Hungry.”

I cast a glance toward the sprawl of Renere, all tangled canals and sharp spires and streets that twisted in impossible geometry. “You sound like you like it.”

“I don’t know yet.”

I caught the faint furrow in his brow as his sharp gaze flickered across the rooftops, to the taut linen lines strung between high windows, bright silks drying in the open air. Feelers searching. Measuring.

Then, more to himself than us, he mused, “It doesn’t swallow strangers as politely as the Fae, though. That’s something.”

I sighed. “That makes one of us.”

Bast turned his charming smile on me, all teeth and mischief.

Then, in one easy flick of movement, he vaulted smoothly from the embankment, landing beside me with uncanny lightness.

He dusted his hands together as if settling the matter.

“Onward to our inevitable doom,” he declared brightly.

“Fate hasn’t decided that yet,” I muttered.

Bast tipped his head to the side, like a hound catching a distant sound. And then, quietly, almost sweetly:

“Hasn’t it?”

\* \* \*

A gondola would have been easier. The dockmen whistled as we passed, mindful of their poled crafts as they cut lazily through the silver-blue shallows. They gestured toward the open seats, calling out offers no true noble would acknowledge.

Sim almost caved. Almost.

Then Wil snorted. And Bast flicked his gaze toward him with a look of pleased curiosity, as if he’d already begun reading Wilem by what he chose to scorn.

“Afraid of a little walking, Simmon?” Bast asked, in the manner of a man dropping a coin just to watch a beggar decide what dignity is worth.

To his credit, Sim straightened immediately. “Obviously not.”

Wil grunted his approval. “Then we walk.”

That was fine with me. A city can’t be known except by its streets. You have to feel it underfoot, listen to how it sings, how it murmurs, whether it whets its teeth on laughter or whispers secrets in stolen steps.

Tarbean had leered at me, sprawling and broken, full of jagged edges and cutting smiles. Imre had sung, all light and laughter, wealth and easy kindness.

Renere?

Renere did neither.

The city did not welcome. It did not leer. It swallowed.

The streets teemed with people, all moving in the sharp, choreographed chaos of somewhere made to consume coin and breath alike. Silk-sashed bravos walked among hard-eyed merchants. Street performers spun and leapt in wide courtyards, laughter ringing against stone. Everywhere, the sharp scent of cut citrus struggled against the heavier notes of riverwater and the lingering perfume of money.

You could measure a man's worth by his collar, by the weight of his rings. And you could measure his danger by how easily he walked a city crowded with thieves.

Bast seemed almost relaxed. Almost.

For the last hour, he had prowled the streets at my side, but never where I expected him. One moment, he was just behind me. The next, sidling behind Wil and eyeing street performers from under his lashes. A few minutes later, when I turned to glance back, he was nowhere at all.

Then, impossibly, he was ahead of us, leaning lazily against a lamppost, watching our approach with the smug satisfaction of a cat watching pigeons wander too close.

He wasn't just wandering. He was testing the city.

He noted rooftops. He pressed palms to market stalls, gauging how sturdy they were. He fell behind for just long enough to poke his head into an alley, then reappeared as if he'd never left.

Bast was listening to the city.

After a time, I realized Wil had noticed, too.

He wasn't watching Bast in suspicion—not quite. More like a man listening at a locked door, waiting to hear whether there was music inside or something with teeth.

Bast caught Wil's stare. He curved an eyebrow, then smirked and tilted his head just slightly. His smile—slow and sharp-edged—was unquestionably a challenge.

"Oh, careful, dear Wilem," Bast said. "If you stare any longer, I'll start thinking you fancy me."

Wil didn't slow his pace. He didn't even blink. "I already have one reckless bastard to look after. I don't need another."

That startled real laughter out of Bast—bright and genuine. "Oh," he breathed, delighted. "I take back every unflattering thing I've ever thought about you."

"You've known me a day," Wil said dryly.

Bast shrugged. "Some people inspire insults faster than others."

Sim narrowed his eyes at Bast. Then he looked at Wilem. Then at me.

Finally, he sighed heavily, as if resigning to fate. "God help me, I think you will get along."

Bast grinned as if he'd just won a bet.

\* \* \*

The noise reached us.

Not laughter. Not the vendor calls. Not the living hum of a city.  
Rhythmic, steady. A voice above the others.  
A pulse in the air, deep and thrumming.  
Up ahead, the street had thickened— movement slowing, growing dense, a clot where people had backed away but not yet fled.  
Wilem frowned.  
Sim took an uncertain step forward.  
Across the square, something loomed in sharp relief. Thirty feet of black stone. Not a tower. Not a wall.  
A man.  
He stood frozen mid-step, one foot placed forward, saber thrust downward, as if pinning the very city beneath him.  
King Feyda.  
Even his statue looked patient. Waiting. Watching.  
And at its feet, a crowd had gathered.  
Bast exhaled in something that was not quite amusement. “Now what’s this lovely little snarl?”  
Sim hesitated. “They’re just… street preachers?”  
I glanced at their hands.  
Not clasped in prayer. Not raised in invocation. Arms crossed tight over thick shoulders.  
Not spiritual fervor.  
Something sharper.  
Wilem had caught it too. His expression had gone stony.  
“This isn’t a sermon,” I murmured.  
The chanting surged. Their voices grew tight, not quite a shout, not quite battle-bright, but dangerously close.  
Sim had gone pale. “We should—”  
Then, the first soldiers pressed their way into the crowd—blue-and-gold uniforms pushing against the brown-robed bodies pushing back.  
The air had not yet broken, but it was bracing itself. Just a breath, held too long.  
A single wrong moment, and everything would turn.  
Bast rolled his shoulders, exhaling long and low. As if standing still was costing him something.  
I made my choice.  
“Bast.” My voice was low. Steady. “Find us a way around.”  
Bast turned his head slightly, just enough that the city’s half-light caught in his eyes. His grin was slow and lazy, but there was nothing careless about it.  
“Oh,” he murmured. “Now you like my tricks.”  
The air in the square grew heavier. Someone had begun to shout.  
“Bast.”  
He sighed, tilting his head back with the air of someone scenting storm clouds. His gaze flicked up toward rooftops, then down a tight alley none of us had even glanced at twice. His fingers flexed by his side.  
Then, with the languid ease of stretching his legs after a long nap, Bast stepped away, slipping toward the alley with confident, careless grace.  
Wil murmured at my side. “You trust him to know where he’s going?”  
No.  
But that didn’t matter.

"I trust him to move as if he belongs," I murmured back. "And half the time, that's enough."

"Half the time?" Sim whispered, voice rising slightly.

Steel caught the light across the square.

Not yet drawn. Not yet swung.

But enough.

\* \* \*

When the White Citadel gates rose before us, my legs ached and my fine new tunic had gathered the dull grit of Renere's streets.

If Severen had shimmered with nobility, King Roderick's court simply burned. Everything was too white, polished within an inch of sanity. It was a fortress built to stab upward, high and narrow, its upper towers so distant I tilted too far back trying to count them.

Sim steadied me with a hand before mumbling, "Just as well. Someone would have charged you tax for looking too long."

It was a jest I would have laughed at. If I hadn't seen what rolled past the gates.

A carriage.

Heavy. Gilded. Loud in color and presence, the kind of garish thing that used gold like perfume, overdone to the point of suffocation.

And on its door, pressed in shining metal, was a crest that made my blood catch fire.

House Jakis.

I turned too sharply. My hands were fists before I had thought, before I had considered.

Sim saw. So did Wil.

I didn't say it outright. I didn't need to. We all knew. Ambrose was here. With Auri.

Wil stepped neatly into my path, blocking me before I could so much as breathe forward. "I know that face, Kvothe."

"She doesn't belong here," I told him, though my throat had seized up tight.

"She didn't belong in the Underthing either." Sim's voice was almost gentle, and that made it worse. "What if she's better here?"

"She won't be." The air in my chest burned. "She can't be."

My body made a decision before my mind did. A step forward, toward the gate, toward steel-rimmed doors and a fool's arrogance.

Wil snatched my sleeve. "Brilliant plan. Charge headfirst into the White Citadel and get thrown in a stone cell before the hour's end."

I knew he was right. My fists stayed curled, the heat wound tight in my chest.

"Fine. We bluff our way inside." My voice hardly sounded like my own. "We find her before Ambrose gets his claws in."

\* \* \*



Disguises are tricky things. The bad ones rely on deception. The good ones rely on truth—small truths, carefully chosen, painted larger than life.

And it just so happened that I had a dangerous truth at my disposal: I had once been a court musician to the Maer of Vintas.

Wil and Sim, skeptical at first, quickly warmed to the plan when they realized how easily it could be done. The Maer's name carried weight here, and I carried the writ of patronage to prove it. What I lacked in money, I made up for in arrogant improvisation.

After arranging rooms at a nearby inn named the Blind Beggar, I sifted through the market with Gemmel-trained efficiency, plucking the barest essentials: a blue-and-ivory silk sash (for the Maer's colors), a ribbon worked into Sim's curls, and a tailored waistcoat with silver buckles for Wil. Bast, predictably, fought me at first—but by the end, I caught him admiring the way deep navy suited his sharp frame.

"You're enjoying this," I accused.

"I have no idea what you mean," Bast purred, adjusting his cuffs.

By the time we reached the White Citadel's outer gate, we looked the part—brilliant in noble colors, fine enough to pass, rich enough to ward off suspicion. The guards eyed us, but I was already slipping the writ into the waiting hands of the officer before he could ask for it.

The man frowned, turning over the parchment before glancing up at me. "You claim patronage under Alveron?" His voice held doubt, but only a little.

"He has sent me ahead," I replied smoothly, "in confidence. The court at Severen awaits his word in your king's favor."

This wasn't entirely untrue. The Maer maintained correspondence with Roderick's court, and while I hardly ranked among official diplomats, no one at this gate could be sure of that.

The officer hesitated for only a moment, then waved us through.

Just like that.

Wil let out a slow breath once we were beyond earshot. "You make that look too easy."

"That's the trick," I murmured. "If you pretend to belong, half the time, nobody checks."

\* \* \*

I left that night with bruised ribs and wrecked pride.

The court had thrown me out, discarded me like a troublesome stray howling at their doors. My body ached from where the guards' gauntlets had struck, but my mind was worse—shattered, unraveling, crashing through endless ifs and whens and should-have-saids.

But most of all, I was drowning in her name.

Not Auri.

Ariel.

They had called her Princess Ariel, and no one had questioned it. No one saw a girl of small, sharp bones and moonlight laughter. No one saw the girl who had danced barefoot in the Underthing. They saw what they wanted to see: a daughter of Roderick. A piece moved into place. A lamb turned princess.

I had opened my mouth to speak the truth. Had shouted it to the rafters, raw and reckless.

And no one had listened.

No one had seen what was wrong.

How her braid was too tight, the gleam of her hair too perfect. How her shoulders did not rest but locked, sitting still as broken clock hands. How her hands stayed still in her lap, too still—gloved fingers curled in patient tension, twisted beneath silk. How she tilted her head exactly the way a doll would, listening, nodding, smiling just so.

I had seen it.

And so had Ambrose.

He stood at her side as if he belonged there, speaking in a voice like warm honey left too long in the sun, sticky and cloying. He petitioned for her hand, full of grace and easy, practiced charm. And Roderick—her father—nodded his approval.

It had broken something in me.

I remember shouting. I remember trying to wrench the weight of the world away by sheer force of will. But court does not listen to broken things, and so I had been discarded. A reckless interloper. A fool.

And Auri—Ariel—had spoken just once.

Not with the voice I knew, full of lilt and laughter. But in a whisper, quiet as falling dust.

“Please don’t hurt him.”

Then the guards had struck me down. And I had nothing left.

We stood outside the Citadel now, the air heavy with failure. Something brittle had settled between us in the silence.

Wil was the one to break it. “Kvothe,” he murmured, his voice quiet and careful. “We’ve got company.”

I looked up just as the man arrived. He stepped into the flickering torchlight without hurry, dressed in a coat that shimmered like an oil-slick in the evening dark. His mustache was precise as a quill line, his posture effortless, his rings gleaming just enough to catch notice without appearing garish.

Some would have called him a bastard made out of silk and sharp places.

“Quite the bold performance you made in there,” he said, his voice slick with amusement. “Kvothe, isn’t it? Or shall I call you something more... inventive?”

I hadn’t given him my name. That fact settled like iron in my stomach.

“I don’t believe we’ve been introduced,” I said lightly, keeping my voice steady.

He smiled, all teeth. “Nor have we. I am Fascino. Regent of nothing important, though I suspect our interests overlap. For instance...”

He studied me, slow and knowing. “You seem quite... familiar with our dear, luminous Princess Ariel.”

My heart clawed its way into my throat. I was conscious of Bast stilling beside me. Of Wil shifting his weight. Of Sim’s fingers tightening ever-so-slightly at his sleeve.

Fascino saw it all. And smiled again, the kind of smile that knew all the ways a knife could be used.

“She is a delight, isn’t she?” he continued, voice like silk-wrapped steel. “Our lost princess returned. Our jewel of court. They say she was found near the University, wandering half-mad beneath the city streets. A tragedy, really. But fortunate, all things considered.”

I met his gaze. “Fortunate for whom?”

“Oh, for many,” Fascino said easily, flicking a speck of dust from his sleeve. “For King Roderick, having his wayward daughter miraculously returned. For the ladies of the court, thrilled to welcome a new curiosity in their midst. And, of course...” He let the words drag, savoring the taste of them. “For the Jakis heir, who now finds himself in the golden company of royalty.”

I felt something shift inside me, something raw and wrong.

Fascino tilted his head, watching me closely. “Come to my gathering tonight. The Palazzo de Contraier. A private affair. No guards, no scrutiny. You should come—it might serve you to... mingle with friends of mutual distaste for a certain Jakis boy.”

He stepped back, all coiled grace. Then he turned, leaving a faint suggestion of perfume and wealth in his wake.

Wil exhaled sharply. “Kvothe, do you trust him?”

I should have said no.

But I was watching Fascino retreat into the dusk, his movements too smooth, his offer too careful, and I knew.

“It’s not a question of trust,” I murmured. “But of choice.”

# CHAPTER 20

## LURED INTO THE CURRENT

THE PALAZZO DE CONTRAIER did not demand attention the way the White Citadel did. It wasn't ostentatious or desperate to impress. It didn't reach for gold or jeweled embellishments like a noble fumbling for titles.

Instead, it was quiet about its wealth. The mahogany walls were polished the way only old money polishes things—without thinking about it. Rugs thick as river moss softened footfalls, and the travertine tile drank the light, leaving the whole place soaked in quiet. In the corners, statues of unknown figures lingered mid-stride, caught in some silent moment of elegance.

I moved carefully, smoothing the deep green waistcoat I'd bought for the occasion. It cost too much. It felt too much—too fine, too fitted. But better to wince at the expense than stand out as an obvious intruder.

Then the half-harp found me.

It lilted through the grand halls, running fingers along the ribs of the palace, seeking. It knew where it wanted to go. It led me, and I followed.

Then I saw her.

Denna.

She sat straight-backed, fingers precise against the strings, her head tilted slightly. The harp bowed to her, yielding something delicate yet unyielding.

She met my eyes near the final refrain. A flicker of recognition. Her fingers faltered. Just for a moment, just enough for me to hear.

The song ended to polite, undeserved applause.

The murmur of conversation rose again—meaningless talk, gilded courtesies. But Denna's eyes lingered on mine.

There was a pause before she crossed the room to me. A hesitation, a decision made.

Then she embraced me lightly—more the idea of an embrace than the true thing. “Well, aren't we making a habit of this?”

But I caught the meaning beneath her words: **There you are. I wasn't sure if I should be looking for you anymore.**

I exhaled. “You know me, always lurking where I shouldn't be.”

Denna leaned in slightly, her voice silk-soft and dangerous in that way only she could manage. “Yes. Especially with the wrong women, I hear.”

I blinked. “The... wrong—?”

Denna gave me a knowing look. “Rumors travel fast, Kvothe. And yours are particularly juicy.”

She was amused. Not hurt. But something deeper sat beneath it—a pointed curiosity.

“We weren’t—” I started, then stopped. What was I supposed to say? That I’d spent sleepless weeks with Devi not tangled in bedsheets but tangled in artifying schematics? That our relationship had been ink-blotted diagrams, alchemical failures, and whispered defiance—nothing more?

That sort of answer would only make it sound more suspicious. I could already picture the way Denna would tilt her head, the amused glint in her eye. **Oh, of course, Kvothe. Weeks alone with a pretty girl, deep in your work. Definitely just artifying.**

She was watching me now, dark-eyed and unreadable, waiting.

I exhaled. “You wound me, Denna,” I said smoothly. “To think you believed I’d betray my boundless devotion to you with an alchemist. No offense to alchemists.”

Denna laughed, full and warm. “Ah, see—now that sounds like a lie.”

“Only if you don’t believe in poetry,” I said.

Her smile lingered, indulgent. “I don’t,” she admitted, amused.

“Then I’ll have to prove you wrong another time,” I said, offering the lifeline to pull us away from dangerous waters.

Denna considered me for a beat longer than necessary—then took the escape.

“Of course,” she murmured, studying me briefly before turning her head toward a rustle at the entrance. Something shifted in her posture—barely, but enough for me to read unease even as it disappeared.

“Ah,” she said lightly, too lightly. “Fascino has arrived.”

She exhaled quietly, looking back at me. “I can’t linger,” she said after a brief hesitation, then, softer: “Stay. I’ll show you my favorite part of Renere.”

Then she was gone, slipping into the crowd, and for a moment—so was my grasp on what I’d meant to do.

\* \* \*

I noticed Bredon before he noticed me.

Or rather, I noticed him noticing me.

He sat among the watchers, the old-money men whose business was not business but influence. He wasn’t near Fascino, nor was he near the lesser lords of Renere.

Instead, he occupied the perfect corner—a place to see but not be seen. A man who measured the weight of a room before deciding whether to tip the scales.

His silver-threaded attire would have marked him as some merchant prince if not for the cane that rested against the crook of his arm, its handle set with mother-of-pearl. Not gaudy, but old. A thing passed down.

Bredon watched the way a man watches a game he has already decided the outcome of.

And—perhaps it was my imagination—when my eyes met his, I could have sworn I saw the faintest flicker of amusement.

I moved toward him, careful, deliberate.

Then came the crash.

A sudden bloom of red across my new green waistcoat, the sharp scent of wine spilling between fabric and silk.

The man who had backed into me turned, blinking down at his stained orange coat.

He didn't look embarrassed.

He was older than me, broad-shouldered with the easy posture of high nobility. His coat was of Aturan cut, his insignia woven in gold thread at the cuff.

His accent, when he spoke, was Aturan as well—drawing, rich, and unimpressed.

"Watch where you're going," he said, his voice just a shade too loud.

I wiped at the stain. An accident, I told myself. Play it off. Walk away.

I brushed a hand over my waistcoat and gave a small, apologetic shrug.

"Tragic," I said lightly, tilting my head at his ruined sleeve. "Killed mid-vintage. A true loss."

I moved to walk around him. He stepped sideways—not blocking me outright, just enough to make the movement feel deliberate.

"You'll apologize," he said smoothly. "Or perhaps you'd prefer satisfaction instead?"

I let out a slow breath. Ah. Of course.

I didn't even know his name, and already we were speaking the language of knives.

"Satisfaction," I said lightly, shaking my sleeve, "is a bit dramatic for an overturned drink."

At the edge of my periphery, I saw Fascino watching. Not approaching. Not helping.

"And there it is," he sighed, feigning long-suffering patience as he gave a small shake of his head. His orange coat caught the gold chandelier light as he turned ever-so-slightly to display me to the others.

"The glib tongue of a Ruh, sneering at civility itself."

More guests began to look our way. I could feel the room tilt against me so I tensed, fists balled, but made no move to answer. I had suffered worse insults without lifting a hand. If I reacted, I was lost.

Then, the man moved.

His foot slid back too quickly—his movement exaggerated just enough. His body twisted at exactly the wrong moment, his weight shifting as if he'd been shoved.

He staggered. His heel caught. The tray of a passing servant was upended in a fast, crashing sound—broken glass cascading against stone.

Gasps spread across the room like ripples.

I didn't react immediately. I hadn't touched him. I knew I hadn't touched him. But that didn't matter, did it?

Because the guests hadn't seen what hadn't happened.

They had seen something else.

The man adjusted his sleeve, exhaling sharply, steadying himself like a man struggling to contain his temper.

"I try to excuse your vulgarity," he said gravely, "and you respond with threats of violence?"

The weight of the room shifted fully against me.

I stepped forward, finally recognizing the shape of what was happening—but too late.

Then, at the perfect moment, Fascino arrived.

"Come now, gentlemen," he said pleasantly, sliding into place like oil over water. His tone was mild, amused, perfectly timed.

Then, with the measured ease of a practiced hand laying down the final card in a fixed game, he spoke.

"Lord Vatis, Kvothe, surely there are better ways to settle disagreements?"

The world paused.

I could almost hear the pieces clicking into place.

Vatis is a lord.  
Not just a wealthy merchant. Not a petty court dandy. A lord.  
And there it was.  
I had known the moment smelled of a setup.  
I had simply been too slow to name the players.  
I could feel the weight of expectation around me. The gathered nobles weren't asking if I would accept. They were waiting for it.  
The story had already been written.  
Vatis turned toward the crowd, his voice crisp with the well-trained projection of a poet on stage.  
"Since this man seems to have forgotten his manners," he said, clasping his hands behind his back, "perhaps I should remind him how things are settled among gentlemen."  
Polite laughter.  
Then, smoothly, without raising his voice, without a hint of hesitation:  
"A duel, then."  
He let the words linger in the air, offering them to the room as if they had been inevitable from the start.  
Gasps rippled outward and calcified into expectation.  
I could deny it. I could argue, protest. But no one in this room would unsee what they thought they had witnessed.  
A lord had been attacked—or at least, something close enough to count.  
If I refused the duel, I was a coward. A dangerous, out-of-control Ruh given a second chance by tuition and charity.  
If I accepted, I was playing noble games on noble ground.  
I had already lost.  
Fascino still said nothing. He didn't need to.  
I glanced toward him, searching his face for any sign of hesitation, amusement, calculation. But he merely adjusted his cuff.  
With that single, carefully timed gesture, I understood.  
This was never about the duel.  
It was about making sure I had no way to refuse.  
Vatis arched an eyebrow, his expectant smile leaving just enough room for my words.  
I let out a long breath, already regretting my next ones.  
"I accept."  
The room exhaled as one, their tension breaking like a fever.  
Vatis inclined his head, his grin widening.  
Like a man who had orchestrated the whole evening before the wine was even poured.

\* \* \*

Bredon found me watching them.  
Vatis and Fascino, moving through the room toward the gilded halls beyond.  
They weren't hasty. That was what unsettled me.  
"Your knack for catastrophe is truly unparalleled," Bredon murmured beside me. "One might almost believe it divinely ordained."

"I do my best," I said, voice dry. "For the greater good, you understand."

Bredon exhaled through his nose, tipping his cane against the marble. It made a quiet, measured sound.

"No one ever starts these things, Kvothe," he said. "They simply... drift into them, like leaves on a river."

A quiet statement, almost mild, but I felt the weight of it.

Then came the tap of his cane against the floor—once, twice, soft as punctuation.

"But you, my dear boy," he mused, "seem to make a habit of gravitating toward waterfalls."

I huffed a tired laugh, the closest I had come to smiling all evening.

Bredon studied me for a long moment. Then, just as light, just as casual:

"You do realize your opponent is a poet?"

I blinked. "Oh?"

"Terrible at it," he added. "Though courtly decorum ensures he will never know."

Something about the sheer casual disdain in his voice nearly made me smile for real.

Bredon tilted his head, tapping his cane again, as if considering something from a different angle. "He fancies himself an actor as well."

I went still.

"Oh yes," Bredon continued, watching the door where Vatis had vanished. "Tragic roles, mostly. The suffering noble. The wronged heir." His cane made another quiet tap against the marble. "His falls could use some work, though."

The words landed, soft as snowfall.

"You could have led with that."

Bredon gave me the smallest, most indulgent smile. "Should I have?"

Before I could answer, Bredon shifted his attention to another figure lingering nearby.

"Ah," he said smoothly. "But we're being rude. Kvothe, allow me to introduce Prince Trenati."

"Prince Trenati?" I asked, studying him. "As in Roderic's youngest?"

Trenati inclined his head, smiling with the restrained amusement of someone accustomed to being recognized.

"One and the same," he said. "I was eager to meet you. My sister speaks well of you. She says you helped her in Imre."

"She helped me just as much," I admitted. "It was mutual."

Trenati shifted ever so slightly, positioning himself casually near the back of the chamber.

There, against the far wall, a steward stood with idle precision—one of those men who didn't speak unless spoken to. A ledger sat upon his polished oak desk: the kind used for quiet accountings, for marking names not meant to be announced aloud.

I knew that type of desk.

Trenati loosened the fingers of his left glove, rolling them absently between his fingertips.

Then, with an ease that made it seem unimportant, he pulled the glove off and held it in his right hand just as the steward glanced downward.

No words passed between them.

No grand gesture, no notes exchanged.

The steward simply nodded once, as if acknowledging something entirely mundane, and then continued his work.

Before I could think further, Trenati slipped his glove gracefully back onto his fingers, as fluid as water running through an open hand. It was natural, unhurried. A gesture done as



subtly as breathing.

And yet—it had been a signal.

For what, I did not yet know.

Had it been a mistake?

No.

This was not accident. Not error.

This was something else.

Tap. Tap.

Bredon's cane touched the marble beside me. A small, idle sound.

Too casual to be formal.

Too precise to be idle.

But Bredon made no move to acknowledge anything else. Instead, he studied Trenati for a long, thoughtful moment before turning back to me, polite as ever.

Trenati gave no sign that he noticed Bredon. His gaze returned to me, "I saw your altercation with Lord Vatis."

I let out a slow breath. "Did you?"

He nodded, eyes bright with something unreadable.

"Most wouldn't have taken the duel, you know." A pause, measured. "Honor is... harder to find these days."

Not quite the sort of flattery I enjoyed. If anything, it only confirmed the depth of what I had stepped into.

"Oh?" I asked cautiously.

Trenati inclined his head. "I remember when Vatis dueled Captain Hostenner. Over some slight about his wife. A brutal affair—I hear the captain may be able to ride again someday."

I gave him a slow, unreadable look. "I would hope he's recovering well, then." A vague, neutral platitude. Not too interested. Not too indifferent. But Trenati was watching my reaction closely. Too closely.

Bredon let out a quiet sigh, adjusting the cuff of his sleeve. "From what I understand," he murmured, "Lord Vatis has been a fixture at court for years. He and Baron Jakis go back some ways."

I did not react outwardly. Inside, though, I felt the last pieces of the evening settle into place.

Ambrose's father had set the board. Vatis was his piece. And Fascino...

Fascino had simply walked the lamb to slaughter.

And yet...

I looked at Trenati now, truly looking.

His tone was light, his posture relaxed, but there was something there. Something intentional.

But I did not yet have the right shape for it.

So I exhaled softly. No more than a breath. As if this were all just idle chatter.

"I'm not terribly worried," I said at last, turning my gaze toward the back of the room. "I'm a fair hand with a sword myself."

\* \* \*

I declined further drinking, aware of how poorly wine and swords mixed, and bid Bredon and Trenati goodnight. Outside the Blind Beggar, the night folded around me, cool and sharp, the kind of air that makes you feel seen. I stood beneath the uneven flicker of a streetlamp, humming *Leave the Town, Tinker* to distract myself from tomorrow—a melody that kept stuttering around the edges of my resolve.

I was three verses in when Denna's voice broke gently through my thin defense. "There you are. I thought you'd wandered off with some Vintish strumpet."

It was a careless sort of remark, tossed out like a stone skipped across still water. Not meant to land hard. But I knew Denna too well to take anything she said at face value. There was something careful to the way she leaned against a low stone railing, her posture loose, her smile easy.

I gave her a lopsided grin. "Denna, you know you're the only strumpet for me."

For the smallest fraction of a moment, something flickered across her face—not surprise, not humor, something else. A pause. A shift in weight.

Then, she let out a small, dismissive breath and waved her hand as if brushing away an errant thought. "Well, of course I am."

And just like that, it was decided.

Whatever she might have thought or assumed about me and Devi, whatever curiosity or hesitation had lingered there, she smoothed over in an instant. The matter was settled. Not by any great revelation, not by any heartfelt discussion—just by sheer force of will.

Denna rarely let herself dwell on things she didn't want to hurt her. She decided, and it became true.

She held out her arm, a gesture so effortless it might as well have been instinct. I took it without hesitation.

Renere stretched before us like a second chance, its streets alive with pockets of firelight and wandering shadows. First, she led me to a tucked-away playhouse, where we caught a bawdy rendition of *The Ghost and the Goosegirl*—a performance saved only by Denna's laughter, which came soft and helpless, her scarf barely containing it. Later, a chestnut vendor's crackling brazier offered warmth, and we dirtied our fingers on blackened shells, peeling as we wandered.

We paid a trio of street musicians for song after song, and though they stumbled over every second note, Denna clapped in time, urging on their uneven enthusiasm. But those were amusements—small lanterns along a path that led to her true surprise. She brought me to a square dominated by a fountain tall enough to hold the moon, its waters leaping in cascades of silver.

Lanterns floated in the air above us, their flames like amber fireflies tracing slow, uncertain paths against the night. She handed me one, the fragile paper whispering under my fingertips. Together, we lit its wick and let it rise uneasily into the dark, tugged upward until it became a point of light indistinguishable from the stars.

"I heard about Fascino's," she said, her voice light but her eyes fixed on mine. "You can't brush this off with a clever smile, Kvothe—I've seen your scars. I know better."

Her words, sharper than I expected, left me fumbling for ease. "I'll manage," I told her, but my voice carried the weight of someone promising too much. She looked at me then with that strange intensity she wasn't always able to hide, as though measuring my promise and everything it might cost.

"On your good right hand this time?" she asked, a flicker of a smile breaking the silence between us.

I reached for her hands, clasping them. “On my good right hand,” I said, the promise resting unevenly in the air. As she left me in the square—a shadow folding into starlight—I felt the absence of her warmth more than I cared to admit.

Alone on the walk back, I stopped in an alley and began stepping through the Ketan, hoping muscle memory might calm the nervous stir within me. My movements were stiff, stuttering like a poorly tuned lute, and I faltered on *Catching Rain*, landing gracelessly on the cold cobblestones.

Instead of a third attempt, I breathed deeply, willed the tension out of my body, and continued home. By the time I reached the Blind Beggar, I’d made a promise to myself: if I lived through tomorrow, I would not waste another moment.

# CHAPTER 21

## KAYSERA

**T**HE WHITE CITADEL baked under the noon sun, its sandstone walls almost glowing in the heat. The courtyard stretched wide and empty, save for the crowd pressed along the edges. Their whispers curled through the air like smoke. Trellises of red selas flowers framed the space as if this duel were part of some cruel performance.

We'd drawn a sizable crowd, a few hundred strong watching from the courtyard's fringes or staring down from the Citadel's stone walkways. At its center stood Lord Vatis. His cream shirt clung to his skin, the cut of his leather armor tight and precise. His rapier sliced through the air in slow arcs, the whistling blade drawing attention like a hawk circling above. As I approached, his eyes landed on me with bright satisfaction.

Beyond him, the Jakis family loomed, their garish ornamentation impossible to miss. Ambrose leaned forward, his smirk coiled tight, while his father sat back with the patience of a man used to victory. At their side stood regent Fascino, however it was the person he was engaged in conversation with that stopped my blood cold: Meluan. Likely here for the wedding, though not entirely implausible she had rushed here the moment this duel had been announced, a spring in her step as she'd come to watch me be maimed. With the fist of my free hand clenched, I was suddenly conscious that I was still wearing the ring of bone she had gifted me. Not looking near as joyous was Stapes, the Maer's manservant, standing dutifully beside her. Did this mean Alveron was here? The fact that he wasn't already at her side made me think otherwise.

Though the prevailing court of opinion was clearly against me, I had at least one person on my side, Bast having accompanied me. Wil and Sim, to their credit, managed halfway before turning back, not wanting to risk the sight of their friend's blood.

"Kvothe," Bast murmured from behind me, his voice almost amused.

I glanced back. He wasn't pale, wasn't afraid—if anything, he looked mildly exasperated. His arms were crossed.

"You know," he mused, tilting his head, "the best stories never end with a hero bleeding out in the dust over a noble's bruised pride."

I narrowed my eyes. "That supposed to comfort me?"

Bast smirked. "Only if you believe in stories."

He rocked back on his heels. "Just don't embarrass me in front of these fine people."

I shook my head, "Watch my back."

His expression flickered, just slightly—serious now under the banter. "Always."

In front of me, Lord Vatis's lips twisted into something between a grin and a warning. "You've kept me waiting," he taunted.

I didn't answer. My hand rested briefly on the hilt of Caesura, then drew it, the blade giving a faint, muted hum like muffled bells. The sound pulled a hush from the crowd, though more out of curiosity than awe. Vatis paused, his grin faltering as he eyed the sword. He didn't recognize Saicere, which meant he didn't understand what he was seeing. I could work with that.

\* \* \*

The air held still for a breath.

Then the string snapped. Vatis moved.

His rapier blurred toward me—a blade flashing fast as a striking kestrel. I caught the motion with Threshing Wheat, turning the blade aside in a clean, measured arc. The ring of steel hummed between us, soft as an opening note.

Vatis pressed forward, relentless but precise, his footwork like a practiced dance. He was fast—faster than I'd expected.

But even as I blocked and stepped back, I did not strike.

Not yet.

Instead, I adjusted. Tilted. Shifted.

A step just slightly slower than it should be. Weight carried just a fraction off-center. Small things, subtle things—the kind of mistakes a predator expects from weaker prey.

And Vatis? He noticed them.

And that's exactly what I wanted.

His blade flicked faster, controlling the pace, keeping me reacting—or at least, making it seem as if I were.

I caught his strikes cleanly, parried lightly where I could, but never countered aggressively.

Nothing bold. Nothing desperate. Just slow, quiet loss.

I felt him maneuvering me—subtle, careful. Guiding, not pressing.

He knew this wasn't finished. Not yet.

The feint came low. A sharp twist. A testing flick.

I saw it a breath before it landed. Chose, quietly, where to let him take me.

A sting across my forearm, clean and sharp.

Blood welled. Small, contained. Harmless.

"First blood."

The words rolled smooth from his tongue, smug but polite, measured and easy. He flicked the edge of his rapier once, casting aside my blood like a thing barely worth keeping. His stance was elegant, almost careless.

The crowd rustled—applause here and there, murmurs of polite approval.

I didn't move.

Not angered. Not shocked. I only adjusted the fingers around Saicere's hilt and exhaled.

One step in a deeper game.

I rolled my shoulder, flexing my fingers once. The sting along my arm was a thoughtless thing—unimportant. The true injury had nothing to do with blood.

I met Vatis's gaze, calm and expectant.

I had waited for this moment—but that didn't mean I liked it.

Then—as I had suspected—Fascino spoke.

“Oh, surely not.”

The words hummed through the courtyard like a perfect note, softly played.

Vatis turned his head slightly, brow quirking as if he hadn’t quite heard correctly—or perhaps pretending not to.

Fascino strode forward from the nobility’s ranks, his movements too smooth, too practiced. This was not a request. This was steering.

“A true duel,” Fascino mused, tilting his head. “Settled with... this?” He gestured toward the thin line of red beneath my sleeve with mocking delicacy.

The statement wasn’t meant for me. It was for Vatis.

Vatis exhaled sharply through his nose. His posture shifted—not much, but enough.

Fascino’s lips curled slightly. “Unless, of course, you’d rather this moment be remembered in smaller terms.”

Vatis straightened—a movement just barely reactionary. He glanced out toward the gathering nobility, toward Ambrose, Meluan, the lords and ladies who would remember this moment in every retelling.

Perception. Stories. Legacy.

The nobility had gathered like vultures, waiting to see how the story would go. Ambrose, resting easy in his seat, already knew his version.

I stayed perfectly still.

Because I had predicted all of it.

Vatis’s mouth lifted in a smooth, unbothered grin, but something behind his eyes glinted sharper now.

“He’s right,” Vatis murmured, lifting his blade. He turned, addressing the court as much as he addressed me. “This barely qualifies as a wound.”

He smiled wide. Unshaken. Polished as a speaking stone.

“Let’s continue.”

Now the game was truly mine.

\* \* \*

Vatis struck first.

He was faster now—not reckless, but deliberate in a way he hadn’t been before. He had something to prove—to himself, to the court.

But in his renewed confidence, he didn’t notice that I was not the same opponent he had been fighting before.

Before, I had let him pull me into his rhythm.

Now, I was adjusting it—note by note, half-step by half-step—just enough that he would not notice.

I angled my shoulders, letting my weight flow differently, subtly shifting into Ademic movement—not dueling, but dancing.

Vatis pressed, sensing he was still in control.

That was his mistake.

I turned a breath too quickly, letting him anticipate a false pattern.

A flicker of hesitation—small, barely perceptible, but I saw it.

The game closed.  
Momentum shifted.  
Suddenly, somehow, he was overextended without quite knowing why.  
His footwork—pristine moments ago—was now faltering at the edges.  
I saw his calm expression tighten ever so slightly as awareness crept in.  
Something was wrong.  
He no longer understood why this was happening.  
But he understood it was.  
Before he could adjust— I moved.  
A single fluid cut—not deep, but placed where it mattered. A kiss of Saicere across the inside of his thigh.  
The kind of cut that did not kill but did not forgive.  
Vatis choked a breath—his stance lost in an instant.  
His legs shook beneath him.  
He tried twisting past the injury, but something failed.  
A fractured misstep.  
His rapier slipped.  
There was a sharp, cracking break, small but definitive. The broken tip of his blade clattered onto stone.  
The crowd gasped.  
I didn't press forward. Didn't move.  
I only watched as he realized what I already knew.  
It was over.  
But the realization arrived too late for him to disguise it.  
His knee buckled. Not dramatically. Not all at once.  
Just enough.  
Just enough for everyone to see.  
He inhaled sharply through his nose, one hard, shallow breath—he had not yet fallen, but his pride was already breaking.  
For the first time, his expression lost all its ease.  
His gaze flickered—not to me, not to the blood staining his silk, but toward the watching stage.  
Toward Nobles. Toward Ambrose.  
Toward Fascino, who stood precisely as he had before.  
Had his plan truly unraveled? Or was this just a deeper layer?  
He would not find the answer.  
I lowered Saicere's blade. Felt the weight of the moment press into the quiet.  
Then, finally, I spoke.  
"Yield," I said steadily. "And remember it was an Edema Ruh who let you live."  
Vatis's gaze flickered. His jaw was tight.  
Then, at last—through clenched teeth—  
"I yield."  
The script was shattered, the onlookers frozen in time. Unable to react to such impossibility.  
Then across the courtyard, I saw Fascino's shoulders move as if to let out a quiet sigh. Shaking his head as if disappointed, he turned and left before the first medic even got to Vantis.

To the right, another shift of movement caught my eye. Glancing after it, I saw the wind scatter Auri's hair like autumn leaves in the far cloister.

She did not move. She did not wave. She was watching. That thought sat uneasily in my ribs, like a string tuned too tight—had she always been there? Was it chance? Or had she known?

The courtyard faded behind me as I turned and walked away, pressing my hand against my wound. My focus lingered only on the thought of the tower. If I couldn't save her through Roderick, I would find another way.



# CHAPTER 22

## INTERLUDE

### CROSSCURRENTS

IN THE QUIET OF THE Waystone Inn, Kote polished the bar with slow, thoughtful strokes. Slow as sleep. Slow as memory. Behind him, the fire cracked, shadows slipping gold across the walls like thoughts he never quite chased to ground.

“You made a promise,” Bast said, voice lazy as his posture but sharp around the edges. “Before the duel. You said you wouldn’t waste another moment.”

Kote didn’t look up. “I did.”

“I don’t recall you straining your back over it,” Bast said, too casual to be kind.

Kote gave a dry, drowsy smile. “Only fools keep all their promises,” he said. “But I kept that one.”

Bast arched an eyebrow, skeptical.

Kote picked up the cloth, turned it once, twice in his hands. “As time permitted.” He turned the phrase like it tasted strange. “Which is no kind of permission at all.”

He set the cloth down.

“But I did try,” he said, almost to himself. “So did she.”

Bast tilted his head. “Wilem blamed you for taking twice as long to do anything useful.”

“Because I was chasing ghosts, Bast,” Kote said, and his eyes didn’t quite stay focused on the room. “That’s what we were all doing. Ghosts in noble colors. Ghosts in crests and corridors. Ghosts with rearranged names.”

His hands stilled on the bar, the memory already unspooling.

“I found her arguing with a spice merchant. She was furious. Said his cinnamon was a fraud. Claimed it tasted like sawdust steeped in regret.”

Bast barked a laugh. “That sounds more like her than anything else you’ve told me.”

Kote allowed a smile, softer now. “By the end of it, she had a free pouch of Clovian cinnamé and a crowd of ten arguing whether flavor counts as moral bankruptcy.”

He chuckled once, breath caught in the ribs.

“She never did like to lose an audience.”

“And when she saw you?”

“She didn’t blush. She grinned,” he said. “Like someone caught stealing fire and not particularly sorry about it.”

“Did she say anything?”

“She said, ‘About time.’ Then she took my arm like it had always been hers, and asked if I’d learned anything worth hearing while I was off getting stabbed.”

The room went quiet again for a moment.

Kote smiled. “We started meeting after that. It became habit. Not every night. But often enough. Shuttered teahouses. Ivy-walled gardens no one guarded after dusk. A river bridge where candles drifted like fallen stars. Nothing planned, nothing chased. Never delaying what I meant to do. Only what I should have.”

Bast looked over, more wary than before. “None of us knew.”

“That’s how she wanted it,” Kote said. “And if I had to choose, I didn’t mind.”

He picked up a bottle he didn’t need to polish, turned it in his hands once. Twice.

“It was the only part of Renere untouched by shadows. No ghosts followed us there. No politics. No princes. Just laughter. Shared lies. Quiet music.”

“That’s what she was to you,” Bast said. “Something untouched. Something pure.”

Kote shook his head. “No,” he said. “She’s never been that.”

He turned the bottle one last time, then set it gently behind the bar.

“But for a little while,” he said, “we met where the city forgot to watch us.”

He looked down at the polished wood beneath his hands. Ran his thumb across a grain like music half-remembered.

“And that,” he said softly, “was close enough.”

# CHAPTER 23

## THE THREAD UNRAVELS

**T**HE COMMON ROOM of the Blind Beggar smelled of stale ale, dying embers, and the kind of silence that follows a knife fight no one talks about.

Sim lounged like a man intending to look at ease. His cup rolled between restless fingers, the dregs of his drink tilting back and forth against the firelight.

Wilem, steady as ever, sat stiff-backed, hands folded too precisely in his lap. His posture looked effortless, but I knew what it meant—his tension lived somewhere behind his ribs, deep enough to be dangerous.

Bast looked the most at ease, though he shouldn't have. He was draped over a chair like a cat sprawled in the sunlight, but his fingers grazed the hilt of his knife—not as a weapon, but as something familiar.

No one spoke of the duel, but the weight of it sat between us, an unsheathed blade laid carefully on the table.

I let the silence settle before setting my own cup down—not loudly, not harshly, just enough to press a ripple into the quiet.

I rubbed at my temple. There was something nagging at me—something about the court, something out of place. It scratched at the edges of my thoughts, like a word on the tip of my tongue. Something sharp, angled, wrong.

And yet, when I reached for it, it was just past my grasp.

I exhaled, willing it away, and said, "I saw Auri."

Her name did not feel right in my mouth. Not here. Not in a place of thick wood and firelight, of rough-stitched quiet and thick ale. It belonged elsewhere, in the hush of old clay pipes beneath the city, in the rhythm of bare feet on tiled rooftops. Here she was Princess Ariel.

Sim straightened. "She—she was there?"

Bast hummed under his breath. Not quite laughter. "Of course."

The certainty in his voice dug at me. Because, to Bast, it had to be true. In the Fae, stories were not stories. They were truth. And a lost princess appearing precisely when the tale called for her? Exactly what should happen.

"Prince Trenati was with her," I said.

Bast scoffed. But it wasn't his usual amused disdain. "Royal boy's finally taking an interest in his lost sister? How touching."

Sim caught the hesitation in my voice. "Do you mean with her, or near her?"

There was a difference.

I exhaled slowly. “He wasn’t speaking to her. But I don’t think it was coincidence. He stood just close enough.”

Sim leaned forward, brow furrowed. “Like someone with authority.”

I nodded. “Like a man ensuring people saw him standing there.”

Wilem, ever watchful, tested his words before speaking. “Maybe he’s more jailor than brother.”

The words did not land lightly. They sat heavy between us, an unsheathed knife laid on the table, waiting for someone to pick it up.

I exhaled through my nose, willing the ache between my temples into something orderly, something I could press into shape.

The door creaked open. A man in the livery of a noble attendant stepped inside.

All four of us turned.

“Apologies for the intrusion. Lord Vatis has succumbed to his wounds.”

The air in the room swallowed the words.

Wil straightened in his seat, forehead creasing. “He was still alive when we left.”

“No,” I said simply. Not angry, not questioning. Just fact.

I saw him.

He was fine.

Bast exhaled sharply, shaking his head as if the whole situation were a joke not designed for laughter.

“Ah, yes. A scratch on the ribs, a bruised leg—clearly fatal wounds, if you’re an idiot.”

He pause. A slow blink. Then, dull certainty pressed into his voice.

“And naturally, this is your fault.”

The man—who had merely been sent to deliver a message, not argue—lowered his head quickly and left.

A long, brittle silence.

Then, Wil murmured, “Either someone was careless with the stitches...”

Sim rubbed his temples. “Or someone wanted him dead.”

Bast drummed his fingers against the table. “Dead men tell worse stories than embarrassed ones.”

None of us laughed. Things had just gone from urgent to dire.

I pressed a hand to my still-bandaged cut, exhaling slow through my nose. There were lines here, I just needed to connect them.

That brief exchange between Trenati and the steward—the one Bredon had made sure that I noticed. Why?

I reached deeper, searching the half-light of recall.

There had been a ring on Trenati’s hand.

Not Roderick’s crest.

One of those smaller details I had cataloged without thinking—shoved into memory’s quiet attic, useful for later.

It hadn’t seemed relevant then. Why would it have been?

Had it been worn down? Reforged? No, something else.

The flame-light flickered against the carvings.

Locked geometry, shifting lines carved into gold. Something about the pattern pulled at me, a hook caught between memory and certainty.

I had seen something like this before, I was sure of it.

Ciphers. That was it. Kilvin had once shown me geometric ciphers used by artificers to disguise alchemical recipes, patterns woven to blur their true purpose—to hide meaning in

plain sight.

My first instinct had been to catalog the ring as something similar—an idle flourish of a jeweler. But when I told Sim, his fingers went still around his cup. The firelight caught something wrong in his expression, pulling all the rosiness from his cheeks.

His mouth opened—closed.

No. Not closed. Braced. Like a man about to say something he doesn't want to hear leave his own lips.

"Tehlu's wrath." His voice was soft—too soft. The kind of soft that follows a knife sliding out of its sheath. "That's Feyda's Mark."

I had not recognized it, forgotten things stay forgotten until someone dares to remember them. But Sim—far, far down in the line of Aturan succession—had learned his history well.

"You're sure?" Wilem asked carefully.

Sim turned to him, voice steady. "You don't understand, Wil. No one wears that ring. Not in jest. Not in secrecy." He swallowed. "Two noble houses destroyed their own crests rather than be mistaken for it."

Bast was still.

Not his usual lazy amusement, nor his sharp-edged mockery—just still. Watching.

It was only then I noticed his fingers had stopped moving against his knife-hilt.

"Human rulers are stupid things," he murmured. "But they're never stupid enough to carve a forgotten name into gold unless they mean it."

I agreed, though my mind still leapt back toward the ring, toward the pattern. And suddenly, I saw the lines for what they were.

Someone had altered it. The geometries were rotated, the perspective was shifted, and the framing just different enough to disguise the intent—subtle, clever. A deceit meant for those who only half-remembered, a quiet manipulation designed to turn recognition into a passing thought.

My fingers twitched against the grain of the table. No, that wasn't possible. Feyda's Mark was a piece of history, exiled long before my father's father was ever born. A symbol discarded as ruin. I'd read enough about noble crests to know that much.

Hadn't I?

I frowned, fingers drumming against the table. Except—I never actually had, had I?

I had studied heraldry under nobles, scribes, merchants alike. Pored over succession laws, court intrigues, ruined bloodlines.

But I couldn't actually recall any full accounting of Feyda's Mark.

No descriptions of its exile. No noble family disgraced or cursed for its use.

A story erased unclean still leaves behind its ink.

But there were no stains from this. Nothing left in the margins of history. As if Feyda's Mark had been swallowed completely.

Not erased in scandal. Not recorded in disgrace.

Just... gone.

A slow breath left me.

Yes, it had to be.

This knowledge had been buried.

But that made no sense. The University hoarded knowledge, even when its masters sought to leash it. I'd spent years among those silent tomes, and I had never once found a full accounting of Feyda's Mark. Not its meaning, not its exile, not its absence.

And absence, I was beginning to realize, was its own kind of presence.

My jaw clenched.

“Wil.” My voice was too sharp, too pointed, for the delicate question. You worked as one of Master Lorren’s scribes, “How many texts in the University speak plainly about Feyda’s Mark?”

Wilem did not answer immediately. His fingers flexed, just barely, against the wood of the table.

Then, slowly, “I—I don’t know.” A pause. “No one mentions it past references in succession disputes.” Another pause. “But nothing recent. Maybe there’s some work in the locked stacks—”

Sim was watching me now. Tensed, listening. “Kvothe. What are you thinking?”

I exhaled. Thinking of Ambrose Jakis.

I thought of his endless tenure at the University, dragging through his studies with the leisurely pace of a man who wasn’t actually interested in study. I had always assumed he lingered because of decadence, laziness, spite. Because he was too important to be made to leave.

But that wasn’t right, was it?

No. That was absurd. Ambrose is arrogant, petty, cruel. He wastes effort on insults, on petty vengeance. He isn’t clever. He isn’t patient.

And yet.

Baresh had muttered to me, years ago, that it wasn’t natural for a noble heir to linger at the University so long. Most sons of titled families spent two, three years at most.

But Ambrose? Six. Longer.

He had no hunger for study. So why had Ambrose stayed?

Had he wasted time? Perhaps. Or had he been buying time?

No, I had to be wrong. Had to be—

And yet.

The books I never found. The locked stacks. The documents that disappeared before I could reach them.

I had always assumed Ambrose destroyed things because it was inconvenient for me.

But what if it had never been about me at all?

The silence stretched taut, sharp with unspoken conclusions.

Finally, I let the words slip, quiet and knife-edged, “What if Ambrose wasn’t just in the University for himself?”

Ambrose Jakis had been erasing things that didn’t belong to him.

Books. Stories. Names lost in burned ink.

And now, he was doing the same with Auri—rewriting her into Ariel, erasing everything she truly was.

My fingers tightened into a fist on the tabletop before I realized I was clenching them. She hates being looked at. Hates it so much that even when I called her “Auri” for the first time, she had flinched. Not at the sound, but at the weight of it—having her name acknowledged was as intimate as a knife pressed against her skin.

I had learned what kind of silence to leave for her. When to look away so she could exist as herself, unobserved. I had learned when not to see her—when the length of a shadow, the hush of moving air, had to be enough proof of her presence.

I remembered once, when I had found her sitting on her rooftop, her face turned toward the wide-open sky with its cartwheel of stars. She hadn’t seen me yet, hadn’t stiffened or folded inward. She was entirely herself. The moment I stepped into the clearing, she had curled away, tucking herself into a place small enough where she thought no one could follow.

And now she is being dressed for court. Displayed before noble eyes. Smoothed, styled—wearing the name they’ve chosen for her instead.

I felt the bile rise under my tongue.

I had promised her she would always be safe under my protection. Auri trusted me.

I tried drinking after that. Three sips told me it wasn’t going to help.

Instead, I leaned forward, studying Wilem and Sim across the table. “We need leverage on Trenati.”

“That is not what we need,” Wilem countered.

His voice was measured—but not calm. Not truly. His hands stayed too neatly in his lap, his shoulders too controlled. The way a man settles himself before the first blow lands.

Then, lower:

“You don’t understand what you’re reaching for.”

The fire crackled. A chair creaked somewhere in the room.

“This isn’t a game where you upturn the board with a clever move. I know these types. I’ve seen the way their families shape cities, silence rivals. You don’t fight men like this.”

His jaw clenched. “You survive them. If you’re careful. If you’re lucky.”

He exhaled sharply, suddenly shaking his head—like a man trying not to say something. Then:

“Damn you, Kvothe.”

His voice was low, not angered, not pleading. Just simple, weary truth.

“You don’t run from fire. You always run toward it.”

He wasn’t wrong.

But it didn’t matter. There was no right way to do this, no safe way to tear a locked door off its hinges. I wasn’t looking for equal footing—I was looking for a weak point. I was looking for the place where their rules could be broken.

And I was willing to bet that if we found the right type of evidence, we could convince Trenati to hand over Auri.

\* \* \*

Auri’s time was running out.

That thought beat under every moment, more insistent than my pulse.

The court had already accepted Ambrose Jakis as her suitor. The wedding date had not yet been set, but it wouldn’t be long. No royal house would wait to finalize a match like this. If we didn’t act soon, Auri would be his—bound and broken in a way I couldn’t undo.

That truth chased me down the streets of Renere, turning every wasted hour into another hour Ambrose spent tightening his grip on her future.

Trenati left no footprints. That was the problem.

Even the most cautious ones left markers—a favored tailor, a particular vintner supplying their table, perhaps a discreet card house where debts were quietly settled in gold and sharp glances. No one as prominent as Prince Trenati could move through a city like Renere without leaving some kind of imprint. Not unless someone was deliberately sweeping his footprints from the dust.

Wilem tried the official channels first.

Four days of court records, audience logs, and public engagements turned up what looked, at first glance, like a perfectly ordinary schedule.

But something was wrong with it.

On the 22nd, the records claimed Trenati had overseen trade negotiations between the glassmakers' guild and the ambassador from Modeg.

Wilem tracked down a glass merchant who had been present at the trade negotiations.

"Trenati?" the merchant hesitated for just a second, like a man struggling to place a face in a half-remembered dream. Then he scoffed, shaking his head. "Of course, he was there."

"You sound uncertain," Wilem pressed.

The merchant exhaled sharply, as if shaking something off. "No, no. I know he was. I just..." He rubbed his forehead, frowning. "It's odd. Normally, I'd remember something specific he said, a joke, an insult—Trenati's the sort who burns his words into a room. But I... I only remember that he was drinking. Talking. Something about tariffs."

He exhaled again, muttering, "Tehlu's teeth, maybe I need to drink less at these meetings."

Wil made a note, relief settling low in his ribs. A confirmation. Maybe they were imagining discrepancies after all—

"Wait," another glassmaker interrupted. "Trenati? No—he wasn't there."

Wil turned back. "What do you mean?"

"That wasn't him. That was Minister Halbrecht. Trust me, I'd remember—between him and the Modigan ambassador, we nearly drowned in wine that day."

The contradiction sharpened something at the edge of Wilem's mind. He pressed the second merchant harder. No luck. The details didn't match, but neither man seemed to second-guess themselves.

One single mistake in the records? That could be negligence.

But then came more.

On the 24th, Trenati was recorded as attending a formal procession—yet the uniforms the guards wore that day did not match the season's colors for the Citadel's royal escorts.

The 27th listed him as a guest at the House of Seven Wells—a high aristocratic gathering known for its scrutiny of attendance. But when Wilem found an attendant from the event, she simply frowned at her ledger.

"That can't be right..." she murmured, brow furrowing deeply at the missing entry. "... That night was full. Every guest accounted for."

"Then why isn't Trenati listed?" Wilem asked.

She bit her lip. Fingertips tightened over the edge of the ledger's worn leather.

"But I swear he was there," she murmured under her breath, almost to herself. "I saw him. I mean, I think I did..."

Her fingers traced the blank space in the ledger, following where his name should have been. Her frown deepened.

Then, her posture changed. Ever so slightly, her stiffened spine smoothed into something else—something more controlled.

That moment's uncertainty vanished, smoothed over like a crease in silk. "I can't help you," she said, voice suddenly even. Too even.

Wilem opened his mouth.

"I can't help you," she repeated. And she shut the ledger.

When they left the room, Wilem exhaled. "That was deliberate."

"You think?" Sim muttered, rubbing his forehead. "She looked like we'd asked her to recall a dream she hadn't finished having."



Wilem flipped open his own small record-book—the careful orderly notes he’d made over the last few days—thumb trailing along the empty space where Trenati should have been.

His breath hitched.

It wasn’t empty.

A date, written in his own hand, sat clear as day on the page: “Trenati - House of Seven Wells, 27th.”

He blinked hard.

I checked this earlier. I checked this four times. It wasn’t there. It wasn’t.

Sim was still talking—something about how the contradictions were piling up—but Wilem stared at his own handwriting, trying to remember writing it.

He couldn’t.

He should say something. He should—he—

No. That was ridiculous. He was exhausted. He must have overlooked it, scribbled the note and misfiled it in his head, that’s all.

Tucking the notebook away, he exhaled slowly. “We should keep moving.”

And so it continued.

His name appeared where presence was expected, but the details frayed at the edges. People recalled seeing him in passing but not speaking to him, not interacting.

It was as if Trenati existed just enough to discourage deeper questions but not enough to truly be observed.

If no one was looking too closely, they would never notice the gaps.

Simmon, meanwhile, took to the markets, the tea-houses, the gossip dens.

Unlike Wilem’s records, which were too polished, Sim expected the lower classes of Renere to provide more natural insights.

He was wrong.

Everywhere he went, Trenati’s presence was strangely fragmented, contradictory.

At the docks, a sailor swore Trenati had overseen an ivory shipment. “Clear as day. Wore that dark blue brocade coat of his, same as always.”

“Same as always?” Sim repeated.

“Sure,” the man nodded. “He was wearing it last time he came, too.”

Sim and Wilem exchanged glances.

“And that last time was...?” Wil prompted.

“Dunno.” The sailor frowned. “Feels like no more than a couple weeks back.”

But Sim had already checked. Trenati had been supposedly attending trade talks in Modeg the entire season.

At an upper-market tea shop, one serving girl told Sim, “Oh, no, he never visits.”

“He was here.” The second server insisted. “Blue brocade, same as always. Stood over by the window. I remember the light caught his hair—he had that *look*.”

The first server hesitated, lips pressing together.

“You’re thinking of someone else,” she said firmly.

“No, I know it was him.”

A pause.

A flicker of hesitation.

“...Don’t I?”

The second server frowned again, brows knitting, like she was grappling with a loose thread in her own mind. Finally, almost defensively: “It was him.”

“And I was the one writing down orders, wasn’t I?” The first woman’s voice had an odd edge now.

“Yes, and you nodded at him, I saw you—”

“Then why don’t I remember doing it?”

The second server opened her mouth, then shut it.

A slow, creeping silence stretched between them and Sim felt a small chill run up the back of his neck.

When we were back at the Blind Begger later that night Sim let out a breath, rubbing his arms. “It keeps twisting under itself,” he muttered. “It’s not just that they’re covering up his movements—it’s like they’re rearranging them to make sense. The second you stop looking, it feels natural again.”

He straightened, as if trying to shake off the thought. “It’s like... someone’s telling a story, and every time we turn the page, they’ve rewritten it behind us.”

Wilem tapped his notes against his knee, eyes sharp. “Fabrication?”

“No,” I said, brow furrowed. “That would leave mistakes. Slipping details, missing names. But this—this feels like something else.”

I turned toward Bast. He had been watching the city beyond us, his face cast in shadow, his expression more detached than usual—not bored but wary.

“You’re quiet,” I said.

Bast rolled a silver coin between his fingers, watching the lamplight flicker over the ridges. For the first time all night, he had stopped smirking.

“Nothing to say?” I pressed, my voice carrying an edge.

His fingers never stopped moving. The coin glinted as it flipped over his knuckles, quick, restless. “I don’t like cities that learn how to hold their tongue, Reshi,” he said finally.

Something in the words sent an unshakable chill down my spine.

Wilem noticed my expression. “What does that mean?”

Bast let the question settle, idly flicking the coin and catching it in his palm. “It means,” he said lightly, “that even a place can be taught to forget.”

It wasn’t an answer. It was worse than an answer. It was the shape of something hidden beneath a sheet.

“You knew this the whole time,” Wilem said, not accusing, just assessing.

Bast shook his head. “No. I suspected. And now I don’t want to know.”

That made Sim stiffen. “If you don’t want to know, should we be worried?”

An easy grin flickered across Bast’s face. “Simmon, I’ve always assumed you should be worried.”

But there was nothing easy in his hands. Nothing easy in his weight against the table.

I turned, staring at the city beyond the lamplight, at the soft movement of Renere’s streets. For the first time, I wondered if we were the ones leaving footprints in the wrong places.

A slow breath left Bast’s lips. He turned away from the street, glancing toward me with something unfamiliar in his eyes. Not amusement. Not mischief. A small, sharp-edged weariness.

“Follow your prince to The Whispering Quarter, Reshi,” he murmured. “But don’t be surprised if the city forgets you when you’re gone.”

# CHAPTER 24

## THE WHISPERING QUARTER

**T**HERE WAS NO threshold marking the entrance to The Whispering Quarter.

No walls, no guardhouses. No watchful merchant guilds staking claim over its streets. You simply stepped forward, and the city around you—real, present, known—began to unmake itself.

The air grew thinner, the streets compacting in on themselves like the folds of a closed book. The roads you could explain led away. The ones that remained could not be explained at all.

Bast hesitated first.

I had been watching the streets. But he had been watching the not streets. The spaces between sound, the places between knowing.

And something there had caught him the way a wolf catches the scent of something that has no living thing to claim its name.

He slowed to a halt the way a man steps carefully across thin ice—suddenly aware that something beneath his feet is shifting.

“Bast?”

His head tilted slightly, eyes narrowing. Not at the street itself, but at the space around it.

“I don’t like this,” he murmured.

“Neither do the begger,” Wilem pointed out. His arms were crossed and a controlled tightness in his breath. “Not even the drunk ones.”

Sim rubbed his arms as if an unseen draft had run through them. “This is impossible. There are no secret districts in Renere. The city isn’t built that way.”

Bast tilted his head. The lamplight cast sharp shadows against his cheekbones. “No. But this isn’t a district, is it?”

Sim gave a confused scoff. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Bast ran a hand down the front of his coat as if brushing away dust, gaze flicking toward the street ahead of us. “Borders between places aren’t always... well-behaved.”

There was something in his voice I didn’t like. Something edged with distant knowing.

He exhaled quietly, rolling his shoulders before continuing. “The Fae and the Mortal World aren’t just two separate things, divided neatly like streets on a map. There are places where they... bleed into each other.”

Wilem frowned, shifting his weight unconsciously. “Like the Eld?”

Bast let out a small, humorless laugh. “No, the Eld remembers too much. But this?” He tapped his heel softly against the stone beneath him. His expression turned calculated. **“This is a place that has forgotten itself altogether.”**

The words slipped into the empty air like a drop of ink into water, sinking slow and staining the silence around them.

“Forgotten?” Sim muttered, mouth twisting as he tried to parse the meaning.

I caught the way Bast’s fingers ran absently along the edge of his coat, the same way a man keeps a hand near his sword—not threatening, just waiting to see if he’ll need it.

“It happens sometimes,” he continued, voice quieter. “Places don’t just crumble into ruin. Sometimes... they unravel, like threads slipping loose from a weave. Old promises fray. Old bargains weaken. Some roads fold into themselves too many times, and suddenly—” He made a loose, twisting motion with his fingers. “—you get something that doesn’t know whether it should have existed at all.”

He tilted his head backward slightly, scenting at the air.

Sim shivered. “That’s absurd.”

Bast smiled. “Not if you know the stories.”

I exchanged a glance with Wilem. Bast was being too careful. He always had the air of someone who had seen more than he cared to explain, but this wasn’t his usual playacting amusement.

\* \* \*

We found our perch along the old market district, an empty sprawl of forgotten stalls that had long since given up being useful.

It gave us the vantage we needed—but not the certainty.

The Low-House we suspected Trenati would use was just beyond the dying reach of Renere’s streetlamps. No signs. No mark of allegiance. Only the quiet, unnatural certainty that it had always been there.

Every rule of the city bent around it.

Over the hours, men passed without looking. Footsteps that should have echoed didn’t. Some slowed as they approached the door as if they had forgotten why their feet had carried them there.

Sim stirred beside me, rubbing his arms, frowning like a man trying to shake off a thought before it took shape. “That’s odd.”

“What?” I murmured.

“That man near the canopied stall,” Sim said. “The one lighting his pipe?”

I followed his gaze. A dark-coated man leaned against a nearby stand, puffing at a twisted-stem pipe. Greenish smoke drifted from his lips, curling against the gray fabric of his collar. He looked utterly at ease. Uninterested.

Sim exhaled sharply. “I swear to Tehlu, I saw that man two streets away. By the theater. He leaned against a different wall, same pipe, smoking just like that.”

“Maybe he moved faster than you did,” Wil murmured, though he was already shifting, subtly adjusting his line of sight.

Sim dampened his lips. “At the theater, he was smoking the end of a pipe. Here, it’s fully packed, just lit.”

That left a thin silence.

Then, something changed. It was as if someone breathed back into the world, and then their figure stepped out of the Low-House.

But, not one of the men we counted. Not someone familiar at all. Someone that should not have existed.

The man turned the corner briskly and passed two chatting women. One of them flicked a glance toward him and hesitated—blinking in slow, startled realization.

“You’re back early,” she said, confused.

The man gave a casual wave, smiling.

“Gods above,” the other woman muttered. “I thought you’d already left town.”

A slow, prickling silence settled between all of us.

Even Sim had caught it. That man was not surprised to be here. He walked with the confidence of someone who knew exactly where he had been.

Only the world itself had lost him.

Wilem, who had been carefully tracking the men entering and not leaving, frowned suddenly.

Then—too harshly—he whispered: “That’s not possible.”

I recognized the tension settling into his shoulders. The kind of weight that falls into someone’s spine right before they realize they’ve seen something they cannot explain.

“What isn’t?” Sim asked sharply.

Wilem didn’t look up. He wasn’t asking anymore. He was checking.

He flipped back through his notes, fingers pressing into the page. Running the tally a second time. A third. His lips parted slightly, exhaling a slow, careful breath.

“There were twelve,” he muttered, mostly to himself. “I know I counted twelve.”

Sim and I exchanged a glance.

“There were twelve,” I said cautiously.

“Then why are there still twelve inside?” Wil muttered, flipping pages back and forth.

“Numbers don’t lie,” Sim said, though he sounded like he wished they did.

Bast, who had been restless beside me, flicked his fingers, face impassive. “Reshi, listen.”

I hesitated.

Silence.

That was wrong. The market should not be silent—even this late, even in quieter corners, there should be the scrape of boots on stone, the distant clang of dishes, the ripple of conversations.

But for the space of a lingering breath, there was nothing. As if the city around us had taken a sharp inhale and never exhaled.

Then it returned. Murmurs braided back into the night, a laugh echoed off an empty stone wall. But there had been a moment—a moment where Renere had forgotten to let itself exist.

\* \* \*

A figure passed, wrapped in a clerk’s coat, carrying a satchel. He paused by a lantern to adjust the clasp with fumbling fingers.

Bored, I followed the movement absently—right up until his fingers touched the clasp.

Then, more movement.

Prince Trenati.

His step was certain. Unhurried. Measured.

And yet—  
I felt him fade while watching him move.  
The streets did not resist him. They did not mark him passing through.  
Instead, I felt the world shifting itself beneath his weight, letting him un-make the proof of his own presence.  
Once he walked forward, it did not matter that he had walked before.  
I saw him glance towards a passing street vendor.  
The man nodded absently—a reflexive motion, the kind of movement you don't make toward something that has already been erased.  
He was still here. In some ways, at least.  
“We don't belong here, Reshi,” Bast murmured.  
I kept watching Trenati. “He does.”  
Bast laughed under his breath—not his usual laughter. A hollow thing. A space between breath.  
“For now,” he said softly. “‘Belonging’ is **a debt this place will come back to collect.**”  
Sim let out a quiet breath, shifting his weight. “Do people... come back?”  
Bast's fingers drummed against his trousers. The shrug he offered was empty. Unconvincing.  
Wil's fingers tightened around his notebook. “I don't like this,” he murmured, barely moving his lips. “We should reposition.”  
“Why?” Sim breathed.  
“Because we're too still,” he said, voice bare of emotion. “Three men, a single table, no movement. We don't look like vendors. We don't look like gamblers. We look like men who are watching something they're not supposed to see.”  
I exhaled.  
“Wait, no. Too late,” Wilem whispered sharply.  
I stiffened. Sim went rigid beside me.  
Wil wasn't looking at the Low-House anymore. He was looking past it—to the side street where a man had stopped mid-step, eyes locked directly onto us.  
A casual passerby wouldn't stop like that. Wouldn't hesitate. Wouldn't study us.  
Then—I saw the second man, leaning against a lamp post, pretending to smoke but plainly watching.  
The third, the store clerk, began to angle back towards us.  
The fourth—the street vendor.  
The weight of it settled fast. Too fast.  
“They're not just watching Trenati,” Sim whispered, barely breathing the words. “They're watching for people watching him.”  
And now... we were the ones being watched.  
Wil tensed beside me. “We move now.”  
We turned—but too late. The second man flicked his wrist twice, and the others reacted without hesitation.  
One moment, the alley was clear.  
The next, we weren't alone.  
The first man stepped in behind us, cutting off the exit. The doorman peeled away from his post by the Low-House and began crossing toward us, a purpose in his stride.  
We were surrounded.  
I measured our odds—not good. Not in this tight space. Not against four watchers who had been expecting trouble.

# CHAPTER 25

## RESHI

**T**HE FIRST MAN spoke before weapons could be drawn.

“Peace.”

The word sat poorly in his mouth, like an ill-forged coin pressed into the wrong hand. His voice was rough-sewn, shaped by stone roads and cold mornings—a voice that did not beg and did not barter.

The others shifted around him, hands resting too close to their weapons to be coincidence. Not an open threat. Not yet.

Wilem straightened ever so slightly beside me. Simmon curled his fingers in his sleeve. And Bast—Bast only sighed, as if mildly disappointed in how the evening had chosen to unfold.

I kept my voice measured. “And who,” I asked, “are you to claim peace?”

The leader exhaled through his nose—nearly an insult in any other setting. “Not me,” he said. “Regent Lugosi. He would like a word.”

Beside me, I felt Bast shift—not in surprise, not in protest. Just listening.

I tilted my head. “Strange,” I mused. “I would’ve thought the regent’s coin was better spent on quills and couriers rather than alleyway ghosts.”

That earned no reaction—typical of men used to dull insults. Instead, the leader barely moved his mouth as he murmured,

“A whisper from us—to the dockworkers, the taxmen, the city watch—and I suspect a certain red-haired mercenary would find Renere suddenly... inhospitable.”

A quiet, polite threat. A hand pressed against my ribs, just enough to measure my breath.

Renere could turn against me in an instant.

We could fight. There were four of them, and four of us—though Sim and Wil barely counted, it was not impossible. But Renere didn’t kill you with daggers. It starved you of coin, smothered you under permits and whispers. It made you invisible. I didn’t need to see Bast’s face to know he shared the same thought.

Fine.

I smiled thinly. “Then lead the way.”

\* \* \*

They led us only two streets over, which should have been a comfort. It wasn’t.

These streets had forgotten how to be part of the city at all.

The stones were old, damp with forgotten rain. The archway narrowed above us, pulling the street into a passage the sunlight had abandoned decades ago. A single thief's lamp flickered dimly from a rusted alcove.

The kind of place forgotten men made use of.

Then we reached him.

Lugosi did not wear finery. No gaudy rings. No velvet cloak pressing authority onto his frame. His coat was plain, though well-kept. His boots polished, but not new.

And yet—the space had already shaped itself around him.

“Regent Lugosi,” I greeted him with tight civility.

“Kvothe of Nowhere,” he countered with a faint, cordial bow. “Time is short, so I’ll be direct. Ariel speaks highly of you. If I’m to understand correctly, it was your doing—not the Jakis boy’s—that ensured her survival in Imre.”

I hesitated, choosing my words with care. “She is dear to me, but she’s stronger than most realize. Anything I did for her was slight—second-hand clothing and scraps of help. She took care of herself.”

A hint of a smile flickered on Lugosi’s lips. “That she accepted anything second-hand speaks volumes about trust,” he said, but the humor quickly faded from his voice. Though the one who returned... she’s not the Ariel I remember. Costly things, these lessons your university offers—not all paid with coin.”

His expression sharpened. The kind of gaze that weighed men against the stones beneath them.

“You shouldn’t have killed Lord Vatis,” he said at last.

There was no anger in the words. Just inevitability, like telling a man that rain had fallen.

I bristled. “He pushed the duel. He demanded satisfaction. I only gave it to him.”

Lugosi exhaled, slow. Not amusement. Not pity. Just recognition.

“No,” he corrected me. “You gave the court an excuse to shun you.”

“What if I say you’re wrong? What if I tell you I know for a fact that wound wasn’t fatal?” I pressed back.

Lugosi only shook his head.

“That doesn’t matter in Renere.” His voice was even. “Facts are fluid here.”

He was right. The duel had never been about justice. Or satisfaction. The court did not care for fairness. They needed a story. And I had gifted them one. A blooded Ruh, a wild thing that should have known its place.

“Then why summon me here?” I asked, more sharply than I intended.

Lugosi sighed—not out of frustration, but like a man who had predicted the weather long before the storm struck.

“I didn’t.”

He looked at me for a moment longer than was polite, as if weighing something heavier than words.

“I was once invited to whisper in Roderick’s ear,” he said quietly. “Now I count it lucky to speak into shadows.”

He glanced past me again, toward the place where the street no longer remembered its name.

“Until recently, I thought I knew how to pull the strings behind the curtain,” he said. “Now I suspect someone’s unweaving the curtain itself.”

His gaze flicked then—not toward me. Toward Sim.

Sim blinked. “Me?”



Lugosi inclined his head. "You bear a name worth listening to," he said simply. "Even if House Cautrine has seen better days."

Sim stiffened visibly. His fingers curling slightly at his sides.

"I'm no diplomat," he muttered, voice just a touch too tight.

"You were trained as one," Lugosi corrected mildly. "And now here you are, meddling in politics nonetheless."

There was a shift in Sim. A hesitation. Like something long buried had been uncovered too fast.

He breathed once like a man about to wade into cold water. "Fine," he murmured.

Then, straighter now: "Let's see if it still does."

Finally, Sim straightened, but it wasn't pride. Not entirely.

"Dad always thought the the family name could still mean something," Sim said. "I thought he was just clinging to mirrors."

He looked at Lugosi. "Let's find out who's right."

Lugosi measured his words now. "The situation is not so simple."

A pause. A shift. Then, given the weight of a quiet knife—

"Fascino moves against Roderick."

The words landed like a dry branch breaking underfoot.

"House Jakis follows that power. Other houses shift in turn," he continued.

Wilem exhaled slowly, swearing in Siaru.

"And Trenati?" Sim asked, taking the lead. Stepping into role he had always sought to avoid.

Lugosi's mouth pressed just slightly tighter. "He is ambitious."

"But?"

"But he is still his father's son. Sometimes youth has more passion than prudence."

Lugosi exhaled. "I've offered him advice. Covered his tracks. Bought him time to come back from the ledge. But mark my words—if Trenati fails, I won't be remembered as the man who counseled restraint. I'll be remembered as the one who lit the fire. That is how the court rewrites guilt."

A realization settled in me, slow as spilled wine soaking into cloth. If the coup failed—as most eventually did—Lugosi would hang for it, in reputation if not by rope.

Then Bast spoke.

His voice was quiet. Not soft, not whispering. Just... careful.

"Whispering Quarter's got threads tangled in that prince now."

We all turned.

Bast didn't look away from Lugosi. *"It's not pulling him out of the world, Reshi. It's pulling the world out of him."*

There was a beat of stillness. Like the air forgot how to move.

Sim's forehead creased. Wilem stirred. Lugosi said nothing, but I saw the way his jaw set—not shocked, but like a man hoping someone else wouldn't speak a truth he already feared.

Bast leaned forward, one hand loosely curled on his knee. *"You think you're protecting him, but soon there won't be a 'him' left to save."*

"I know," Lugosi said, now looking tired in a way that couldn't be mended by sleep. "But to go to Roderick directly would be to implicate myself. Persimon here... I don't think most know you're back. Your name isn't tangled in the bloody Ruh rumors, and you were raised clean of city shadows. Perhaps, if I make some delicate introductions to the right ears Persimon can at least put the Kings advisors on guard."

That caught Sim's attention.

Lugosi continued, “There is a certain Lord Veldren Alstair. He and your father studied together.”

“Alstair? He used to smell like ink and oranges,” Sim murmured, more to himself than us. “When I was a boy, he would send me letters. Looking back, I think he was afraid our official tutor was ommiting things. Is he still at court?”

“He is, and is still loyal to Roderick. Your connection to Alstair may carry weight—or nothing at all. But it’s better than silence I get. And persuasion tends to work best before the city begins to burn.” Lugosi folded his hands. “If you can get his ear, perhaps—just perhaps—he can see to it that Roderick hears the truth before both Trenti and Ariel are lost.”

“Auri,” I corrected, tightly. “Not Ariel.”

Lugosi merely regarded me — too polite to argue, too political to yield outright. But still, it landed.

He didn’t look away when he replied.

“Roderick is no saint. But the court he holds together is a graverled spiderweb. If he falls, it collapses—a dozen little tyrannies snapping at what’s left.”

I thought of her then—not Ariel, seated at a king’s right hand, face scrubbed clean and voice folded neat as linen.

Auri, who once named the stars like friends. Auri, who wore the Underthing like a second skin. Who taught me how to listen to silence. To speak without breaking something fragile.

I had shown her how to nod at the world without letting it devour her. That had been our secret.

Now she smiled in court with borrowed grace, her name stitched shut beneath silk.

She wasn’t a crown to win. Not a curse to break. Not a thing they could own.

She was—not mine, but not theirs. Never theirs.

I took in a breath. The shape of it forming in my mind.

“And what about *me*?” I asked, voice careful.

“Careful Reshi,” Bast murmured behind me, “You might not be the knife they wanted. Just the one lying close at hand.”

Lugosi’s smile was thin. “Things are dire. We can not afford to try just one thing at a time. If you have any favor left with the Maer, then go with speed to Severnth. Perhaps the Maer will come to our aid should the coup gain momentum.”

The words settled, measured and inevitable.

The Maer owed me once. I doubted he still did. Worse, Meluan might swallow the sight of me with a smile sharp enough to cost me the whole game.

It wasn’t help he offered. It was a blade lodged in the door. Thin enough to wedge the door. Sharp enough to gut me if pushed too hard.

I took it anyway. The Maer’s court was a knife edge. And I’d be treading it blind. But I’d tread it anyway because every day Ariel smiled beneath court silks, Auri vanished a little more. And I was already out of time.

\* \* \*

On our way back to the inn, we passed a place that didn’t so much beckon as lean—a bar stooped low against the street, its timbers warped and crooked as a drunkard’s grin. The

windows wore a fog of old smoke and older whispers, curling up to rest against the ceiling like lazy ghosts with no one left to haunt.

We stepped inside on the kind of whim that knows just when to tug at your coat. Bast halted mid-step, eyes catching on something in the corner. A vessel sat there: all glass and brass, shaped like a chimera's dream—tall and coiled, lit from within by slow-burning charcoal.

"What's that?" he asked, tilting his head like a crow watching a ring glint in the dust.

"A hookah," I said, which was no real answer at all. I explained it as I always do—half truth, half poetry—speaking of water and heat, coils of smoke and flame. By the end of it, Bast's grin stretched wide, the kind of grin a boy gets the first time he's handed a blade. He inhaled deeply, coughed spectacularly, then laughed so bright and quick the whole bar turned to stare.

"Mortals make the strangest things," he said once he caught his breath. "These were mentioned in the *Celum Tinture*, you know. A glass heart that breathes, gifted to men by a fae who thought them too glum."

It was then the men at the table across the room began to mutter, their voices low and sharp as flint. The biggest of them lumbered over, his eyes flicking between the hookah and Bast's unearthly beauty. "Pretty boy like you don't belong here," he growled, reaching out to shove him.

I stepped between them, my voice soft, precise, and edged like a whetted blade. "It might be best if you went back to your table," I said, looking him dead in the eye. He hesitated long enough for the others to lose their nerve and drag him away.

Later, when the quiet returned, Bast's golden eyes turned to mine. "Thank you, Reshi," he said, quiet but warm.

"And what does that mean, then?" I asked, the word curling like the smoke between us.

Bast's grin turned sly as a fox's. "It means the cleverest of clever. The perfect friend. The fucking boss."

I laughed—a true laugh, the first in what felt like days—and let the title settle onto my shoulders like a well-worn cloak.

## CHAPTER 26

### STORIES WE TELL OURSELVES

“**S**TAPLES.”

I didn’t raise my voice.

I didn’t need to.

It passed through the morning air with the weight of a name long withheld. The street was full of the usual market din—traders bellowing over bruised apples, boots striking stone, the rustle of pigeons claiming eaves—but my word threaded beneath it all. Thin as a blade, cold as a bell’s first ring in winter. A name spoken not louder than the noise, but truer.

He paused midstride. Just a half-step, but I saw the hesitation ripple down his spine. His hand hovered near his belt—not on a weapon, exactly, but in that old habitual way men do when bracing themselves. When they’re remembering somebody they hoped they wouldn’t.

He turned slowly. His eyes squinted through the alley’s hash of shadow and light, searching the shape of me like a man brushing dust off an old portrait he never meant to keep.

“By the Lady’s breath,” he muttered. Not amazement. Not relief. Just the tired weight of old surprise. “Kvothe.”

I stepped from the shadow and let the light find my face. My cloak hung deliberately loose, my hands bare at my sides.

“I wasn’t sure you’d still recognize me,” I said.

He didn’t approach. But his gaze sharpened—cautious, appraising. “I recognize ghosts well enough. The real question’s whether they leave footprints.”

“Only when the snow is fresh.”

That drew the shadow of a grim smile from him, but it didn’t reach his voice. He wasn’t aged so much as polished down—the trim grey at his brow, the quiet carving at the corners of his eyes. The same man, but worn smoother by politics and consequence.

“If Lady Meluan sees me on this street with you...” His tone was half-warning, half lament.

“She won’t,” I said. “We both know her reach may be long, but her interest is brief. This stays here. It ends in the dust like a forgotten coin. I don’t need much—just your time. Just this.”

I pulled back my cloak and extended my left hand. There, still smooth and ridged with pale-glow light, was the bone ring—the Maer’s ring—not worn for vanity but for memory. A promise I had never returned, though many had tried to unmake it.

His breath caught in his throat.

“You still wear it,” he said, voice low.

“Some names don’t wash off,” I said. “No matter how far you’ve wandered.”

He didn’t speak immediately. Just looked. First at the ring, then at me. “You shouldn’t have come,” he said after a long pause. “Not here. Not after what was said. After what came down in Severen.”

“I didn’t come to replay that,” I said. “I came to do the thing I failed to do last time. I came to warn him.”

That stopped him. Not from stepping backward, but from stepping forward.

He looked away, toward the rooftops, toward the fountain beyond, toward anywhere but me. Something behind his eyes moved like dust in a shaft of light.

“She’s still stoking the fire,” he said eventually. “Meluan. Years now. He stopped answering council summons. Kept to his quarters. She says your song enchanted him—said your charm played him for a fool.” He glanced at me. “And the court... They laughed. Not all of them. But enough.”

I said nothing.

“You left, and she pulled the rug from under him. The boy from the road with the wild stories? Turned liar. Turned betrayal. She convinced the old bloods they’d been duped by a stage magician. That he’d been made low by soft words and softer hands.”

“I’m not here to ask forgiveness,” I said. “I’ve brought something darker than regret.”

He narrowed his eyes.

“Then say it plain.”

I looked at him, letting the words form as slowly as they needed. “Old bloodlines waking up,” I said. “Songs written backward. Power hiding in stories. There are names trying to rewrite the world.”

For a long moment, the two of us stood unmoving. Like watchmen in a winter square.

Then at last, he reached beneath his coat and pulled out a small, unadorned pouch—it’s stitching worn, its drawstring neat. Reverent, not fashionable. From within, he drew a silver ring, its surface dulled with age and touch. Faint sigils still clung to it, though time had softened them toward memory.

“If I give you this,” he said quietly, “I lose something clean.” He turned it in his fingers. “But maybe that’s what’s needed... these days. Silver tarnishes, yes—but tarnish remembers the light.”

He pressed the ring into my palm.

“It’ll get you through the gate,” he said. “Don’t expect more than that. Name or no, you don’t belong in that court. Not anymore.”

“I’m not expecting warmth,” I said. “Just space to speak.”

He started patting his pockets. “I need to send a name with you. A note.” He squinted. “Damn—no pen.”

I was already slipping open my satchel. Quill. Ink. Paper. Laid out like old friends.

“You always traveled like a scribe,” he said under his breath.

“Scholars carry books,” I murmured. “I carry reasons.”

He wrote efficiently—his handwriting crisp, deliberate, like a man who knew the cost of misunderstanding. When he passed me the sealed note, his fingers lingered just a moment too long.

“I remember,” he said softly.

“What I did?” I asked, though I already knew.

He shook his head. “Who you were.”

“And for you, is that memory bitter?”

"It's memory," he said. "That's enough to get you past the guards. The rest... The rest is the weather."

He turned as if to leave, then paused, half-swallowed in the swirl of market haze.

"...He kept your ring too," Stapes said, without turning. "The Maer. Never spoke of it. Never wore it. But never melted it down, either."

I folded both rings into the lining of my coat, bone and silver resting side by side. One cold with quiet promise, the other warm with remembered service.

"That's more than I expected," I said after him.

He glanced back, just once. "You always expected too much," he said. "That was your trouble."

A beat passed.

"And your strength."

Then he was gone. Swallowed by the street. Like a story that had been told once, but whose ending no one remembered well enough to retell.

\* \* \*

The streets near the fountain had quieted, save for the gull-call of a greengrocer's cart being pulled home by dusk. I was weaving steadily through back alleys, half-convinced it was the faster way—though perhaps more truthfully, it kept me from running into Denna.

Still, I wasn't quick enough.

"Leaving without saying goodbye?"

Her words weren't loud, but they caught on the air like a plucked note from a half-harp—unexpected, tender, and tuned just so as to make silence feel cruel.

I froze. She was standing in the slivered shade near the old stone bench, loose strands of hair catching the last amber light. I hadn't seen her approach. I never did, not when it mattered.

"Denna," I said cautiously, my voice shaped more from guilt than greeting. "I wasn't—"

She stepped forward, her arms crossing. "You weren't what? Standing me up? Disappearing again? Slipping off like a badly penned epilogue?"

"I... didn't want to complicate things."

Her smile was thin, brittle at the edge. "Ah, so vanishing without a word is your way of simplifying life? Curious method, but I suppose for some it works."

"It's not like that," I said quickly, feeling the shape of the truth resist my tongue. "I have to go to Severen."

"Severen," she repeated thoughtfully, as if tasting the name, not questioning it. "I see."

Her eyes searched mine, far gentler than her words. "You know," she said after a pause, "it just so happens I've been summoned there myself."

That stopped me short. "You have?"

She nodded, a wrinkle of mischief—or perhaps misdirection—tugging at the corner of her mouth. "There's a noble in Severen—one of the old bloodlines. My patron suggested I research their sigils and histories. For the sake of authenticity, naturally. Apparently, the melancholy in my last sonnet needed... genealogical depth."

Her lips twitched, half-laugh, half-apology.

I tilted my head. "You're writing songs about family trees now?"

“Only the tragic branches,” she replied. “The ones struck by lightning. They make the best verses.”

“Does your patron often make such peculiar requests?”

She looked past me, toward the cobbled street fading into twilight. “He’s a patron,” she said softly. “They all have their peculiarities.” Then she turned her gaze back to me, steady now. “But I don’t mind indulging him. Not when it aligns with my curiosity.”

“And what is it you’re curious about, exactly?”

“Old names,” she said. “Things buried in stone. Lines inherited but never spoken aloud.” She stopped, watching my face carefully. “Some names don’t want to be remembered. Some songs only make sense in reverse.”

“I thought you traveled where wind and whims took you,” I said lightly, trying to change the current of the moment.

“I do,” she said. “And it seems the wind’s taking me to Severen.” She brushed her cloak tighter around her. “So unless you’re planning to turn me away, I’d say we have a shared direction.”

I hesitated. “You’re sure?” I asked. “This isn’t just following shadows again?”

“Hardly,” she said with a smirk. “This time, I’m chasing names.”

She said it as if it were truth—a commission, a patron, a sonnet’s whim, all drawing her north. A noble house, a family tree in need of verse. She said these things with a straight back and a mocking smile.

But I knew.

Not with certainty—not the way I know a chord that rings true or the feel of perfect pitch under my fingers. It was a deeper sort of knowing, the quiet kind you keep tucked behind your ribs.

She lied.

Not out of malice, or play. She lied because truth would have admitted too much. And I let her have the lie. I’d rather a beautiful fiction spoken for my sake than an awkward silence born of honesty.

So I smiled. I nodded. I accepted the story she offered, as if I believed it.

Because if chasing me was simpler when wrapped in a pretext, who was I to take it away?

That’s what we did, after all. We gave each other stories when truths were too sharp to hold. For once, we were not chasing each other in circles. We were walking the same path.

\* \* \*

The road’s dust clung to our clothes, thick along the hems of my cloak and the folds behind Denna’s knees where her mare held a smoother gait than mine ever had. Her horse—a dappled gray with Khershaen blood in its legs—moved like music. Mine plodded with the determined stubbornness of a dockworker, as if begrudging every mile.

We took more breaks than we needed. I told myself it was for the horses.

It was easier when we were moving.

At rest, we fell into conversation, the way we always had—half-lies dressed in cleverness, truths slipped sideways into banter. She spoke of patrons, half-remembered cities, salons where men discussed poetry badly and women practiced the art of leaving before

being left. Details blurred, as they always did, and I didn't press. She wouldn't press either, unless I spoke too clearly. That was our rhythm.

"So tell me," Denna said as we stood beneath a split-beamed tree, our horses chewing with shared disinterest, "why Severen? Really."

I hesitated. Too long. "It's... complicated."

"Oh, come now. You're terrible at avoiding questions. 'It's complicated' has all the shape of a lie and none of the poetry."

I pulled in a breath. "There's someone in trouble."

She blinked. "A lover?"

"No," I said, too quickly.

That earned me a smirk. "Said every guilty man ever."

"It's not like that. She's..." I saw Denna stiffing. This was all going wrong in the worst way.

"She's a friend. From the University, though..." I hesitated. "You might know her now as... Princess Ariel."

That earned a cocked eyebrow.

"And what did you know her as?"

I exhaled. "Auri. She used to live beneath stone and starlight. She belonged to the edges of things."

"And you think she's in danger?" Denna pressed.

"I know she's in danger. Five ways to Felling, they are trapping her." I said. This time I didn't flinch from the weight of the words. "She is someone who doesn't belong in the place she's found herself. The wrong name's been hung on her shoulders, and it's pressing her down."

Denna cocked her head. "Princesses hardly need rescuing."

"They do," I said quietly. "Sometimes most of all."

She blinked at that, then laughed—but it wasn't a cruel sound, just brittle around the edge.

"You make it sound like a tragedy wrapped in lace."

"Don't all tragedies wear something beautiful?"

She narrowed her eyes slightly, then looked out over the ridgeline, where the pine-dark world fell off into distance. "You speak like turning someone into a lady is a kind of violence."

"For a girl who lived by moonlight and music and the taste of honeyed air?" I said, softer than I meant. "Yes. Now every moment she wears a mask."

Denna lowered her gaze for a moment, brushing a bit of dried bark from her cloak. "Some of us learn to live behind masks," she said softly.

"You forget, Kvothe," she continued, "lace is armor just as much as steel. You think it's cruelty, but for some, it's safety. It's a roof, a bed, hot meals."

She let out a breath. "It's more than I had, once."

"I know," I said. And I did. But I also knew that Auri—Ariel—would not survive long among the careful knives. A cage made of music still hums with bars.

A quiet stretched between us, coiling slow and strange. After a long moment, Denna glanced sidelong at me, trying for a smile.

"Well," she said, her voice like a woman changing the song before you heard its final verse. "I suppose if you're off to be a gallant rescuer, I'll be a dutiful scholar. My patron's request can't wait forever."

I looked at her, uncertain. "You said you were researching the sigils of old bloodlines?"



She nodded, too quickly. “The tragic ones. Family trees pruned by sharp things. Dead sisters. Lost sons. It’s a poem, I think.”

“Of course,” I said. “All the noblest lies are.”

“Funny thing,” she said. “I was meant to head this way weeks ago. But—I waited. For weather. For words. Hard to say, really.”

She didn’t look at me when she said it. And I was grateful.

If she had, I might have said something foolish. Something tender. Something true.

And neither of us were ready for that.

# CHAPTER 27

## OLD ACQUAINTANCES

**T**HE GATES OF Severen opened slowly.

Inside, the city wasn't loud, yet it rang with unrest: soldiers shuffled outside taverns, wagons groaned heavy along cobbled routes, and paper proclamations rippled from doorposts like the skin of dead trees.

After stabling the horses, Denna and I parted ways, intent on meeting up again later that evening. Having been through this particular song and dance before, I expected the process of reaching the Maer to be a lengthy one, but within minutes of displaying Stapes's letter, Dagon himself appeared, the head of Alveron's personal guard promptly ushering me through to the Maer's private chambers, where inside I found Alveron, sitting alone at his desk, documents, scrolls, and Stapes's letter sprawled across its surface. The flames from the hearth bathed the room in an orange glow, the man I'd come to see regarding me, with lambent, calculating eyes.

"Ah, Kvothe, do come in," Alveron said, still hale and healthy, I noted.

"Your grace," I said, bowing low and formal. "You seem well."

"I am," he replied tersely. "I must say your presence is most unexpected. Shouldn't you be in Imre, drawing on that extortionate tuition they demand of me." He said icily, before picking up one of the many pieces of parchment from atop his desk, "I'm to understand Stapes gave you this letter, though it fails to say as to why."

"That is true, your grace. I come bearing troubling news that warrants your immediate attention," I replied.

"Is Meluan safe?" Alveron said, springing halfway out of his seat. More concern in his voice than I'd ever heard from him before.

"She is your grace, though given what I have to tell you, you may wish to take action," I said.

He seemed to relax a little, settling back in his chair. "This news, it must be serious indeed to bring you all the way here. Speak plainly, though do so quickly. The hour grows late, and I have pressing matters of my own to attend to."

"I have come across news of an expected coup in Renere, involving regent Fascino, your grace."

"Have you now? Interesting," was all he said, his expression inscrutable. "How did you come by this information?"

"Regent Lugosi."

"Ah." He leaned back, rubbing his hands together before the fire. "So, one regent sniping at another."

"Forgive me for saying so, your grace, but you don't seem as concerned as I had imagined you might."

"Any unrest along my borders concerns me." He corrected, "What of Roderick in this? Does he know?"

"I have advised him as such, your grace, though I fear he doesn't take the threat seriously."

He smiled, "Well then, I'm sure there is nothing to be concerned with."

"Will you not come to his aid? Help to reinforce the capital?"

I knew at once I'd overplayed my hand.

"And why would I do such a thing?" he said, tone brimming with disapproval. "I didn't see Roderick ride out when bandits assailed the King's road or for any of the disturbances in the north. The bastard demands his tithes and then comes crawling to me when he can not secure his own lands. For what possible reason would I risk coming to his aid?"

I took a moment to muster all my powers of persuasion. "Your grace, if Roderick is unseated, it will throw the region into turmoil. Any agitation could very well spill over into your own lands." Another thought came to me. "Also, should the worst arise, and you are the one who rides to his aid, Roderick would be very much in your debt."

Looking into the fire, his features fixed in contemplation, Alveron appeared to ponder this a moment. "You were wise to bring this to me, Kvothe," he said, seeming to come to a decision. "I will consider what you have said. I am due in the capital for his daughter's wedding in the coming days. Perhaps I shall expand my retinue accordingly," Alveron added, eying me shrewdly.

Sensing that there was nothing more to say on the matter, I bowed, making it to the door before he called me back.

"Wait. Keep this matter between us for the time being until I've had sufficient time to investigate the validity of these claims. Stories such as this carry the potential to cause considerable unrest if not handled appropriately, wouldn't you agree?"

I nodded. "As you wish, your grace."

\* \* \*

Outside the Maer's chambers, I found Dagon waiting, his one good eye turning on me as I shut the door. He gestured the way ahead.

We were not far from the outer doors to the Maer's chambers when I noticed something out of place, a change from when I'd been here last. Hung upon the wall between two windows was a painting taller than a man. Clearly, the work of a master craftsman depicting a woman not much older than thirty with strikingly familiar features.

"The Lady Meluan's mother," Dagon replied, distracted, already two steps ahead. "Anastasia Lackless. It was added when her ladyship moved in."

Her name barely reached me. I was staring at the hollow place behind my ribs.

It wasn't just resemblance. It was recognition. The curve of her cheek, proud and sharp as song. The angle of her jaw, the rare clarity of her gray-green eyes, just as they'd gleamed above an old lute once on a summer afternoon. Those were my mother's eyes.

No. Not my mother's.

Natalia Lackless.

The old rhyme fluttered through me unbidden.

“Seven things stand before the entrance to the Lackless door...”

I had learned it in jest, recited as a child in whispers, back when I still thought stories were nothing more than clever lies we gave to truth to make it go down easier.

I remembered her voice telling me tales by firelight. Her laughter at my first attempts to play the lute. Her silence whenever I asked about grandparents, or cousins, or names older than hers.

She had kept it from me. The truth. The name. The legacy.

In that moment, I understood why a song can hurt more than a sword.

I had starved in Tarbean. Slept in alleys like a kicked dog, foraging words like scraps from the mouths of richer men.

And across the map, behind silk curtains and carved stone, a family I never knew had buried me with their silence. A sister denied. A child erased.

I felt my vision narrow. Not with fury, exactly. Not yet. But something sharper. Something more precise than anger: wonder turned bitter in the mouth.

If they knew... what would they do with me?

Would the Maer send for a knife in the night, not to silence a threat but to erase a shame? Would Meluan look at me and see her own sister's sin dragged through the mud, strung up in street colors and Ruh silk?

I touched the bone ring at my finger. White. Promise-bound. Unbroken.

In a different world, it might have been a signet. In this one, it was a gravestone.

Behind me, Dagon cleared his throat. “Don’t make me drag you out.”

But I stayed another blink longer, just long enough to whisper the name, “Lackless,” before turning away.

“Tell me, why do you serve the Maer?” I asked him as we walked.

“His grace is a man of prominence,” he replied without hesitation.

“And yet, for all we do for him, he still looks down on us. We are just tools for them to use and discard,” I said bitterly.

He shrugged. “We each have our roles to play. This is mine. When the Maer offers the carrot and it fails, I’m the stick.”

I stopped in my tracks, unable to suppress the laughter bubbling up inside me. My conversation with the Cthaeh played in my head. I could see Dagon’s irritation reaching a tipping point, the stoic commander reaching for the wooden cudgel at his waist. But before he could pull it free, I held up my palms in an appeal for calm.

“Tell me, Dagon... how is the road to Tinue these days?”

He stopped-so-slightly. Not the sort of halt you’d notice if you weren’t watching. But I was. His boots lost a breath’s rhythm. His good eye shifted toward me, unreadable.

He said nothing for a long moment. Then, evenly:

“Long for those who walk the path, and know the way,” he replied, quoting exactly the phrase I’d pulled out from behind the Four-Plate Door.

I turned toward him, letting silence draw out like a string pulled taut.

Then, he added: “Heard that in a play, once.”

“So did I,” I said, my voice too calm, too quiet. “A very old one. Never staged anymore.”

Dagon turned a corner, gesturing for a pair of minor guards to keep their distance. Then he looked at me properly for the first time, sharply.

“Who taught you that line?” he asked.

“I read it,” I said, watching his eyes. “In a book no one admits exists.”

"A dangerous pastime," he muttered. "Pages are more patient than people. They don't know when to keep things buried."

"I've buried things," I said. "Some that still bleed."

He considered that in silence. We passed a tall window and I caught his profile in the colored light—stern and uncertain, like a war-scar that never fully healed.

"If this is a test," he said at last, "you're pressing thin ice. The kind of thin that cuts."

"I'm not testing you," I said. "I just want to know if the echoes I've found belong to anything... real."

Slowly, he nodded once. "Then give me the next line—see what's worth echoing."

I let the breath hitch in my throat, but I answered.

"And those who do?"

He made a noise like a laugh, but it wasn't humor. "They do not often return by the same way."

Silence stretched between us like a drawn bowstring.

I risked more.

"But for those who walk the path," I said, "and know the way—"

He stopped.

Not blocked the corridor. Not turned.

He merely stopped.

Weight shifted in his shoulders. Breath drawn. The kind of stillness that soldiers learn before drawing steel.

His fingers brushed his cudgel. Not in threat. In readying.

"No more riddles," he said. "Say what you mean, or say nothing."

I swallowed. My heart ticked like a counting clock against my ribs.

Then one more gamble.

"For the greater good," I said.

No flourish. No reverence. I let the words fall like coin on a table.

His eyes searched mine, for what, I don't know.

Then he echoed it, equally flat, equally exact.

"For the greater good."

A silence followed—thin as spun glass.

Then, in a tone halfway between curiosity and caution: "That line was burnt from doctrine nearly two centuries ago. You'd lose a tongue for half of it."

"I didn't take an oath," I said, "but the cost?" I tapped the bone ring on my finger without a word. "Paid in full."

Another beat of silence.

Then, at last, Dagon looked past me—to stone arches and closed doors—and stepped half into shadow.

"There's a town," he murmured. "Obscure. Cold. Frozen out of memory by newer roads. Leveritis."

The name rang faint, like a page half-torn from a childhood atlas.

"A tavern," he continued. "The Weeping Eye. Don't ask after shelter. Don't flash coin. Just order finger tea. Then ask for Claude. That's all."

My mouth was suddenly dry. "And who—?"

"No more," he snapped, quickly. "I've already said too much. If I'm wrong about you, I'll end up with a knife in the gut and my life rewritten in a footnote." He adjusted his gloves.

Then, as if nothing had passed between us at all, he added brightly, too brightly:

"Of course, it's just a line from a bad play."

I met his eye. "Of course."

We resumed our walk, both of us quieter than before.

Stories, you see, live in whispers. But some whispers are wearing armor.

\* \* \*

"How did it go?" Denna asked, casually waiting for me beyond the main gates of the Maer's estate. "I'm guessing from your expression not well."

"Alveron's not going to offer any aid to Roderick," I said.

Though he hadn't stated as much directly, I had spent enough time in the man's company to get a sense of his character, and my instincts told me he had no intention of helping.

"Ah, what now then, do we ride back to Renere?"

"Not yet," I said, turning back to stare at Alveron's residence. "I need to go north, but before that there's one more thing I need to do here."

\* \* \*

The Maer's estate unfurled beneath the moon like a slumbering animal—still in form, tense in essence. Gauze-veil clouds crept across the sky, shrouding the upper towers in soft motion. From my perch atop a merchant's sloped roof across the gardens, I watched its patrols pulse like blood beneath stitched-together light. Heavy lines of lanterns drew golden hemstitches across parapets, too precise for decoration. These were watchers' paths.

It looked different than I remembered. Not simply fortified—alert. Awake in the way animals are when sensing weather before men can spot it.

I had told Alveron the truth. Or just enough of it not to trip the wire.

But the trouble with truth is that it's rarely whole. And the things that matter—truly matter—they don't live in letters read aloud in the glow of a hearth. They live behind silences. In the things a man won't say, not even to himself.

I couldn't walk back in and ask the Maer to unhook a portrait and show me what lay behind it. I couldn't afford to admit I'd come not just with nation-saving tidings, but for something far smaller, and older, and unforgivably personal.

There are things men will never show you. Not even when they shake your hand. Not even when they pretend to forgive. Not even over wine.

So I planned my own kind of courtesy. Not the kind that knocks at the front door, but the kind that climbs ivy and travels quiet beneath windows. The kind you're never meant to see.

I tapped the slate beside me gently: once, twice. A signal. Faint but deliberate.

At the treeline below, Denna shifted—just enough for her shadow to shift back. She wouldn't interfere unless something went wrong. I didn't say as much when I asked her to wait, but she knew. Denna always knew the things I didn't want to spell aloud.

I adjusted my shawl, kissed my fingertips, and began to descend.

The outer wall curved treacherously, an old Selic trick meant to befoul ladders. But I didn't bring a ladder. What I had was a memory's worth of footholds indenting the stone and fingers calloused by harp strings and harder things.

At the foot of the wall, I crouched beside an old ivy root curled like a dried serpent along the foundation. My hand moved to the right, parting brush. The blue thread I'd left hours earlier remained untouched—taut and silent. That was good. It meant no patrol had disturbed this stretch since moonrise.

I steadied myself and climbed.

The climb was slower than last time. Rain had come less than a day ago, leaving moss slick and fragrant. I nearly lost my grip on a loose stone halfway up and only caught myself by digging my fingertips into a fault-line knot—I bit back a yelp as an old splinter buried itself beneath a nail.

I reached the ledge with my pulse stamping sharp in my ears.

Then I saw it.

A glyph. Freshly scored into the underside of the eastward parapet.

It pulsed faintly, like amber watching from ash—no glow to betray it from afar, but up close, the edge shimmered like breathing glass. A ward. Crude, but active. Likely tied to alerting a nearby scrying node or sympathist bell.

I cursed silently.

I reached into my travel satchel and pulled out a tight-wrapped twist of copper ribbon and a cloth pouch of cider ash. I breathed with tempo—slow, steady, trained in corners of the University too dangerous to name aloud. These weren't tools; they were promises. I whispered a shape to the ash, not a name—but the hint of one, folded along a single syllable meant to cool the listening wind around the trigger.

The shimmer in the glyph slowed. Then stopped.

I didn't move. Not immediately. These things needed to believe you were gone before they looked away.

Several heartbeats later, I stepped gently past it. It didn't stir.

I let out a breath and slid beneath the wall's lip.

Below me, the courtyard opened like a tongue beneath twin rows of teeth—guards idling in routine circuits that looked looser than they were. They moved with feigned ease, laughing softly at stories sharpened for company, but their eyes swept too often to be bored.

Plan A had been the servant's chute off the west kitchen—unused since before the Maer's gout took his preference for boiled eggs—but that path had been newly sealed and bricked over. Plan B was the garden arch near the reflecting pool. Plan C?

I didn't like thinking in letters beyond B.

I waited for the guard rounds to stagger, dropped to the sculpted trellis with the weight of a breath, and slipped toward the servant's sub-wing.

Almost.

A glimmer caught my eye.

Another glyph—this one layered beneath a peeling section of paint near the molding.

Sloppier than the last.

But as I ducked beneath it, a gust of wind caught the trailing corner of my shaed and fluttered the edges against the molding.

A flash.

Damn.

I threw myself flat, heart ramming my ribs like a stuck cartwheel. A split-second delay, then—chime. Light, brittle, and not far off. A bell signal. Silent to most. Not to whom it mattered.

They would search this wing. Maybe not immediately. But soon.

No more delays.

I ducked into the first alcove I could find, nearly tripping over a crate of polished pewter. The room was narrow and unlit, lined with piles of linen. I pulled a cloth over myself, crouched behind a wardrobe, and forced my breathing down to a whisper.

Footsteps. Just one pair at first. Then another.

From the sounds, they weren't on high alert—but someone would check. I had minutes. Three, if they checked systematically. Five if miracles liked me today.

I moved. Fast, quiet. No longer a drifting shadow—I was a thread drawn taut.

The servant hallway smelled of soaproot and tallow—heavier than I remembered. Someone had cleaned thoroughly. I kept to shadows I knew by name, dodging brushing threads meant to track presence.

The passage behind the grapevine carving gave easier than I expected—either luck or disrepair. I stepped into the memory of the Maer's chambers.

It had changed. Not by much. Just enough to feel... brittle. As though someone had moved objects to make them appear exactly where they once were.

Not comfort. Control.

There was no time to marvel. I ignored the Maer's collection of jewel-inlaid cases, the bone-inlaid music box simpering in the corner, and the combs made of ivory teeth. I moved straight to the portrait: Anastasia.

Not just my blood. A gatekeeper.

Carefully, I tilted it aside.

What I expected: an alcove.

What I didn't: a copper filament unwinding from inside the panel, now pulsing red.

Voice catching in my throat, I reached in and twisted it taut, murmuring a soft binding—tempting the filament to close the loop instead of completing it. My fingers shook. The pressure on the syl bindings across my chest twitched—if I failed, I would glow like a bonfire to the eyes that listened through copper eyes and silver domes.

It held.

Barely.

I coaxed the panel open and found the box.

Yilish script curled along its edge like laughter caught mid-song.

I didn't pause.

Didn't wonder.

Didn't hope.

I stole it.

\* \* \*

Dawn brushed the horizon as Denna and I rode north. The box rested in my pack, its presence a quiet itch I couldn't ignore.

"Denna," I said, breaking the rhythm of hoofbeats. I pulled out the box and handed it to her, watching as curiosity lit her face.

"Oh, this is lovely," she murmured, fingers brushing its carved surface. "Ruah, perhaps?"

"Maybe. But I'm hoping you'll tell me what *you* make of it."

She hefted it in one hand, giving it a cautious shake. A soft sound stirred inside, a clink that made her brow furrow. "There's something inside. Stone, perhaps? And... oh, these are



Yilish knots.” She ran her fingers over the carvings, her expression sharpening.

“Kist and crayle!” I said, barely stopping my horse from bolting at my outburst. “I thought so too. I’ve been studying it all night, but the meaning escapes me.”

Denna’s touch lingered on the box. “It’s old, expertly made. I’ve never seen anything this intricate.” She frowned slightly, as though something about it unsettled her. “Where did you get it?”

“An aunt,” I said, avoiding her gaze.

“Keep your secrets, then,” she teased with a small smile, though her attention quickly returned to the box.

I gave her a moment, the silence stretching until I couldn’t bear it. “Well?”

“Well what?” she replied, looking up with deliberate innocence.

“What does it say?”

She smirked. “Words. Riddles. But deciphering them will take time—and not while riding a horse.”

“Fair enough,” I murmured, hesitating as she glanced at me.

“May I hold onto it?” she asked.

I swallowed the instinct to refuse. If not Denna, then who? “Just make sure you return it.”

“When have I ever not?” she said with a smile too bright to trust fully.

I forced a smile of my own, though we both pretended not to notice the sting of the lie hanging between us.

# CHAPTER 28

## FOR THE GREATER GOOD

LEVENTIS WASN'T MUCH to look at, a gathering of crooked rooftops and muddy streets where the Four Corners tangled in trade. Nothing about it demanded notice. Yet such unremarkable places often held remarkable secrets.

Denna fell into step beside me as we approached the center of town, her dappled mare trailing lazily behind her. The breeze toyed with the ribbon in her hair, its bright red band a rare bit of color against the town's dreary dust.

"So, what's the plan?" she asked, her tone light but curious. "I'm guessing you're not here for a quiet pint and an early bed."

I hesitated before answering, knowing what I had to say and dreading the fallout regardless. "I need to go in alone."

Denna raised an eyebrow—the one she always used when she found me particularly amusing. "I'm sorry, did I not get the memo about this being your quest and your town?"

"It's not that," I said, careful to keep my tone gentle. "This isn't about trust. There are... certain things I haven't told you."

Her face softened, amusement exchanged for something far sharper. "Certain things," she repeated, with just enough weight to pin me in place.

"Yes." I forced myself to keep walking, each step feeling more unnatural than the last. "If what I hope is inside *is* there, it might..." I trailed off, searching for the right way to say it—or at least something that wouldn't sound like a coward's evasion. "It might be dangerous for you."

She reached out, catching my arm and stopping me in the middle of the path. Her eyes locked mine. "Kvothe, I'm a big girl. I've taken care of myself far longer than you've known me."

"I know," I said quickly. Too quickly. "I know that. But if something goes wrong in there..." I gestured vaguely to the squat, sagging tavern at the edge of the square. "These people don't take kindly to outsiders, especially ones who ask questions. If it's just me, I won't hesitate. I can handle it."

Her grip on my arm loosened, though she didn't let go entirely. "You're terrible at lying, you know."

I gave her the wryest smile I could muster. "Good thing I'm not lying."

She let me go, crossing her arms. "Fine. But I'm not waiting all day, and I'm not pulling your body out of a ditch if this blows up in your face. Don't take too long, Kvothe."

I nodded and turned toward the tavern. Her shadow stayed burned into my mind as I went, each step feeling heavier the closer I got.

The Weeping Eye was almost empty, though it felt far from welcoming. Dust danced in the single shaft of light from the warped window, the air thick with damp and disuse. A few patrons lingered in the dimness, their murmured conversations fading as I pushed the door closed behind me.

The bartender glanced at me without interest, like someone mildly annoyed by the arrival of a late delivery. I walked up to the counter, watching the way the floorboards sagged under weight that hadn't changed in years.

"Finger tea," I said.

The bartender grunted, reached for a cup, and began pouring with all the care he might lend to washing his hands.

The silence stretched long enough for me to feel the eyes on my back. Every man in the room had stopped talking. My skin prickled with the awareness of their gaze, though I refused to turn. Instead, I pushed the mug away as it was set down and leaned closer to the barkeep.

"I'm looking for Claude," I said softly.

The mug stopped halfway across the bar. The bartender's hand froze, but his expression didn't change. Without a word, he glanced over my shoulder.

I caught the sound of footsteps, the faint scrape of a chair leg. Someone walked to the door and dropped something heavy—a wooden bar sliding into place with a deliberate thud.

The room was suddenly colder. My fingertips brushed Caesura at my side, the leather scabbard rough beneath my palm. Before I could decide the next move, an unfamiliar voice broke the quiet.

"I'd leave that sword be if I were you."

The man who spoke sat alone. His hair was white, thin enough to let hints of pale scalp shine through, and his weathered face seemed carved from an old oak. Despite his age, his presence was cutting—a quiet, deliberate authority that made the room feel smaller. A slim dagger of Ramston steel rested in a plain sheath at his side.

"You wanted Claude," he continued. "Here I am. Sit."

I hesitated, my eyes brushing the room. Men lingered at the edges, their hands resting on cudgels and knives but not moving. It wasn't a room of drunks or brawlers. It was something colder. Sharper.

Slowly, I approached the table and lowered myself into the seat opposite him.

"So," he said, his blue eyes fixed on me like chips of frost. "Who sent you?"

"Dagon."

Claude didn't flinch. Didn't so much as raise a brow. "Dagon," he drawled. "If that's true, he gave you no proper sign. No name we'd know. That leaves me curious—why would he send a boy like you here unmarked?"

"I told him I had questions," I said evenly. "He said you had answers."

A faint chuckle escaped Claude, dry as dead leaves. "The Amyr aren't in the habit of answering to outsiders." He leaned back in his chair, fingers tapping lightly on the tabletop. "But tell me, what's your question, boy?"

I didn't hesitate. The moment was too precious—and too precarious. "How do I find the Chandrian?"

The air didn't just grow still. It turned sharp. Dangerous. The kind of silence that could cut.

Claude's expression cooled instantly. "You will not speak their names here," he said, his voice low and deliberate. "Do so, and you'll be dead before the word leaves your lips."

I nodded. "Why do you seek them?" he asked, and though the question was soft, it carried the weight of stone.

"To kill them," I said plainly.

He leaned back slightly, his expression unreadable. "Many have tried. None have succeeded, not truly. What makes you think you'll be different?"

I swallowed, my voice firm despite the weight of his scrutiny. "The will to see it through. No matter the cost."

His lips twisted into something like a frown, but heavier, carved from something older. "Then you know their names," he said. "And if that's true, you don't need me or mine. Names are a summons. Speak them in the wrong shadow, boy, and they'll find *you* before you can so much as draw that pretty sword."

I let out a slow breath. His words carried an awful kind of truth, jagged-edged and cold.

"You mentioned others have tried," I said, pressing on. "What happened?"

"They killed them," Claude said simply. "And still they returned. Fire and ruin, vengeance and retribution. Again and again, the stories end the same. You cannot kill the wind, boy. You cannot drown the sea."

His words simmered in my mind. I leaned forward slightly. "And the Amyr? What is your role in all of this? What do *you* do, sitting in shadow?"

Claude didn't blink. "We thwart their plans where we can. We bury their names and silence their stories. We make the world forget."

"For the greater good."

"For the greater good," he echoed hollowly, and his weariness showed for the first time. "But if you think we will stand at your back with swords drawn, you are mistaken. We are not what we once were, boy. We are fewer now, scattered and hunted. And even then, we do not fight wars for kings or men."

I felt my temper flare, but I kept it leashed. I straightened slightly. "What about Renere? There is a coup coming. I've seen the pieces moving. Without intervention, the capital will fall."

Claude studied me for a long moment. "The Amyr do not meddle in the affairs of state unless the Seven are tied to them. We will not spill blood for thrones and crowns."

"Even when kingdoms slip into chaos?" I shot back.

"Even then," he said, unmoving.

The fire in me dwindled, turning cold with bitterness. I stood, and as I turned to leave, Claude's voice stopped me.

"Let me give you advice, boy. The weight of the world will crush you if you think to carry it alone."

\* \* \*

Denna was waiting just where I left her. "Stoic, angry, and frustrated," she teased as I approached. "I'd recognize that expression anywhere. Didn't go well, did it?"

"No," I admitted.

Instead of pressing me further, she fell into step at my side, her silence a rare but comforting presence.

If the Amyr wouldn't act, *I would*.

# CHAPTER 29

## LOCKLESS

THE ROAD SOUTH TO Renere stretched long and winding, dust rising in thin plumes behind our horses as we rode in silence. Denna was focused on the Lockless box, her lips forming occasional fragments of words as her fingers traced its carvings. Meanwhile, my mind churned with its own puzzle.

The Amyr. For years, I had pinned my hopes on them, imagining them as avenging shadows—scholars and warriors who might stand alongside me, who might help me unravel the mystery of my family’s deaths. Instead, I’d found a hollow echo of legend, an order content to endure rather than act, to hide rather than strike. If the Chandrian were to be confronted, it would fall to me alone.

Lost in thought, I barely registered Denna’s sudden cry.

“I’ve got it!” she exclaimed, her voice cutting through the quiet like a plucked string.

Startled, I nearly slipped from my saddle. “The box?” I asked, already dismounting to join her.

“I think I’ve deciphered part of it,” she said, her eyes bright. We tethered the horses beneath a tree, and Denna sat cross-legged on the grass, the box balanced delicately in her lap.

“Look here,” she began, pointing at the top left corner of the lid. Her fingers brushed the carved patterns. “This section references dual ownership. And this,” she added, gesturing to another part, “mentions a key—though it’s strange. Something about ‘lasting male essence.’”

“Male essence?” I repeated, raising an eyebrow.

“I said it was strange,” she replied, laughing softly. Then her expression turned thoughtful, her voice quiet as she continued. “Here, several words are unclear. I keep circling between ‘cage’ and ‘coop,’ but the last part feels certain: ‘By their blood, the ring remains closed.’”

“The ring?” I asked.

She nodded, frowning. “Exactly. I was hoping you’d know what it means, but...”

“What about this part?” I asked, gesturing toward more flowing patterns etched near the base.

Denna hesitated, then took my hand, guiding my fingers over the carvings as if sharing the weight of their meaning. “‘Never free,’” she murmured. “‘For only the something of death lies beyond.’”

The words hung in the quiet air between us. Neither of us spoke for a moment, the wind stirring the leaves above.

“Well, that sounds cheerful,” I said, forcing a smile.

Denna's lips quirked, but the worry in her eyes lingered. "That's all I can make of it for now," she said, setting the box gently on the ground. "My grandmother was the real expert at this sort of thing. If she were still alive—" She stopped short, glancing away.

"You've done more than enough," I said gently, resting a hand on her shoulder. "Most people wouldn't have gotten this far."

"You flatter me too much," Denna said, meeting my eyes for a moment before laughing again, lighter this time. "Where in the Four Corners did you ever get 'Dance' from? That wasn't even close."

"What do you think it means?" I asked as we stood to untether the horses.

Denna paused, her expression suddenly serious. "Honestly? I'm not sure I want to find out what's inside."

\* \* \*

As twilight fell, the sun's last light painted the horizon in fire and ash. Denna and I stopped to make camp by a pond off the main road, where a toppled greystone jutted into the water's edge like the finger of some forgotten monument.

We unpacked with deliberate leisure, setting out provisions we had saved for this sort of lingering dusk. Thick bread, baked potatoes still warm from coals, figs plucked fresh along the road, and butter thick enough to be considered cheese. It was a feast by any simple measure, but I had one more surprise left.

"I've been saving this for just the right occasion," I said, drawing a bottle of strawberry wine from my travel sack.

Denna burst into laughter, falling back onto the grass. "You've been hauling that all this time?" she said, wiping a tear from her eye.

"What's wrong with strawberry wine?" I asked, my voice mock-offended.

"Nothing," she replied, grinning broadly. "It's just funny you should say that." She reached into her satchel, producing her own surprise: a bottle of amber mead.

I took it from her hands, turning it over to examine the elegant label. "Metheglin!" I exclaimed. "The mead of kings. Well, if this isn't the finest coincidence."

Denna smiled, a flush warming her cheeks. "I picked it up in Anilin. I almost brought it out back in Renere, but I figured you needed all your wits about you for the duel."

"You, Denna," I said, offering her a dramatic bow, "are truly extraordinary."

"And you," she replied, raising her bottle, "are too easily impressed."

The mead had a golden warmth that spread through my chest in increments, smoothing the sharper edges of my thoughts. As the stars emerged above us, we began to talk—easily at first, then deeper as time softened our words.

\* \* \*

"The Vesumbri Islands," I said, my voice lilting slightly with drink. "I heard stories about a volcano god they still worship. I've always wanted to see them."

“Exotic,” Denna teased, swirling the last of her mead in its bottle. “I’ve yet to make it out that far myself. Unfinished business keeps me close these days.”

Her tone shifted on those last words, her gaze turning downward. I watched her silently, unsure of whether to break the stillness.

Finally, she spoke again, softer now. “That remedy you gave me helped for a time, but my breathing—it’s worse again. It hurts more than it used to.”

“Denna,” I began, the weight of her words stealing the air from my chest.

“I saw a physician in Atur,” she cut in. “University-trained. He called it phthisis. Chronic scarring of the lungs. He said, eventually...” Her voice faltered. “Eventually...”

“No,” I said firmly, sitting forward. “Come back to the University with me. Master Arwyl—he’s the finest healer alive. If anyone can help you...”

“Kvothe,” Denna said, placing her hand on my cheek. “It’s kind of you, but—”

“No,” I interrupted. “I don’t care about your patron. Forget him. Come with me. Please.”

Her lips parted, searching for something unsaid. Then, at last, she nodded softly. “For you, Kvothe. I will.”

\* \* \*

The night deepened, pressing us together in its quiet. Lying on the grass, Denna gazed into the stars above, her voice faint as a whisper. “I thought you’d kiss me that night in Roent’s caravan,” she said.

“Would you have wanted me to?” I asked, my voice unexpectedly nervous.

Denna tilted her head toward me, her meaning clear before she even spoke. “Why not try and find out?”

I leaned closer, closing the space between us. When our lips met, the world fell away. It was not Felurian’s careful art, nor some practiced kiss of technique. It was something messier, simpler, and far more honest. Denna.

I won’t share more than that. The rest is mine alone.

Afterward, we laid together beneath the sky. Naked, perfect, at least to me. Catching me staring as I caught my breath, she smiled at me mischievously.

“What’s so funny?” I asked, prodding her gently with a finger.

Denna rolled away, giggling, “You reminded me of a story I heard once. The Dulator.”

“Can’t say I’m familiar with that one,” I said.

“Ah, the Stealer of Hearts. I’ll tell it to you sometime,” she said, poking me back. “My Dulator,” Denna said, her eyes glistening.

“I’ve been called worse,” I said, planting a kiss upon her lips.

“Hold me. Keep me warm, my beautiful thief.”

And I did.



## CHAPTER 30

### SWIRLS IN THE WATER

THE NIGHT STRETCHED on, calm and quiet but for the faint rustling of leaves and the occasional chirp of crickets. I sat by the dying embers of our fire, unable to sleep. Denna lay nearby, her head resting on her bundled cloak, the soft rise and fall of her breathing a rare, peaceful rhythm. My cloak had slipped across her shoulder, and I resisted the urge to adjust it for fear of waking her. Instead, I watched her for a long while, caught between thoughts of what could be and what might never come.

For the first time in weeks, my mind strayed toward something simpler. What might life look like when—and if—this was all over? Ralien in the Caeld, maybe, or distant Iskur by the Commonwealth's edge. I pictured us going somewhere no one knew my name, somewhere without Chandrian or Amyr. But even that small dream felt fragile, like something held in trembling hands.

The ground trembled faintly beneath me, breaking the stillness. A distant rumble reached my ears like thunder without a storm. I pressed my ear to the ground. Hoofbeats. Dozens of them. No. More.

"Denna." My voice was low but urgent. "Denna, wake up."

She groaned softly, turning away. I didn't have time to be gentle. I shook her shoulder harder. "Denna! Get up! Someone's coming."

Her eyes shot open, confusion turning quickly to alarm as she sat up. "What—?"

"No time," I said sharply, already on my feet. "We need to move."

We scrambled to pack what little we could, leaving behind anything that would slow us. The horses pawed at the earth nervously, sensing the unease in the air, and within moments, we were riding hard into the night.

\* \* \*

The hoofbeats followed us in relentless rhythm, growing louder with each passing minute. My own mount was sluggish, still cold and stiff from sleep, while Denna's mare strained against her reins, wild-eyed with fear. Whoever was pursuing us wanted us caught.

"Do you think it's just patrols?" Denna called over the pounding of hooves, her voice tight with panic.

"No," I answered grimly. "They're tracking us too well."

Each time I angled us away from our course, hoping the uneven terrain would slow them, they adjusted their path. Whoever they were, they knew we were their prey. The first shouts reached us not long after, men's voices carried on the wind—taunts and jeers that were far too close for comfort. I risked a glance over my shoulder. Pale faces flitted through the trees, the faint flicker of torches highlighting greedy grins and the glint of swords.

“Faster!” I urged, though I knew it was futile. Our horses were flagging, and the ground had grown uneven and treacherous.

It was only a matter of time before disaster found us. We burst into a wide-open space where an expanse of still water waited like a black mirror. The lake stretched in every direction under the thin light of the moon. The horses slowed instinctively, their hooves splashing into the icy shallows as they hesitated at the sudden change.

Denna pulled her reins, her voice trembling. “Kvothe?”

I didn't answer immediately, my mind racing. Ahead lay the broad, dark water; behind, the men were closing. We wouldn't make it to the far shore—it was too far, and we'd be easy targets in water this open.

The riders emerged along the bank, their silhouettes solidifying into men and horses in grim procession. At least a dozen spread along the edge, and in the middle of their group stood a man in leather armor, a thick black beard wrapped in a dozen braids. A spark caught my eye, and he held a torch aloft that flared to life.

Tam. The name rose unbidden in my chest, though it carried little weight beyond recognition. I'd known him years ago, during one of my first trips with Roent's caravan. Back then, he'd been a loud-mouthed mercenary; now, he was something worse.

“Come out o' the water,” Tam shouted, his deep voice rolling across the lake's surface. “I promise to make it quick.” He paused, then grinned. “Cross me, and I'll make it twice as ugly for your lady.”

The words tasted like bile. I glanced at Denna, who had drawn a thin steel blade. Her hands shook, her eyes wide with fear. Something broke loose inside me at the sight of her like a dam bursting.

“I'll kill him,” I muttered, gripping Caesura's hilt. “I'll cut his hands off before I let him touch you.”

“What do we do, Kvothe?” Denna asked, her voice small.

I steeled myself. “Listen. When I say, ride for the shore and don't stop. Head south. Don't look back.”

“No, I'm not leaving you—”

“We don't have time to argue!” I snapped. “Do what I say, Denna. Go.”

Tam let loose a laugh and began wading in after us, his men following hesitantly, their torchlight casting rippled shadows across the water. I roared back at them, my voice thick with contempt. “Cowards! You're too afraid to face me alone!”

The taunt worked. With a grunt, Tam urged his horse forward, his men reluctantly following. I split my mind, reaching deep into sympathy. Eight threads of thought. Then nine. With a grim effort, I froze them in place, their horses thrashing but unable to move forward. Even so, three slipped past my control, charging after Denna as she raced toward the shore.

“Damn it,” I whispered under my breath, and the icy lake and cold air seemed to answer.

And then I *saw* it. The Name of the water, written everywhere around me: etched into the moonlight's reflection on its surface, curled into the rippling waves against my waist. It was beautiful. It was terrible.

I spoke its Name.

A thunderous roar filled the air as the lake answered me. A massive swell surged outward, rising higher than a man and collapsing in fury. It lashed toward the bandits, horses screaming as they tried to retreat. The dark wave swallowed them whole, dragging them down into the water's cold embrace.

Shivering, I scrambled back to my horse. "Hold on, Denna," I murmured as I kicked the beast into motion. The poor animal was exhausted, foaming at the bit as I urged it forward, but it obeyed. Somewhere in the distance, Denna needed me.

\* \* \*

The horse labored beneath me, its chest heaving, its hooves pounding against dirt and stone as if the beast could sense my desperation. I spotted them ahead, three figures looming like shadows over someone sprawled on the ground.

Denna's mare screamed in the distance—a terrible, piercing cry that sent a chill rippling up my spine. My heart surged. I didn't think. I acted.

I leapt from the saddle before my horse came to a stop, the ground rushing up to meet me. My feet hit hard, but I was already moving, Saicere singing free of its scabbard, the blade flashing in the moonlight.

The first man turned toward me, blade swiping in an arc meant to cut me down before I reached him. He was too slow. My sword struck true, carving through his feeble block and crashing against his shoulder. He stumbled, and I followed—a second strike, fast and brutal, split him from temple to jaw. He crumpled without so much as a sound.

The second came with a growl, a torch raised high in one hand, a chipped sword in the other. I met him in a whirl of motion, spinning low and wide. I kicked out—hard—catching his knee, and he stumbled. My blade came up quick across his wrist, cutting the torch from his grasp. He bellowed and charged, swinging wildly.

Too close. My sword caught beneath the body of the first man, lodged firm, and for a moment I had nothing but my open hand.

Then the world slowed. The word came to me—not thought, not intention—just instinct: raw and sharp. "Fire."

The torchbearer erupted, flames licking out from his eyes, his mouth. The torch hadn't caught him. Something else had. His scream choked, high and terrible, as his face melted like wax, as if the fire came from within. He fell, burning and broken before he hit the ground.

The third man froze. His blade hung limply at his side, and his lips moved in a frantic prayer. "Merciful Tehlu, save me..."

"There is no mercy," I said, my voice hollow—a sound that didn't feel like my own.

The words barely left my lips when the air shifted. It rushed toward him, a brutal, invisible force tearing its way through the world. He gasped, clawed at his throat, and staggered backward. I saw his chest collapse inward, his ribs bowing like the stays of a ship under too much pressure. Then the noise came: a sharp, final crack, and he fell where he stood, lifeless.

I rushed past him, already forgetting the bodies. The only thing that mattered now was Denna. She was at the base of a boulder, her back pressed tight against it, her face pale and streaked with dirt. Somewhere nearby, her mare limped, still crying softly.

“Denna!” I called, dropping to my knees before her. I reached for her hand, but she pulled it back as if my touch burned. Her eyes fixed on me, her chest heaving, her lips trembling.

She’d seen it all. All of it.

“Denna,” I tried again, softer this time, reaching out once more. Her shiv slipped from her fingers, clinking against the dirt as she shuddered. Then she broke completely, tears carving new streaks into her already tear-stained cheeks as her body buckled.

I caught her before she hit the ground, pulling her into my arms. “It’s over,” I whispered, holding her tight. “You’re safe now.”

\* \* \*

For all we’d endured, our wounds were merciful ones. Denna’s mare had fallen in the dark, taking her down hard. She brushed it off, but the streak of dried blood in her hair told another story. Meanwhile, I carried no visible scars, only the kind that haunted. My hands trembled faintly at my sides, their shaking unbidden, unwanted.

The mare hadn’t been so lucky. Her leg had twisted beneath her like a snapped branch, and there were no kind roads left for her to walk. I ended it swiftly, murmuring soft nonsense as if I could quiet the breaking of her breath. That was the worse part—how it lingered, even after she was gone.

Denna said little, but she watched. She always watched.

To distract myself, I turned to a quieter kind of magic. From the bottle I’d scavenged, I poured a ribbon of water into my hands and reached out with a whisper. The Naming answered, subtle and soft, and the water curled into a ring that spun between my fingers. It joined the others I’d long gathered: wind, stone, amber, wood, bone... all containing their own quiet truth.

As the water pooled away into silence, my eyes caught the dying orange nib of a coal in the dirt near where we’d camped. Something simple, nearly hidden under the film of ash. Almost gone, but not quite. The thief in me stooped before the poet could hesitate. I plucked it up with careful fingers, cradling it, listening for the faint whisper of its name.

Fire is a raucous thing, riotous and wild, but there’s a grace to its last glimmer—when it’s smoke and heat but no longer hunger. It took less effort than I expected; the strand of its name came willingly to me. The coal flared briefly, then reshaped itself into a circle, a thin, flickering band of flame around my fingers.

I grinned at the sight. That’s new.

“That’s a pretty thing you’ve made there,” Denna said, her voice catching me between surprise and shame. Her words carried warmth, but her eyes had a sharper glint. She’d been watching me longer than I realized, quiet as frost on glass.

“Comes in handy,” I said lightly, letting the fire spiral away into nothing. Then, I turned and offered her the water bottle.

She hesitated, her fingers brushing the lip of the bottle but not taking it. The moment stretched too long before she withdrew. “No, thank you,” she said simply, her eyes settling on the horizon instead.

\* \* \*

When morning came, we started forward again. Denna rode my horse now, sitting small in the saddle, her arms wrapped around herself like armor. I kept to the ground, walking alongside them with reins in hand. The road was slick and pocked, and our pace was slow. Still, I found some solace in the thought that we'd reach Renere by tomorrow, late but in time to stop Auri's wedding.

For a while, we walked in silence, the only sound the creak of the saddle and the steady squeel of the road beneath my boots.

"How do you think they found us?" she asked finally.

I turned the thought over like a stone between my fingers. "Campfire," I said, too quickly for it to sound honest. "Most likely, they saw the light and thought we'd be easy pickings. Bandits move fast when desperation bites."

Her eyes stayed forward, quiet but unconvinced. Neither of us believed it was quite so simple.

I wondered if I should tell her what my gut kept whispering: that the bandits had moved too cleanly, their purpose too sharp. Someone had set them after us. Someone who knew what they wanted. But I swallowed the words. Denna carried enough of her own silences without letting me pile mine into her arms.

"The one with the black beard," I added after a moment, trying to sound casual. "I've seen him before. A caravan guard turned mercenary. My guess is they fell on hard times and traded their coin for sharp steel and heavier crimes." I said it lightly, but the words rang hollow in my mouth.

The silence returned, heavier than before, lingering like a weight neither of us wanted to name.

The crags slowed us to a crawl, the jagged stone biting at my boots and Denna's cloak catching in the wind. The sun offered light but no warmth, and my feet ached with each step over the uneven ground. Finally, we reached an old pass high in the hills, the narrow path giving us a view that stretched far into the valley below.

I almost missed it at first—a flicker of movement in the canyon below, something too organized to be natural. I stopped dead, scanning the hollow. Then I saw it: rows of tents laid in neat formation, campfires burning low, and the figure of armed men moving with purpose. A camp.

I crouched low, Denna kneeling beside me. "There has to be at least five hundred down there," I murmured, my stomach sinking as I counted the tents. Soldiers moved in clusters, their steel catching traces of sunlight.

"Do you recognize the uniforms?" she asked softly.

"No," I said, shaking my head. But something else drew my eye: a pale banner, cresting the wind above a large white pavilion at the camp's center. I froze. Silver trim. A coiled serpent.

"Jakis," I said grimly. "That many troops this close to Renere... he has to be working with Fascino."

I stood abruptly, my voice taut with urgency. "We've lost too much time already. We need to get back to Renere."

Denna nodded, though her eyes stayed fixed on the soldiers below, sharp with thought. The wind stirred, flaring the flag once more, and the serpent seemed to coil tighter.

# CHAPTER 31

## THE DECEIT

**D**IRT CLUNG TO every inch of me—my boots, my shirt, even my teeth. By the time we reached the Blind Beggar, night had folded over the city like worn velvet. My ribs ached with every breath, but I didn't let us slow. Denna followed without a sound.

I knocked. A shuffle, the scrape of a chair, then Bast swung the door open. "Finally. I was starting to think you'd gone and gotten yourself—oh!" His eyes widened as he caught sight of Denna.

Behind him, Sim and Wil leaned forward from their seats, their expressions shifting from relief to alarm.

"Denna! Good lord, what happened to you?" Sim asked, half-rising. His voice brimmed with that anxious kindness that might irritate if it weren't so unerringly genuine.

"Fell off my horse," Denna said casually, brushing past him like a ghost propped up by borrowed grace. "Got anything to eat?" She paused, her empty hands hanging loosely by her side. "I'm starving."

"Er... I think Wil has half an onion left from earlier," Sim offered hesitantly.

"An onion?" Denna blinked, her voice half incredulous, half amused. "Just... an onion?"

"It's on a stick," Wil said as flatly as ever. "But if you're not interested—"

"God's teeth, it might as well be roasted lamb," she said, holding her hands out toward him. "Pass it over."

As she moved through the room, she carried that odd air of hers, light and unshakable, despite the shadows beneath her eyes. I, by contrast, collapsed into a chair and began the laborious task of prying off my boots.

I didn't want to say it aloud. The words already tasted like old ash. But Sim just looked at me with the same hopeful expression he always wore: too kind, too human for days like these.

"So," I asked, looking between Wil and Sim, "any luck?"

Wil answered first, his voice clipped. "We got the letter into his hands. Taliver helped. But either it never left the servants' floor... or he read it and ignored it."

"He ignored it," Sim murmured. "He has to have."

"Then the court is deaf on both ends," I said. "The Maer wasn't cruel—just... absent. Cloaked in formality, drowning in caution. He knows something's coming but would rather wait in safety."

Bast made a low growling sound, rolled his shoulders. "We're running out of cards."

I looked at him, letting the weight of it settle before I spoke. "It's worse than you think."

“Oh, good,” Wil muttered, trying too hard to sound casual. “Let me guess—Jakis is having tea with the Maer, or a horde of Shamblemen’s about to crash the city gates?”

“I wish you were exaggerating,” I said. “I really do.”

“We spotted an army. Jakis’ colors flying high. They’re camped in a ravine less than two hours from here. Waiting.”

Sim set the onion down carefully, like it had begun to hum.

“I think I’d rather take my chances with the Shamblemen.”

Wil cursed under his breath. Bast’s posture sharpened, like a bow pulled taut. “If they’re that close,” he said, “why not bring it straight to the King?”

I shook my head. “Roderick’s buried beneath silk-tongued flatterers. News worse than ours won’t reach him for a month—if ever.”

“Or ever. It’s not King Roderick’s court anymore,” Sim said bitterly. “It’s a curtain.”

Bast muttered a curse in Faen, low and sharp as broken glass. “Fools die prettiest when the silk’s still warm.”

Wil and Sim exchanged a look. It was short, but heavy as an anchor.

“What?” I asked.

Wil cleared his throat, folding his hands. “It’s not that we don’t agree. We do. It’s just... we’ve started cooking up something else. Not elegant. Not even lawful. But it might be the only way to shake the right trees.”

“Tell me.”

“We start,” Sim said, his voice thin. He glanced toward Denna, then back to me. “With kidnapping.”

\* \* \*

The sound of my boots against stone echoed in the drafty citadel halls. Despite my disguise—the gaudy green and gold uniform of the royal tailor—I felt each clap of my steps as loud as cymbals.

“Not much further now,” said my escort, a little man named Galeshim with a drawn face and hurried gait. He barked incessantly at anyone in our way. “Out of the hall! Move aside! Important business, make way!”

I adjusted the absurd bundle of fabric in front of me, frilly and blindingly white. The thing was heavy, reeking faintly of lavender and starch. All the while, my face itched under its mask—the fiery red hair and sharp angles of Kvothe erased by the glamourie Bast had so carefully wrought. In my reflection, I no longer saw myself, but Artemi Ilario: tanned, aging, and wearier than anyone rightly deserved to look.

We approached a doorway flanked by two guards wearing the King’s red and gold. Their expressions might as well have been carved into granite.

“Open the door,” Galeshim demanded, making a short shooing motion to punctuate his words.

Neither guard moved.

“Are you deaf? We have urgent business. This is His Majesty’s personal tailor. He requires access at once.”

The guards were not inclined to respond. Galeshim’s lips pursed like he’d bitten into something sour. “Need I remind you of the King’s temper when things are left imperfect? Or

will you explain to Lady Almira why her dress was delayed?"

They shifted uneasily but did not part. Galeshim turned to me, exasperated but hopeful. "Do something."

I stepped forward, adjusting my burden as I showed my face properly beneath the hall's dim lighting. Aging. Stern. A stranger. All pieces of the glamourie. "As much as I'd like to prattle all night," I hissed in an accent whose Modegan lilt I'd studied over the span of two desperate hours, "I've no time for stubborn oafs with more muscle than sense."

The younger guard flinched. The elder one stepped aside with a simple "My apologies."

Inside the room, light spilled from tall windows onto gilded mirrors and tables scattered with jewelry. A figure sat at a dressing table, a murmuring throng of maids hemming and pinning ribbons on pale swathes of fabric.

I gave the thin stick hidden in my sleeve two deliberate shakes—the signal. A clever trinket of Wil's, bound to Alar enough to send a faint response to others across the Citadel. Somewhere near the outer gates, I knew, the others would be waiting. Watching.

The maids before me paused, some stiffening while others looked up in confusion.

"Ladies," I began, stepping fully into stance, "His Majesty requires adjustments. Unshackle me from your work; I'll be quick about it."

"Well, we weren't expecting—!" one began, but I clapped twice, sharp and quick.

"Go. Now."

One by one, they gathered their things and scurried out until I was alone with the figure at the mirror. Her head inclined downward, her frame delicate, her radiance muted by quiet sorrow.

I stepped closer, shaking free of the empty persona I'd worn. "Auri," I said softly, almost disbelievingly.

She turned, her wide eyes meeting mine. A moment passed, then another. Then recognition roused her. "Kvothe?"

"Yes."

She was up and in my arms before I'd finished the word. Her weight was slight as a bird's, and I feared she might vanish into thin air. Then she laughed, half through tears, and murmured, "What did you bring me?"

A crash rattled the door. My body tensed. "We have to move," I whispered, retrieving the alchemical vial Sim had handed me with far too much confidence earlier.

The substance stank like vinegar left to spoil in sugared ale. I worked it over my palms quickly, testing its tackiness against the stone of the window to ensure it held.

"This is safe, yes?" Auri asked, her brows knitting.

A harder crash at the door answered for me. "Safe enough."

"Splendid."

I lowered myself onto the wall, the Citadel sprawling beneath us like a long, gleaming tale. Auri clung to my neck. Each movement felt deliberate, muscle and bone straining against every instinct that screamed not to let go.

Then came the slick sound of my palm slipping against the stone. All at once, the gel began to give way.

"There!" a voice shouted from the balcony above us. "He's escaping! After him!"

"We'll be alright," she said, though it carried the fragile weight of a prayer.

And I couldn't answer her. Not yet.



# CHAPTER 32

## THE FALL

THE WIND WRITHED around me, humming a note I could almost taste. It was everywhere—pushing my hair, stinging my eyes, filling the space between my ribs and the stone wall I clung to. With it came the pull of an impossible thought: *Let go. Trust it. Let it take you, as it took Taborlin.* I considered it for half a heartbeat, but every inch of my body screamed in defiance. A story is fine for Taborlin the Great, but I wasn't great. Not yet.

Auri clung to my back, fragile but steady. "You won't," she whispered. She said it so softly, like the wind wouldn't hear. "You'll hold on."

I shifted my focus, forcing myself to see the stones beneath my fingers, broad and ancient. I felt their cold weight as the wind roared indignantly, demanding my attention. Then, as clear as my own name, I felt it: not one stone, but three. I reached for the name that bound them, and something inside me shifted. As I spoke, the tension in the rock eased, and the block beneath my toes pushed itself forward.

A step.

Each time, the act pressed the edge of my mind, my focus wavering like a lantern in the wind, but it worked. Another stone shunted out. Then another. I crawled downward in agonizing slowness, my hands raw and trembling. Below us, a balcony yawned open like an escape. Relief sank its claws into my chest as I dropped lightly onto the smooth, slick surface.

Through the open balcony doors, an empty chamber stretched before us. Stone floors polished by centuries of footsteps reflected the light of an iron chandelier, its candles burning low. A long oak table sat at the center like the spine of the room. I let Auri's feet touch the ground and grabbed her hand. "Come on," I said, moving fast. The sound of boots echoed faintly above us.

The first door was locked. The second opened a pitiful inch before a sharp grind told me its bolt was in place. The third swung open just as four knights spilled into the room, swords drawn. I pulled Auri close, pressing her against me as the knights fanned out. A man in a captain's sash barked an order: "Hold!" His eyes darted between me, the broken window, and Auri. He was putting the story together in fragments.

"Trust me," I murmured into her ear. Then, quick as a Magician's flourish, I pulled a knife from my boot and pressed it against her throat. "Stay back!" I shouted, my voice lashing through the room.

Auri yelped. Trembling ever so slightly, she said, "He'll do it. He'll kill me!"

The captain froze, his hand tightening on the leather-wrapped hilt of his sword. "Easy," he said carefully. "No one has to get hurt."

“Over there,” I hissed, motioning with the knife. “All of you. To the far wall.”

The steel-clad soldiers obeyed, their boots grinding across the grout. They stopped only when their backs touched cold stone. My knife still at Auri’s throat, I maneuvered us toward the door they had entered, my pulse hammering in my ears. Three paces from the door, I heard new steps. Measured and deliberate. Then came the King.

Roderick entered, his chest heaving, his crimson cloak trailing behind him. Baron Jakis hovered to his right, pale and stiff, flanked by two of his house guards. The sight of royalty would normally freeze me, but I was too close to breaking. Too close to failure. And behind Roderick, more armored men poured into the room, lining the walls like wolves stalking prey.

“Unhand her!” Roderick spat, his voice trembling like a taut bowstring. “If a single hair is harmed, I will have you carved into pieces and fed to the crows.”

“You’ve left me no choices, Your Majesty.” My words were quick and desperate, angling instead of striking. My grip tightened. “Your city isn’t safe. Your court isn’t safe.”

“I’ve heard enough of your conspiracies!” Roderick hissed, but then hesitated.

I dug deeper into the air between us. “Ask Jakis,” I said, my voice calm and deliberate. “Ask him about the army.”

“What—” The King’s eyes cut to the Baron. “You would swear to me, Vito?”

“If this sorry liar had seen an army,” Jakis said steadily, though he shifted just slightly on his feet, “he’d be dead already. He’s scrambling for lies to save his own skin.”

“Send scouts then,” I countered sharply. “Let them sally forth and finally see with their own hungry eyes.”

Before Roderick could reply, Fascino Regent appeared at the room’s edge, his stride unhurried, his detachment of guards surrounding him like vipers. And unlike Jakis, he smiled.

“Fascino,” the King began, though there was a tremor now to his words. “What treason turns this tide?”

Fascino shrugged. “Oh, it’s quite true. Jakis brought his little forces. Mine never left.”

Roderick turned red, then white. “You... After all I’ve—”

Fascino waved him off lazily. “Spare us the lamentations, Roderick.” Then, darkly, “You ruled with song when the world demanded flame.”

The sound that came next broke the air in two. Screams. Clanging echoes of metal below. Roderick shouted something, but it was lost as Fascino’s men drew their weapons. His words had barely faded before swords clashed in fury, blood splashing mute black over pale stone.

“You! Move!” I snarled at Roderick, dragging him and Auri toward the door as chaos chewed at the chamber. “Which way?” I demanded without looking back.

“North,” Auri said, pulling at my sleeve. “The Tower of Tears.”

Roderick, his breathing ragged, blinked and then nodded. “That way!” He stumbled forward, leading us left.

We ran. A small mercy that the halls were clear, the only sound the echo of our frantic steps. Remembering the plan, I fumbled in my pocket for the sticks to signal the others that everything had well and truly gone to hell.

“Kvothe!” Auri’s small cry caught me. I looked back to see them—a dozen knights, Fascino’s sigil bright on their chests, turning the corner less than forty feet behind us.

I stopped without thinking, planting myself between them and the others. “Keep going!” I shouted over my shoulder. “Get to the tower!”

“Kvothe, no!” Auri’s voice broke, but Roderick grabbed her, pulling her onward.

I turned to the enemy. I may have looked pitiful—no armor, an arrow quivering from my shoulder—but power roared beneath my skin. When I called the Name of the Wind, the walls seemed to tighten in fear.

It ripped forward like vengeance, howling. Curtains tore free, slicing through the soldiers with their rusted iron rods. One screamed as he flew backward, smashing into the wall. Another tumbled through the shattering window, his armored body plummeting into the chaos below.

But not all of them fell. The second rank knelt, crossbows ready. I saw the bolt too late. It struck my left shoulder, shoving me back against the wall. Pain shot through me like a jagged crevice, but still, I drew myself forward, spilling my Alar wide enough to hold them rooted.

Steel flashed, and the third crossbowman crumpled, gurgling as Sim retracted a blade from his chest. Wil stepped forward, axe in hand, eyes sharp. “Charred body of Tehlu, I thought you’d be dead by now.”

“So did I,” I croaked, clutching my shoulder.

“Denna’s waiting at the gate,” Sim said, already hauling me upright. “Let’s end this.”

But as the screaming continued above us, I turned toward the Tower. “Not without them.” And with a crash of steel behind us, we ran into what remained.

# CHAPTER 33

## THE TOWER

THE SMELL STRUCK first: sour ale soaked into wood, a rancid smear of spilled grease, and the cloying tang of too many unwashed bodies packed into one space. The garrison was a shattered remnant of what it should have been. Sixteen guards sat or slumped in a room built to hold twice their number, most clutching bottles with lethargic grips. Some blinked at me glassily, their faces slack with drink. Others ignored my entrance altogether, their shoulders slumped like scarecrows abandoned in a storm.

This was no fortress. It was a hollow shell drowning in surrender.

Roderick paced near the center of the room, his voice sharp against the drunken murmurs. “Ready yourselves! Get moving, damn you! They’ll be at the gates any moment!” His words stumbled against their indifference, the authority in his tone stretched thin—something brittle pretending to be stone.

For a moment, my eyes met his, and I saw it plainly: the panic behind the orders. The words weren’t just for his men. They were for himself, a faltering refrain against the crushing weight of betrayal.

“Kvothe!” Auri’s voice snapped me back. She darted toward me, her wide eyes fixed on the fresh stain blooming across my shoulder. “You’re hurt!”

I glanced at my shoulder to finally appraise the crossbow bolt that had lodged itself beneath my clavicle. Four inches of blackened oak jutted out like a cruel joke, just shallow enough to let me stand, just deep enough to remind me of the delicate symmetry that might let me live another hour. *Lucky*, I thought, but saying that felt wrong. What kind of fool calls himself lucky with a piece of wood sticking out of his chest?

“I’ll live,” I said, though the sharp sting when I moved told a different story.

“Looks pretty awful,” Sim said, paling as he came up behind me.

“I know what to do!” Auri said suddenly. Her voice, as always, had a lightness to it, but a sharpness crept in as she grabbed my arm and pulled me to a stool. *Auri wanting to help—of course—but Auri taking charge?* That was new.

Auri was already pulling a fresh strip from the sleeve of her dress. She dropped her voice into something soothing but curt, like a mother speaking to a child who refused to sit still. “You’re going to sit here. And stay. No moving about until I’ve dealt with this mess.”

When I started to argue, she pressed a wad of linen between my teeth. “Bite down. A hedgehog with a bolt in its chest isn’t very convincing.”

I glared, but her calm defiance left no room for protest. She gestured briskly to Sim, who hovered nearby. “Steady the bolt. Just behind the base, yes—there. And you,” she barked at Wil, “snap the shaft, clean and quick.”

Wil's expression soured. "Quick's easy. Clean's the problem."

Auri didn't answer, her small hands already gathering what she needed. Then, without preamble, Wil broke the shaft. The room narrowed to a single sharp crack, like stone splitting under frost.

Pain seared through me, pure and hot, scattering every coherent thought. My vision blurred. I barely registered Auri pulling the bolt free, her movements precise but pitiless, her smallest motions practiced and deliberate. Somewhere beyond the haze of agony, Sim dry-heaved, and Wil turned away, muttering sharp curses under his breath.

"You're lucky it hit where it did," Auri said after a long, breathless moment, tying the final strip snugly around my shoulder. "No bone, no veins. Just your pride."

I blinked away tears of pain to look at her clearly. This wasn't the shy hermit I had coaxed out from quiet corners. This was someone else, someone steady and quick and knowing. Was she trained in the Medica? That wasn't right—I would have known.

Nearby, Roderick watched her with an expression I couldn't entirely place—a strange mix of confusion, pride, and what might have been guilt.

"Did you learn that at the University?" the King asked carefully.

Auri's hands stilled for the briefest of moments. She met his gaze head-on and nodded. "Of course," she said softly.

Roderick opened his mouth to say something more but stopped himself. He turned sharply away, his jaw clenched tight.

\* \* \*

The tower groaned as I stumbled to the narrow arrow slits. Some men had roused themselves enough to join me, their faces pale against the lamplight. The scene outside defied any hope I might have clung to.

Fascino's forces moved with rhythmic precision, their scarlet banners streaming like fire in the wind. Tight formations surged around the tower's base, shield bearers at the front, the sharpened hunger of battle reflected in every step. In their midst, the massive timber battering ram loomed like a dark god, the heads of its crew bent over it as they prepared for their approach.

I pressed a hand into the cold stone, breathing through the ache in my shoulder. From beside me, Sim spoke softly. "We're trapped, aren't we?"

I didn't answer.

"Lugosi will come," Roderick muttered behind me, his voice brittle and distant. "He has to—any hour now—his men—"

"No one's coming," I said, the words heavier than I'd intended. "This is what we have."

Wil swore under his breath. Sim stayed quiet, his fingers brushing the window frame. I could feel his thoughts turn like grinding gears.

"What do we have left?" he asked, looking to one of the few sober guards.

The man shrugged. "Oil. Pitch. Mishmash of gear upstairs. No bloody tunnels out, though. Just us. That's it."

Sim shot me a glance, his eyes flicking to my shoulder. "You can't lead like this," he said bluntly.

"I'll manage," I said, even as black spots danced in my vision.

“Tehlu’s breath, you can barely stand! Let me help,” Sim snapped, something sharp beneath his usual softness.

I stepped back, leaning heavily against the wall. My voice came quieter now. “Alright.”

For so long, I had wondered why Sim never truly stepped forward despite all his potential. He’d once told me that his father, the Duke of Daloni, had tried to mold him into a leader—tried and failed. Sim lacked the sharpness of ambition, the hunger for power or control. Kind-hearted people don’t seize the reins. They shy from them.

But perhaps his father had been right to hope after all. Perhaps leadership didn’t always come from hunger. Sometimes it came from necessity.

Sim squared his shoulders, his mouth tightening into a line I recognized—not nervous, for once, but resolute. “Wil, start bringing the oil down. Focus on the murderholes first.” He turned to the guards, his voice firm enough to cut through their haze. “You two—secure anything sharp. Swords, arrows, godsdamned chair legs if you have to. Bring them all here.”

To my surprise, the men obeyed. Sim’s words carried weight now.

Outside, Fascino began his ultimatum, his smooth voice rising like venom on the wind. “Surrender the King, and the rest of you may leave with your lives. Refuse me, and you’ll see the inside of your bellies before the day is done.”

The guards shifted nervously, but before doubt could sink teeth into them, Sim raised his voice. “Don’t believe him.” He stepped deeper into the lamplight, his face calm and leveled. “Look outside. Look at the street. Tell me how many of our brothers and sisters Fascino left alive. Go ahead. *Count them.*”

The room stilled. Sim let the heavy silence swell.

“That’s what I thought,” he said. “He doesn’t want mercy. He wants your fear. Don’t give it to him.”

It was the first time I’d seen him like this, standing not as a faithful companion but as a leader. And for the first time, under the tension fraught canopy of blood and fire, the room stayed steady.

\* \* \*

The ram came first.

From the tower, I watched as Fascino’s soldiers surged forward, wielding shields while others carried the massive timber battering ram. Men scrambled into place, Sim barking orders with a sureness that felt foreign on his lips but suited him just the same.

Roderick’s voice boomed from behind. “For Vintas! Hold the fort, men!”

Even in the chaos, I bitterly noted that his stolen valor sounded hollow. But there was no time for anger. As the ram crossed the bridge, Sim called: “Loose!”

Arrows struck the unshielded front ranks. Soldiers fell, their weight pitching the ram awkwardly into the ground. But more came to replace them. Behind the first ranks, shield bearers pressed forward, and the battered gate shuddered under repeated blows.

The tower groaned, dust creeping from the crevices. I felt the vibrations of each strike in my bones. “Ready the cauldron!” Sim shouted, rushing to help the others maneuver the boiling oil into position.

“Now!” The cauldron tipped. The ram crew below screamed as liquid fire poured over them, and bottles of dreg followed. The courtyard lit up, and Fascino’s soldiers scattered like

startled insects.

For a moment, hope flickered. Then I saw the mangonel.

# CHAPTER 34

## COMMAND IN THE CHAOS

**T**HE MANGONEL CREAKED AS Fascino's men prepared the first strike, its massive arm drawn taut against ropes groaning under the strain. They loaded a stone the size of a small child into the sling, and I felt the ember of hope in my chest flicker dangerously low.

"We don't have the defenses for this," I muttered bitterly, sagging back against the cold stone wall. Pain radiated from my shoulder with every slight movement as though reminding me of its presence, its cost.

Wil's hand fell heavily onto my good shoulder. "What is it?" he said, his voice clipped and serious.

"They're bringing a mangonel," I said, the taste of failure bitter in my mouth. "If they hit us with that, this tower is done."

Wil cursed under his breath, his voice low and ragged. From across the room, Sim caught the tone in my voice as he hurried toward us, his face pale but his posture firm.

"Tehlu spare us..." Sim looked out of the narrow arrow slit. His lips tightened as he took in the sight of the siege engine and the soldiers surrounding it. For a brief moment, he seemed lost. Just like I was.

Then Sim set his shoulders and exhaled slowly.

"No," he said sharply, his voice like steel scraping flint. "We're not done. Not yet."

Wil raised an eyebrow. "I'm not sure what you're seeing that we aren't, friend."

Sim turned to him, fire alight in his normally soft eyes. "We still have arrows. Oil. Pitch." He gestured briskly at the handful of guards. "You've fought worse odds on the frontier, haven't you?"

Wil's eyebrow arched again, but some part of him seemed startled—and maybe annoyed—by Sim's sudden command. "Barely," he said dryly, but there was no mockery in his tone.

Sim looked at me then. "Kvothe, I'll need you on the Wind."

I blinked at him through the haze of pain and exhaustion. "I—Sim, I don't know if I can." My hands trembled slightly, and my breath caught just short of admitting the truth: that calling the Name of the Wind now, in my state, could do as much harm to me as it could to our enemies.

"You don't have to stop it," Sim said carefully, lowering his voice so only I could hear. "Just slow it down. A glancing blow. Give us time."

Time. Everything we were doing came down to snatching at those fleeting, fragile moments that we might wring between their strikes. He wasn't asking the world of me. He wasn't asking for miracles. He just wanted me to try. There was something in his voice—something firm and unrelenting. It wasn't desperation. It was belief.



I nodded once, pulling myself upright with a sharp intake of breath. “Alright. Do what you can down here.”

\* \* \*

“Wil,” Sim said, already moving toward the remaining guards. “Take three men. You’ll get the oil down. Focus on that first. Tip the cauldron directly over the courtyard when I give the order—no half measures, I don’t care if it spills on their shields.”

Wil saluted him with a sarcastic flourish but gathered the men just the same. “On it, Commander Sim.” His voice carried its usual wit, but in his stride there was purpose.

Sim turned to the guards remaining in the room. “You two—gather every bolt, every arrow. If it flies, we shoot it. Aim for the siege crew. No excuses. Not one of them leaves without an arrow in their gut. Understand?”

The men nodded, their stunned expressions reminding me that they weren’t used to taking orders from anyone who wasn’t screaming them half-deliriously or dragging bottles of ale between breaths. Sim wasn’t barking orders; he was giving them a lifeline.

Even King Roderick seemed struck dumb, watching Sim with an expression I couldn’t entirely place. There was pride there, but also something quieter. Something guiltier.

Sim held my gaze for a moment, the unspoken question resting between us: *Will it be enough?*

Neither of us said it, but we both knew the answer. It didn’t have to be enough. It just had to buy us time.

\* \* \*

The first stone launched.

I was ready. I pressed one hand to the cold stone of the wall, feeling its solidity beneath my fingers. It eased the unsteady churn of my mind as I reached for the Wind.

It came to me slowly, like coaxing a shy animal into the open. My body was too battered, my focus too thin, to call it with the force I wanted. But Sim had been right—I didn’t need force. I needed precision.

When I whispered the Name of the Wind, my voice was weaker than usual, but the world heard me all the same.

The air shifted outside the tower just before the stone struck. The massive projectile tilted, its trajectory skewing just enough to miss the central structure. It slammed into the outer parapet instead, scattering shards of stone like deadly debris. The impact rattled through the tower, enough to break my concentration and send me stumbling into the wall.

Sim ran to my side, steadying me. “You did it,” he said, his voice caught somewhere between disbelief and gratitude.

“I slowed it,” I croaked. “That’s all.”

“You bought us time.”

He ran back toward the defenders as Wil called down: “Oil’s ready!” From above, the sound of bubbling liquid hit my ears, and a moment later, the roar of flames filled the

courtyard.

\* \* \*

Through the arrow slit, I watched as Fascino's crew scrambled under the firestorm. The boiling oil had gummed up portions of the cranking mechanism, and one of the men operating the mangonel writhed in flames, clutching at his charred arm as he fell screaming to the ground. The siege weapon wouldn't fire as quickly now.

But the engine itself wasn't destroyed. Not yet.

Wil returned to the room, sweat misting his brow. "That's their last smooth volley for a while," he said. His voice softened slightly as he looked at me. "If you're pulling your Naming stunts again, try not to kill yourself before we all die together."

"They're still firing," Sim muttered, his expression darkening.

I stepped forward despite my vision swimming. "One more," I said hoarsely, watching as the mangonel's crew regrouped. They were cranking the mechanism again, though more slowly this time. My shoulder throbbed violently, but the part of me that had always sought defiance burned brighter than the pain. "I'll get one more shot."

I reached for the Wind again, mind trembling under the strain.

\* \* \*

Just before I could summon it again, Sim's hand caught my arm. "No," he said firmly. "They'll keep coming, and you'll burn out too quickly. We have to try something else."

"What else is there?" I rasped, my breathing ragged.

"You gave us time," Sim said. "It's enough to organize one counterstrike before they regroup. Let me figure the rest out."

I leaned back against the wall as Sim moved away, his voice calling new orders to the remaining defenders. I let my eyes drift partially closed, not resting but counting every heartbeat.

Outside, Fascino's voice rang through the chaos, smooth and venomous. "Still standing, are you?" he called. "Your tower's a corpse on its feet! Look around, and tell me—was this worth it?"

I didn't answer him. What was the point of answering a man pretending to be above it all when his world burned just like mine?

Instead, I turned toward the others preparing for the next assault, blood seeping through the bandages on my shoulder, my voice soft and steady for Sim: "Whatever you need, I'll still be here."

# CHAPTER 35

## THE PRICE OF LOYALTY

THE MANGONEL'S ARM creaked, ropes groaning as they drew back the heavy stone for another deadly blow. I leaned against the frozen wall, my shoulder aflame, my breaths shallow. Every movement felt like shards of glass grinding against bone. I wanted to act, to move, but my body betrayed me, shaking with weakness and exhaustion.

And then the horns came.

The sound cut sharp over the battlefield, louder and more terrible than the hiss of violence below. I twisted toward the arrow slit, the motion wrenching at my wound. Beneath me, the battlefield churned like a broken tide. Fascino's forces—slick with blood and still jeering in their grim work—turned sharply at the sound.

Knights surged forward, their armor flashing in sapphire and ivory. Their banners flew, one over the other. The first, House Calanthis, bore red and gold, trampled in mud and tarnished with soot. But the second banner made my stomach twist in place: sapphire and silver, the seal of the Maer Alveron.

I watched as the Maer's forces swept through Fascino's ranks with ruthless precision. Dagon, Alveron's dark-eyed captain, swung his saber cleanly, severing Fascino's head from his body in a single arc. Baron Jakis was next, fleeing on foot with blood on his hands and panic in his eyes. The Maer himself bore down on him with the force of inevitability. His voice boomed, stripped of mercy.

"You thought to poison me? You thought *that* would be enough?"

Jakis didn't die swiftly.

A pressure settled on the room in the silence that followed. "Raise the gate!" Roderick's voice cracked, strained with brittle hope. His relief felt sharp and wrong, and when the portcullis staggered upward, I couldn't stop the words from spilling from my mouth.

"Wait—"

No one listened.

The Maer's forces entered the courtyard like a steel tide. Alveron climbed down from his steed, his knights fanning out behind him as he walked toward the tower. Each step the man took echoed with an authority we had no choice but to obey.

The boots came first, climbing the stairs in a slow, steady rhythm.

\* \* \*

Alveron entered with measured purpose, his knights flowing around him until they filled every shadow in the room. The Maer's expression was cool as an autumn lake. Whatever kindness I had ever seen in his sharp features was gone as though it had never existed. He carried no pretense of warmth. He didn't need to.

Roderick stumbled forward, hand extended, the glinting silver of his house seal catching the faint light. "Lerand," he started, his voice forcefully bright. "You came. You saved me. I knew—"

Alveron stopped him mid-word. "No."

The word was sharp, and it carried enough weight to stop Roderick in his tracks. "I didn't come for you," the Maer added, quiet but certain.

The silence of the room pressed inward, broken only by a faint creak of leather as Alveron unsheathed his sword. Roderick froze. He had seen his death. The streak of crimson that followed was almost an afterthought—a quiet bloom spreading across Roderick's throat, his crown rolling away as though eager to depart its master's fallen head.

Auri screamed and darted forward, desperate and trembling.

"No!" The shout came from Sim.

I caught Auri's wrist first, pulling her back with shaking fingers as she struggled against me. Sim had stepped forward, his face pale but his jaw clenched in anguish. He fumbled for a weapon and caught up a discarded sword, its hilt awkward in his hands.

"For all your cleverness," Alveron said, turning his attention to me, "you thought to bind yourself to this sinking wreck of a king? Truly, did you think yourself immune to reaping what you've sown?"

The nod he gave Dagon was slight. The captain lunged. I raised my hand instinctively and called the Name of Fire, expecting resistance. What came was unshackled fury, both imperfect and wild. The torrent struck Dagon square in the chest, fire wreathing his armor, blistering his face into something monstrous. His screams were barely human.

But the act had cost me. I crumpled back against the wall, breathing in a horrible stagger. Dagon, though burned, did not fall.

\* \* \*

Sim stepped into the gap before I could move.

"Stay back!" Sim roared, his voice startlingly loud. The knights hesitated. And for a moment, I thought he might find himself frozen too. Then he shifted his feet, a sudden surety in how his body moved.

The Name settled in him. It didn't crack like lightning, nor did it whisper. But something in the way he gripped the borrowed blade changed, as though he had always known it.

Iron.

His focus shifted, sharpening into unrelenting precision. Sim's first strike came faster than I'd ever thought him capable, bending his opponent's blade with weight that didn't feel like his own strength. He stepped inside the swing, striking with the assurance of someone guided by more than instinct.

The knights faltered under Sim's fury, iron bending to his will. He cut through one—then another—but each step forward stole the softness from Sim's face. With each strike, his

shoulders hunched, and his limbs trembled, his body wearing the cost of what his mind demanded.

Wil moved to join him, his heavy axe cleaving into one of the knights that came too close. “Sim!” Wil barked. “Fall back!”

Sim didn’t respond.

I called to him, but it was already too late. In his focus, Sim hadn’t spotted the knight flanking from his blind side. A blade cut through his torso with a sick, wet sound.

Wil roared, charging forward and dropping two with reckless strength, but too many blades turned on him. Steel pierced him from every direction, and his body fell with the heavy finality of stone.

Sim collapsed first. He turned wide, panic-filled eyes toward me, and his lips moved soundlessly. Whatever he tried to say crossed into nothingness before it reached me.

\* \* \*

Heat rushed through me. A cold, sharp heat, like a blade dragged over living nerve.

I called the wind by name, but it wasn’t the wind I had summoned before. This Wind came raw and jagged and answered with violent hunger.

It tore through the room, blades of air cutting through Alveron’s knights as though they were paper. Dagon staggered within it, his burned body refusing to fall even as it ripped at what little strength he had.

The storm ebbed only as I stumbled over my own legs. My Alar cracked, broken under its own strain. I didn’t see Dagon lunge until it was too late. His saber drove through my chest. Another soundless gasp became all that was left of me.

Auri’s voice called faintly in my ear: “Kvothe, live. Please.”

And then the Wind was all that remained as I fell.

# CHAPTER 36

## INTERLUDE

### A WEIGHT OF NAMES

**K**OTE STOOD BEHIND THE Waystone Inn's bar, wiping the same mug for the third time, though it gleamed clean under the amber flicker of the hearth. His movements were slow, deliberate, like a man trying to tether himself to the present. Outside, wind pressed against the shutters, a soft howling that always seemed to find its way into this quiet corner of the world.

"You've stopped, you know," Kote said suddenly, his voice low and flat.

The scratch of the Chronicler's quill ceased on the parchment. Kote didn't look up, his hands still tracing the rim of the mug. "Your pen. It's silent. Why?"

Chronicler hesitated before answering. "I suppose..." He shifted in his seat. "I suppose I thought this part of the story wasn't something you'd want... written down."

Kote exhaled sharply, a bitter sound. "You're not wrong." He placed the mug down harder than necessary, the faint clink of it against the wood sharper than the quiet around them. "Some things shouldn't survive the telling."

He turned toward the hearth, one hand bracing himself against the bar, the other pressed to the hollow of his chest. His breathing hitched once, almost imperceptibly. Then it came, heavy and jagged—a sob that ripped free of him like a wound reopened. There it was, the grief he had tucked away in some deep, forgotten corner finally surfacing.

"I led them to their deaths," he said, his voice cracking under the weight of the words. "Wil. Sim. They didn't hesitate. Not once. They walked into that fight knowing they wouldn't come out because..." Kote laughed bitterly, shaking his head. "Because of me. Because I couldn't stand on my own, and they—" He broke off, his knuckles whitening as they gripped the bar.

Chronicler set down his pen with care, the sound deliberate. "Kote—"

"No, let me say this." He finally turned, eyes glassy and rimmed red, but his voice steadied through sheer force of will. "Heroes don't save the day. Not always. The world weaves stories, songs, tales of triumph and wit. But the truth—the brutal, bloody truth—is men like Wil don't get songs. No bard carries their name. No melody hums their feats."

He fumbled into his pocket and pulled out a small vial of milky liquid. For a moment, he simply held it, the firelight refracting through the glass. "Wil was one of them," he

murmured. “Just a man with an axe. All brawn. No training. And yet, when the room filled with knights, when Sim and I were on the edge of breaking, Wil stood. He stood.”

Kote uncorked the vial, tipping some of the liquid into his mouth. His features slackened slightly, smoothing into something quieter, though his voice retained its edge. “He threw himself into them, swinging wildly. Not with skill, no, but with purpose—enough to buy us another few moments. He knew he wouldn’t survive it. Wil always knew where his story would end, and he didn’t try to change it. Tehlu forgive me, it should’ve been mine instead.”

\* \* \*

“And Sim...” Kote’s hand trembled as he set the vial down on the counter. For a long moment, he stared at it as though the answers he sought might be found swirling in its depths. “Simmon the gentle, Sim the scholar,” he said, his voice softening. “The boy who could hardly hold a blade without complaining about the balance. I never thought... Gods, not Sim.”

He ran a hand down his face, the movement slow and wearied. “I don’t even know how it happened. One moment, he’s the same Sim I’ve always known—anxious, overthinking. And the next... He wasn’t just brave. He was something else. Something I don’t have the words for.”

Kote closed his eyes, the silence between his words stretching taut. “He called the Name of Iron. I’ll never know how he found it in him, but he did. There’s something terrifying about seeing someone you love become wrath. He wasn’t swinging a sword—he *was* the sword. Moving like he’d been born to wield it, like his life had been meant for that single moment.”

Chronicler broke the silence this time, a quiet question in his tone. “What did he sacrifice for it?”

“Everything,” Kote said simply. His eyes opened, and for the first time, there was no anger—only fatigue. “Each strike cost him a piece of himself. And when it was over, when the knights were scattered around him in bloody heaps...” A bitter smile tugged at his lips. “He died on his knees. Not from fear. Not from the wounds. From the weight of it. He carried us that day, and it crushed him.”

\* \* \*

The fire crackled, filling the empty spaces between words. Kote leaned forward, resting his forearms on the counter as though trying to ground himself.

After a long pause, he spoke again, quieter now. “The world won’t remember Wil. Or Sim. People like that slip through the cracks of history.” He glanced up at Chronicler, his gaze sharper than before. “But you will. That’s why you’re here, isn’t it? The pen only stops when you choose to let something die.”

Chronicler’s jaw tightened, but he didn’t look away. “What are you asking me to do?”

“Write them,” Kote said firmly. “Not tomorrow. Not today. But someday, when you’re holed up in some frozen cabin with nothing but ink for company, write them. Not the

versions the world would want. Write Wil's clumsy, graceless fight. Write Sim's quiet acts of brilliance. Let them live again, even if it's only in the flicker of a lantern and the scratch of quill on parchment."

Chronicler nodded once, his throat bobbing as he swallowed back whatever words he might have said in return.

Kote exhaled and leaned back. "They deserve more than this poor telling," he added, softer now. "But it's all I have left to give."

The innkeeper reached for the vial again but held back, his hand hovering over it. His eyes drifted toward the hearth, unfocused, distant. Finally, he whispered something under his breath, so softly that Chronicler had to lean forward to catch it.

"Sim... Wil..."

And then the silence closed in, gentle and heavy as snowfall.

At that, Kote pushed himself upright and straightened his apron, the mask of the innkeeper settling back over him. He gestured toward the Chronicler's pen.

"And for now, this part of the story remains yours to write. So keep writing, Chronicler. That's why you're here after all, isn't it?"

He turned toward the hearth again, his voice distant now. "Their story deserves the telling. Even if the world doesn't deserve them."



# CHAPTER 37

## THE BREATH AFTER THE FALL

I FELL, AND the world unraveled in the breathless rush of wind against my ears. The white walls of the Citadel blurred into a chalk line above me, and the jagged hole from the mangonel stared down like an empty, unblinking eye. For a moment, the city's distant rooftops and cobblestone streets painted themselves as a cruel certainty—hard, cold, and absolute.

The wind tore at my clothes and whipped through my hair. My ribs screamed with every movement, each breath a jagged edge. Still, something clawed at my mind—not just panic or instinct, but a part of me that would not surrender. My fingers curled against empty air, reaching like a drowning man toward a memory of strength. Then, past the haze of pain and fear, the light waiting at the edges of my unraveling: the Name of the Wind.

I called it with desperation, wrenching the word from somewhere deep enough to feel primal and raw. The wind hesitated for the briefest moment. Then it obeyed—not gently or kindly, but with brutal, jarring force. The air caught my body in uneven fits, pushing and pulling me like a cruel child toying with a doll. My descent slowed, but the impact still came as an unforgiving shock.

When I finally struck the ground, pain exploded across me like lightning splintering every bone. I lay in the damp grass, my breaths broken and shallow. Faces flickered above me in the distance, pale and stunned as they leaned over the Citadel's jagged wall. Shouts blurred into the background, faint and distant. But my body stayed fixed in its small crater of bruised earth, too broken to heed them. Darkness poured over me, heavy and certain.

\* \* \*

I surfaced with a gasp, lungs burning as though I had been held underwater. At first, I saw only the blurry outline of a figure above me—skin pale, hair dark as spilled ink—but the voice that followed was familiar.

“Reshi, lie still.” Bast's tone held urgency rarely reserved for me, his words sharp but trembling underneath. “You're broken in every possible way. I'll hold you together, but you have to *stop moving* before you finish what the fall couldn't.”

His hands gripped my shoulders lightly, holding me like I might crumble entirely under the weight of his touch. I managed to croak his name, the raw scrape of it across my throat sounding less like a word and more like a dying man's groan.

“You’re alive,” he murmured, almost like the words were meant more for himself.

Then his head snapped toward the sound of approaching footsteps. As the crunch of grass grew louder, Bast’s gold-green eyes darkened. “Well, if it isn’t the queen of impeccable timing,” he said dryly.

“Clever as ever, Bast,” came Denna’s voice. She stepped into view, her frame cutting against the gray sky above, her hair wild and windswept. As always, she willed herself calm, though her sharp glance at my condition betrayed her worry.

“Are you here to slow us down with more riddles and tricks?” Bast growled.

Denna knelt shielded from his scorn, her hands quick and purposeful as they unpinned her cloak. She rolled it into something soft and set it gently beneath my head. “I’m here because someone needs to save him. And you’re wasting air bickering when seconds matter.”

She ignored Bast as he muttered under his breath, turning her full attention to me. “Kvothe,” she murmured, brushing hair from my face, her expression equal parts tender and grim. “We don’t have time. Can you stand?”

The question clawed weakly at my fading awareness. No more than a groan spilled from my lips. Not waiting for an answer, Denna tucked one of my arms over her shoulder and tried lifting, gritting her teeth at the weight. Her strength surprised me, if only dimly, though it was clear even she couldn’t manage it alone.

She turned to Bast, her voice tight but practical. “Help me.”

He bared his teeth in raw frustration—not quite a smile, not quite anger—before slipping his hands beneath my shoulders. “If I snap whatever pieces are holding him together, that’s your fault,” he said.

“I’m used to working against impossible odds,” she replied evenly.

Their movements were clumsy but coordinated, both of them leveraging care against urgency. Together, they half-dragged, half-draped me over the horse waiting nearby. I groaned as they jostled me over the saddle, the pain driving a new wave of black into the edges of my vision. I clung to the leather reins as though they might anchor me, ignoring the warm stickiness under my fingers.

Little flickers of contact between Bast and Denna passed unnoticed by neither of them nor myself: fleeting glances, sharp and wordless, as though a negotiation played out silently in their minds. But I couldn’t hold the sight of them. The ache surged again, and the dark claimed me once more.

\* \* \*

Hours dissolved into indistinct flashes of sensation. The rhythm of the horse’s steps blurred into a lulling monotony of sound while every slight jolt screamed betrayal through my ribs. Faint snatches of their voices reached me: Bast’s sharp-edged curses, Denna’s quieter, tighter handling of answers. One moment bled into the next without clarity of focus.

“How much farther?” Bast snapped, though it sounded more like desperation than impatience.

Denna’s reply barely broke the space between them. “Far enough to matter. And not nearly far enough for you to start complaining.”

When I stirred briefly to the sound of cracks in a dirt path beneath hooves, her voice softened into fragments of a hum—a lullaby perhaps, or something faintly Modegan. Before

the scattered tune could coalesce, I fell back into the drift of pain.

\* \* \*

I awoke to rough wood beneath my hands and sharp edges of sound—stone floors, footsteps, faint shuffles of movement. The room embraced me with dim light, its edges indistinct but safe. Most of me didn't care where I was, so long as there was no shouting, no death.

Denna's voice pulled me back from the haze, low and urgent as she crouched beside me: "Bast, steady his legs."

"Might as well ask me to steady a falling building," Bast muttered, though he followed her instruction without protest. Together, they eased me into what felt like a bed.

Somewhere in the thick fog of my mind, I felt cloth against my chest and hands packing something there. Pressure bloomed briefly, sharp and insistent, before fading into muted relief. Then came the taste of bitterness—a slick liquid forced between my lips, stinging as it tangled with the back of my throat.

"Drink," Denna commanded softly. "And don't argue."

Another swallow, and whatever strength I had left was pulled from me. Still, beyond the ache, a single thought broke through: for Auri. For Sim. For Wil. My hands flexed weakly, clutching at nothing as I gave myself back to exhaustion.

\* \* \*

The ceiling above me was unfamiliar, walnut paneling latticed in shadow by pale light seeping through curtains. At first, I thought I'd been taken back to the Blind Beggar, but no—it was too clean, too orderly. No sour reek of old ale or damp wood clung to the air.

"Denna?" I croaked, my voice thin and brittle, but no answer came. I lay there for a while longer, letting my limbs catch up with my thoughts.

Eventually, I forced myself upright, swinging my legs over the edge of the bed. Agony flared through me, though it was dull and deep now, no longer the sharp fire of fresh wounds. My fingers instinctively went to the worst of it—the place where Dagon's blade had pierced my chest. Bandaging and dark stitches crisscrossed the bruised skin like crude repairs on a shattered lute. Poorly done, but functional.

My shoulder, where the crossbow bolt had struck earlier, bore similar handiwork. "Amateur," I muttered, while some distant, softer part of me allowed I might have been dead without it. Denna's work, no doubt.

As I examined the rest of my affronted body, mottled with bruises in purples, yellows, and faint greens, memories of the Tower crept into my mind unbidden. Sim. Wil. My breath hitched sharply. My weakened legs threatened to give out, but I braced myself against a table, unwilling to crumble just yet.

I spied my torn clothes draped over a nearby chair, and Caesura lying on a table opposite. My shaed hung there, untouched and waiting like a second skin. Dressing was a slow process, each motion a deliberate test of will. Sliding my shirt over my head pulled at the

stitches in uncomfortable ways; pulling on my trousers was no less forgiving. But when I threw the shaed over my shoulders, a strange, fragile relief washed over me, as though I'd reclaimed something vital.

It was then I found it—a pressure in my pocket. I reached inside, withdrawing the compass Wil had made for us in the Tower. I turned it over slowly in my hands, remembering its purpose: to find each other when all seemed lost. “If Denna still has hers...” The idea formed weakly in my thoughts but burned brighter with every passing second. This was something. A thread.

\* \* \*

I stepped gingerly into the street, the hood of my shaed pulled low. The aches in my body surged with every step, but I pressed onward. The sign above creaked faintly in the wind, and it wasn't until I turned to look at it—the painted image of a willow intertwined with a blossoming rose—that I realized I knew the name: *The Willow Blossom*.

Denna's sanctuary. Clever of her to bring me here. The White Citadel and Alveron's men wouldn't think to look for me in such an unassuming place.

For the first time since the Tower, a flicker of resolve sparked within me. I was alive, and I intended to make that matter. There was still so much to do, so much to reckon with. For now, I clung to hope: that Denna was still out there, that Auri had survived, that somewhere in all of this, I would find a way forward.

# CHAPTER 38

## THE WOLF AND THE OWL

**T**HE STREETS OF Renere twisted around me like a cruel, unending maze. My steps wavered, each one a sharp reminder of the bruises still painted across my body. The shadows stretched as the sun fell lower, blurring the crooked architecture into jagged silhouettes. I had been following the compass for what felt like hours, the bobbing needle's frantic motion my only guide. When it suddenly surged and stilled, my pulse quickened.

I turned a corner, entering another narrow alley, and finally heard something: a man shouting. His voice was gruff and gravel-edged, the kind that cracked with too many years of practiced anger. I slowed, pressing myself to the damp brick walls. The sound came from a derelict tavern ahead, its sign hanging crooked on rusted chains.

Moving carefully, I approached one of the boarded windows. Through the gaps, I caught sight of Denna. She was sitting inside, her head bowed, arms folded tightly in her lap. The man standing before her was tall and white-haired, his back to me as he leaned in close, his gestures wide and furious. His voice was too muffled to make out, but his tone sliced through the air like the edge of a knife.

Instead of entering immediately, I circled to a side door and found it unlocked. Slipping inside, I stayed low and silent, creeping toward the sound of their argument. Only fragments of the conversation reached me at first.

"This is how you repay me?" The man's voice carried cold authority, its weight pricking at the edges of some vague memory. "After everything I've done for you, you lie to me?"

"I brought what you asked for," Denna replied, her voice trembling but steady. "Why do you need him so badly? Why does it have to be Kvothe?"

The man spun on her, his words sharp and venomous. "Because I told you so! You don't have to understand, only obey. You are what I made you—an instrument of my will!"

I stayed hidden, though the urge to intervene burned in my chest. The man's tone, the way he loomed over her, felt uncomfortably familiar. Was this him? Her patron? The enigmatic Master Ash?

Denna flinched as he raised his hand. "Please, I can't—"

The crack of his palm meeting her cheek snapped through the room, loud as a splitting branch. She staggered, one hand flying to her face, her sharp intake of breath cutting into me like glass.

I didn't hesitate. My pain, my bruises, none of it mattered. I surged forward, closing the distance in two furious strides and driving my fist into the side of the man's face. He sprawled back onto the wooden floorboards with a startled grunt, his cane clattering beside him.

Denna turned, fear written across her swollen face. Her lip quivered as she stepped between us, her palms pressing against my chest. “Don’t,” she whispered urgently, glancing back at the fallen man. “Please, Kvothe, just leave.”

I ignored her, my eyes fixed on him. Then he looked up, and so did I. The light caught his face just so, and the world turned on its head. It was Bredon.

Bredon, the owlsh old man I had shared countless cups of wine and games of Tak with in Severen. The man I had trusted.

My stomach churned as I stared at him, this wolf in sheep’s clothing. Memories of the Citadel, of the Cthaeh’s cruel words, screamed back at me: *He beats her, you know.*

“I see you’ve finally joined us,” Bredon said dryly, brushing dust from his dark, embroidered coat as though I had insulted him rather than struck him. “This makes things... efficient.” His tone cut at the edges, mocking and weightless, as if this were all just a joke.

“You bastard,” I spat, the words hot and heavy on my tongue. “What kind of man are you?”

Denna tugged at me, her voice pleading. “Kvothe, please, you promised you wouldn’t get involved!”

But I couldn’t stop staring. Behind Bredon, on the table, sat something I hadn’t noticed until now—a dark roah wood box. My blood froze. “Why do you have that?” I demanded, pointing at the Loeclos Box.

Denna didn’t answer right away. She looked at the floor, the pain on her face impossible to read. “He said... he said he could help me translate it,” she said weakly. “I thought if I gave it to him, maybe...” She choked on the words. “I just didn’t want to lose you.”

Her voice cracked at the edges, a threadbare whisper. She leaned into me then, her warmth frail against my chest. I felt her tears wetting my shirt as she whispered, “Please, let’s just leave. Please.”

For a moment, both rage and reason warred within me. I could see it so clearly—cross the room, take the box, and gut the man who had wormed his way into both her life and mine. But then she pressed closer, and something in me softened. “Okay,” I said through clenched teeth, “but not before I have what’s mine.”

As I stepped forward, Bredon blocked my path with his cane. I grabbed his wrist, but before I could shove him aside, a freezing sensation bit into my hand. Sharply, unnaturally cold.

I looked down. The ring on my finger—a simple band of water dyed pale blue—was crystallizing into ice. My breath caught as memory surged forward from the recesses of my mind: *You will know them by their signs.* My head snapped up.

“Cinder.” The word eked out of my throat like poison.

And then his smile shifted. It spread too far, impossibly wide. It was no longer Bredon sitting before me, but Cinder—the being who had torn my life apart, killed my parents, and laughed while doing so.

The air around us crackled like brittle frost. My hand flew to Caesura, and I drew her clean, the blade whispering like a drawn breath. My strikes came wild, vicious, but Cinder moved like flowing water, each of my blows cutting empty air.

“Angry, are we?” he said mockingly, sidestepping another ill-timed slash. His grey sword, dull and lifeless as the edge of a gravestone, flashed into existence from his ash-colored robes with serpentine grace.

I lashed out again, slamming Caesura toward his throat, but he met the strike casually, moving faster than seemed possible. Each clash of our blades sent shivers spiraling through

Caesura's edge. With every parry, the sound of her strain grew louder, more dazzlingly acute, until—

She shattered.

The broken fragments of my blade clattered to the floor like teardrops.

Before I could recover, Cinder's blade swept past me, grazing my ribs with a whisper of cold death, and he turned his gaze to Denna.

"Ferula!" I screamed, raising a binding, but my strength was fading, and his resistance was a ravenous force. He staggered but reached her regardless.

His hand closed around her arm, dragging her close. The grey blade pressed to her throat, and my body froze. "Drop what's left of your sword," he said, his voice now low and rasping with something unhuman.

I let Caesura's hilt fall, my mind spinning helplessly.

"Ah," Cinder said with evident amusement. "Now we're getting somewhere."

And then he spoke a name, once, twice, thrice: *Alaxel. Alaxel. Alaxel.*

The air tore open. Darkness boiled into being with a soundless howl, taking shape as figures cloaked in shadow. One, wreathed in a mantle of all-consuming black, stepped forward.

Haliax.

The air turned suffocating as he spoke. "Do you have what we seek?"

Cinder smiled, holding out the Loeclos Box and gesturing toward me. "I do, Lord Haliax. Both of them."

Haliax's gaze—or what passed for a gaze—settled on me. I stepped forward, my chest heaving. I wouldn't abandon Denna. Not now. Not ever.

The darkness reached for me.

# CHAPTER 39

## THE WEIGHT OF SHADOWS

**T**HE WORLD FOLDED and turned inside out, and I was torn from the decrepit taproom. Haliar didn't cast a spell, not in any sense I recognized. This magic was old—primal, raw. It turned the air to syrup, thick and heavy, pulling at me like unseen hands. For a moment, I stood empty in a howling void, shaken and weightless, before reality reformed around me.

Cold air hit my face, sharp as a razor. The darkness peeled away like storm clouds, revealing a jagged outcrop of stone jutting high above the world. The moon hung low on the horizon, swollen and pale, its light cold against the cracked expanse of the mountain landscape. The ground beneath my feet felt wrong—foreign. The stones were too smooth, their edges too sharp, as if the earth here still remembered the Shapers' hands.

A sputtering red light flared ahead. Haliar held a pale candle in the crook of his shadowed hand, its flame unnaturally bright and crimson, throwing jagged splinters of light across the uneven cliff. "We move," he said, his voice quiet but cutting, like a sword drawing from its sheath. "There is much yet to do."

A hard shove pressed into my back. I turned, unsteady, to find a woman with eyes like frostbitten glass staring at me. Her mouth was covered by a crude stitch of pigskin, leaving her features disturbingly incomplete. Her eyeless smile told me more than words would have anyway. She tilted her head, gesturing with a short silver blade toward the path ahead.

I stumbled forward, each reluctant step crunching against loose stone. Denna drifted to my side, her face pale and tight, her arms folded against the chill. "I didn't know," she whispered, voice low but urgent, like a confession meant for both of us. "I swear, I didn't know what they were—what he was."

"You couldn't have," I said, though the words felt heavier than I meant them to. "You trusted him. We both did."

Her eyes flicked toward the hulking shapes in the distance—Cinder, Alenta, and the others. Her voice cracked, trembling with something raw. "Kvothe, I never meant for this to happen. I didn't—"

"It's fine," I said too quickly. "We'll figure this out. But I need to know everything. What did Ash—what did *he* want from you?"

Denna hesitated, her gaze locked on the ground as she walked. "Research," she admitted finally. "He had me looking into old families—names like Loeclos and Laclith. Stories about Lanre, half-forgotten songs. He kept me moving from one city to the next, gathering scraps. At first, I thought it was harmless. Call me naive if you want. I thought... I thought he was helping me." Denna folded in on herself, her arms tightening. "Now I'm not so sure."



I kept my tone neutral. “And the Loeclos Box? How did it end up with him?”

“I thought it might protect you,” she said, her voice soft and brittle. “There was so much I didn’t understand. He promised it would help, that he’d translate the markings. That it would keep you safe.” Her eyes begged for forgiveness, but I couldn’t find the words to give it.

Instead, I pressed the question rattling in my skull. “Denna, what do you think they want with us?”

Her answer didn’t come in words, just a look—a tightening of her lips, a flicker of fear in her eyes. I didn’t need her to say it aloud. She didn’t know.

Ahead, Cinder turned, his grin sharp and predatory in the moonlight. “Patience,” he called, the word dripping with mockery. “All will be revealed soon enough.”

I stumbled closer, heat pulling into my chest. It was reckless, but the question boiled over anyway. “Why should we believe anything you say? You’re Chandrian. Betrayers. Murderers. You’ve spent centuries lording over ash and ruin.”

The grin dropped from Cinder’s face like a stone cast into deep water. Haliarx turned slowly, shadows thickening around him, swallowing the light from the crimson flame. The ground trembled beneath his voice. “You think you *know* something?” he seethed. “You speak the Amyr’s lies, parroting their feeble truths. You know nothing, boy.”

His shadow surged forward, drowning the light of the moon, his presence pressing against me like a storm about to break. “We gave everything,” he hissed, his voice louder now, echoing against the mountains like an ancient wound reopened. “Our lives, our loves, our names, all sacrificed to save those who danced on our graves.”

“And now you slaughter innocents.” My voice was steel, sharper than I’d expected under the crushing weight of his ire. “Families. Children. Cities turned to ash.”

He recoiled, just barely, the shadows around him flickering like dying coals. Then his voice softened, quieter than before but hitched with something hollow. “Burn,” he murmured. “Do you think we burn without reason? You would not endure the lives we’ve lived, the memories that bite and gnaw at us like dogs at our heels.”

It was Denna’s soft gasp that made me look away—a hand pressed to my chest, a pommel digging sharp into my ribs. Usnea leaned close enough that I felt her ice-edged breath against my neck. “Another word, boy,” she hissed from behind her mask, “and I’ll cut her pretty little ears clean off.”

I didn’t doubt her.

\* \* \*

The silence of the walk stretched for what felt like hours, broken only by the crunch of gravel underfoot. The wind cut cruelly across the mountain face, coiling around us like a living thing. The path led to a flat expanse of raw stone, strewn with outcrops and jagged broken rocks. Haliarx came to a stop at its edge, his gaze cutting across the massive plateau below.

I approached cautiously, peering over the edge. The sight below stopped my breath. A vast flat expanse stretched in every direction, but the center of the plateau held a perfect circle excavated into the earth, surrounded by a ridge of piled stone and dirt. The enormity of it was staggering—its intentional design unmistakable, but its purpose terrifyingly unclear.

“Come,” Haliar said, his tone calm once more. The rust-veined moonlight lit the edges of his shadow like embers. “It is time.”

We slid down the crater’s slope, loose earth shifting beneath our boots. Inside the bowl, the space felt even more massive, its center a shrine to quiet, ancient power. Haliar placed a pale candle on the ground first, the red flame flickering unnaturally high in the darkness. Then he lit a second candle, this one a deep, greasy black. Its flame didn’t glow—it darkened. Its mere presence swallowed any light the stars above tried to lend.

As the black flame burned, shapes began to rise out of the darkness. What I’d thought were scattered stones grew into towering obelisks, forming two concentric rings. At their heart, the largest stone loomed: a massive trilithon, its top lintel spanning larger than Anker’s inn, and beneath it, a curtain of shadows darker than deep night.

Haliar turned his gaze to the heavens as though tracing some ancient constellation only he could see. The low moon lit his shadow-cloaked form, its light breaking across him like water against rock.

“The time has come,” he said, his voice low but unyielding. “Bring him and the box to me.”

Stercus’ hands gripped my arm, the weight of his calloused fingers biting into the bruises beneath my shirt. Alenta seized my other, her fingers cold and unrelenting. They dragged me forward, each step grinding resistance into the loose earth beneath my boots. Haliar stood ominously still, a monolith carved from darkness. From his hand, the black Loeclos Box dangled with all the careless gravity of a blade about to fall.

“You will open it,” Haliar commanded, his shadow-thick voice slipping past my ribs and settling somewhere deep and unshakable.

The box seemed to absorb the moonlight, its surface unyielding, alien. “I don’t know how,” I managed through the tight cage of my chest.

Cinder’s laugh splintered the silence, fractured and sharp as shattering glass. He stepped closer, his pale face alight with cruel delight. “That’s no trouble. We’ll teach you.”

At Haliar’s imperceptible nod, Alenta gripped my wrist with one hand as her other brought forth a blade, quicksilver under the moon. She drove it cleanly into my palm.

I screamed, the sound driven from me like wind through a broken pane. The heat of it—searing and alive—was unbearable, a wildfire tearing through nerves and bone. Then came the cold, immediate and unforgiving, a glacier’s breath filling the hollow left by the pain. My fingers hung limp, alien and useless. Crimson drops splattered the ebony box, soaking into its surface like rain into parched soil.

“Open it,” Haliar repeated, his words more profound than any marked command.

I remained silent, gasping and dizzy as the weight of the moment began to tilt the world, the box swimming in and out of focus.

“Open it,” he hissed again, and this time his voice drew tight around my mind like a snare. “Or we will take that same blade to her.”

His shadow-woven arm extended, pointing past the circle of beasts and figures to Denna, who stood motionless at the edge of the gathering, her hands folded against her chest. The tremor in her stance betrayed her strength.

“No—” I choked out, then gathered enough air for my next words to feel sharp. “Don’t touch her.”

“Then heed me.” Haliar’s vow hung heavy. “For every fraction of hesitation, my purpose will be carried out on her instead.”

I met Denna’s gaze then—wide, fearful, and resolutely fixed on me. There was no room for stubborn defiance under that weight. I crumbled. “Edro,” I muttered.

The lid of the Loeclos Box clicked open with a sound that reverberated through the night, as though the locks of a hundred ancient vaults had suddenly disengaged. I flinched, waiting—expecting fire, light, the shattering wail of forgotten worlds to pour forth. But there was none of that.

The interior was padded, lined with material dark as pitch and eerie in its perfection, as though no human hand had ever touched it. Nestled within was a single shard of black stone, no larger than Caesura's shattered tip. Haliar plucked it out with strange reverence, holding it aloft as the moon painted eerie edges across its surface.

"Our suffering ends tonight," he announced, the words vibrating like the pluck of a string between the jagged stones. His shadowed figure turned toward Denna, ominous in its simplicity. "Bring her."

"No!" I scrambled to my feet, more desperate than I'd ever been. "Take whatever you need from me—just leave her out of this!"

Haliar surveyed me, his head tilting beneath that gathering void of shadow. When he spoke, his voice softened, which somehow made it all the worse. "For what comes next, Kvothe, you cannot help."

Suddenly, I was seized again, thrown aside like a discarded banner. I hit the ground hard, the impact punching air from my lungs. When I recovered enough to look, Denna was standing before him, her frailty outlined in the harsh moonlight.

"Cinder speaks of your talents," Haliar said, his tone distant, almost fond. He held out the shard to her, its sharp edge casting an unnatural, liquid gleam. "Now you will sing. Look upon the door, and sing the words that are forsworn there."

She faltered, her voice a quaking fragment. "I don't—"

"Do not look at it," Haliar interrupted, seizing her chin with his skeletal hand, forcing her face forward. The dark shape of the ancient stone arch loomed like a mouth against the horizon. "See it!"

Denna trembled, tears slipping down her cheeks, but her gaze became distant, fixed, as though the arch were rewriting her. Seconds passed, and the silence of the gathering deepened, heavy as an executioner's hood.

Dalcanti approached her then, her mask drawn back to reveal her ghostly, ruined face. She whispered something into Denna's ear, her words sharp and cruel as shattered ice.

Denna's eyes widened as they met mine briefly—frantic, questioning, betrayed. And then, like a marionette pulled by its strings, she drew in a long, shuddering breath and opened her mouth.

What came from her was not song in any way I had ever known it. Three clear notes rippled into the air, cutting and unyielding, impossible in their perfection. They carried the texture of stones grinding beneath deep water, of doors long closed and forgotten creaking wide to let nightmares through. Light thrummed in the space between stone, bending and shivering.

The black stone arch rippled, its curtain-like darkness bulging outward, swelling toward us as the ground beneath began to shake. A deep, resonating thrum escaped from the door—a heartbeat, dreadful and primal, echoing into bone and marrow.

Shapes pressed against the dark veil, too strange to process, and then they poured forth: wolves the size of horses, their jaws dripping molten ruin; birds with human teeth glinting through their hooked beaks; spiders tall enough to blot the moon, their eyeless forms scabbling forward.

The air cracked again, and through the crowd of horrors, something else emerged. Taller, larger, and infinitely worse—the spindly figure of Iax. His flesh hung in shadowed tatters, his

wiry arms stretched unnaturally long, and from beneath a dripping curtain of black hair, his hollowed-out face grinned a mirthless mockery of joy.

“Welcome, Dreamer,” Haliax said with a strange kind of reverence.

Iax’s soulless eyes surveyed us, fixing on Haliax. A laugh boiled from his throat, rust on iron, wheezing and jagged. “Lanre,” he said, soft and full of dark humor. “How fitting that you would stand here, among the ruins you wrought, to set me free.”

Haliax raised the shard of black stone, his voice steady despite the tremor in his shadow. “Not free—not yet. I come seeking your power. Our curse has run long, our torment endless. I ask your boon, Dreamer. Free us.”

Iax’s laugh deepened into something brutal, scarred and ancient. “Ask, then, hero of old. Tell me, what price would you have me pay for your deliverance?”

Haliax stood straighter. For the first time, I thought I saw something fragile at his core. “Shatter the curse. Burn these shadows to smoke, and let me pass through the doors of death.”

Iax considered this, his head tilting farther than it should. With a word—a sound that crushed the very air around it—he took the shard, smote it into dust, and scattered it into the wind.

The shadow coiling around Haliax melted away, revealing the face of a man who had fallen long before history was written. He reached up, touching his own cheek, a sob escaping his trembling lips. “It has been so long,” Lanre murmured. “Too long.”

Then, he turned, smiling faintly. “Someone... someone end it.”

Cinder obliged.

The blade sank deep, and Lanre collapsed, the bitter smile still gracing his face as shadows stirred and the candle hissed out.

# CHAPTER 40

## CINDER

**“WE’RE FREE,”** CINDER said, his voice spilling over with a relief so vast it bordered on reverence. He turned to the other Chandrian, the remnants of shadow still licking at their forms as they came together, each embracing the others with something raw, desperate, and uncomfortably human.

The sight turned my stomach. This wasn’t freedom—they didn’t deserve joy. My parents, my troupe, the cities they had reduced to ash—every atrocity they had so effortlessly wrought stacked like cords of firewood in my mind. They deserved punishment. Justice. Not this celebration. Yet as my hands curled into fists at my side, a bitter truth struck me: what could I, alone, truly do? Even with all my anger, all my fury, I was still only one man standing against centuries of slaughter.

And then it happened. A thread of memory, faint but clear, drifted through the chaos. Marten’s words, dry with meaning. “Call me the proper way, and I will come.” The Eld had shown me more than I had understood at the time. Perhaps, even now, there was still a chance.

I stepped forward, feeling the air in my lungs burn as I drew it deeper. Then, I spoke.

“Great Tehlu, roll me in your wings. Protect me from demons and creatures that walk in the night.”

No response. None of them so much as glanced my way.

I raised my voice, louder and fiercer. “Tehlu, in his name, watch over me!”

A tremor flickered through the group like a ripple in still water, but still, there was no immediate reaction. My voice grew sharper, rising like a blade from its scabbard. “Tehlu, shelter me from iron and anger!”

Cinder’s head turned slightly, his face narrowing with curiosity as he sought my voice.

“Tehlu, who the fire could not kill, watch over me in fire!” I roared, the words pulling something vast and ancient out from deep within me. This time, more eyes followed: Tenet’s pale ones, Usnea’s frostbitten gaze, even Iax’s monstrous shape cocked its heavy head toward me.

“Tehlu, who held Encanis to the wheel, watch over me in darkness! Tehlu, whose eyes are true, watch over me! TEHLU, SON OF YOURSELF, IN YOUR NAME, WATCH OVER ME!”

“Kill him!” Cinder bellowed, his sharp tenor cutting through the stunned silence. He broke into a sprint, his blade like raw winter in his hand, gleaming and deadly.

Stercus surged toward me first, his massive form barreling through the night. But the wind—the wind was mine. I shouted, and it answered. A tremendous gust lifted him clear off

the ground, tossing him like a scrap of parchment battered by the storm.

Another came for me, Usnea's silver blade poised to strike. With another roar, I called the air, and the gale howled, sending her crashing shoulder first into the black arch. But there were too many, their numbers rising like the tide—unstoppable.

Cinder hurled himself forward, the dull gray sword in his hand aimed for my heart.

A crack of lightning split the sky, blinding white and sharp as shattered glass. The air itself shook, and the plateau was illuminated as though the noonday sun had broken through the gloom. Another bolt carved deep into the earth, spilling fire and stone into the air, scattering both Chandrian and nightmare beasts alike. The heavens screamed in defiance, and then I saw them.

Eight figures descended, wreathed in divine flame. Wings burned bright against the carved night, their light cutting through the terrible shadow. Tehlu's angels had come, their presence undeniable, their fury absolute.

At the first touch of their burning swords, chaos erupted. They moved like fire itself, blinding and unrelenting. Chandrian and monstrosities fell equally beneath their blades, screams rising like bitter smoke.

I stood frozen, the sheer force of ancient power consuming everything around me. "Time to go," I whispered sharply to Denna, grabbing her wrist.

We ran for the ridge as the battle roared behind us, the host's guttural wails carving through the night. My thoughts rallied around one clear purpose: escape. It wasn't until the barbed sound of a voice pierced my ears that the terror set back in.

"Where do you think you're going?"

Cinder materialized before us, his matte black eyes gleaming with cruel amusement. He stalked forward, lips twitching into a feral grin. "You thought you could slip away? Foolish children."

I called the wind, a wall of air screaming between us, but Cinder planted his blade in the soil and braced, his form unmoving. With a sharp laugh, he moved again, too fast, too precise. My panic surged as I realized his target wasn't me—it was Denna.

"No!" I threw myself forward, a collision of desperation and instinct driving me. My body sailed toward him, but Cinder's deft grace betrayed my clumsy attack. He spun like lightning, and I saw the glint of his sword too late.

Pain shot through my left hand.

Then a deeper, quieter pain washed over me as three of my fingers fell to the ground.

I choked back a scream, staggering under the savage blow, but even as agony coursed through me, something in my chest burned brighter. Fury took root. My mutilation wasn't the end—it was a spark. Defiance surged, raw and terrible.

With all my weight, I drove into him, tackling him to the ground. My fists slammed against his face, raw and breaking with each impact as his nose crumpled under the blows. I grabbed wildly, finding purchase in his silver hair, and smashed the back of his skull into the unforgiving earth.

Cinder roared, throwing me aside with inhuman strength. He pinned me, bringing his fists down like stones. My face went slack from the impacts, blood filling my mouth as my vision blurred. He grinned, the same grin he wore the day he took everything from me.

The rage returned.

My ruined hand rose to his face, smearing my blood across his eyes. With his vision blinded, I scrambled, but his sword appeared in his hand as though summoned by his will. He drove his boot into my chest, pinning me to the earth, raising the blade high.

Then he froze.

Behind him, Denna stood, her breaths short and sharp, her hand clutching a small dagger buried in the back of his neck. For one moment, all her trembling fear vanished as she met his gaze.

“Pity,” Cinder growled. “You would’ve made a fine apprentice.”

He plunged his blade into her abdomen.

“NO!” I screamed, my voice breaking with raw anguish. A gale swelled beneath my fury, and the wind exploded outward, tearing Cinder from the ground and sending him spinning through the dark chaos.

I was beside Denna in an instant.

“Help me up,” she whispered, clutching the wound as her blood seeped between her fingers.

I obeyed, hauling her to her feet as we half-ran, half-stumbled toward the ridge. The carnage behind us dwindled into background noise. Survival became everything.

But I turned. I don’t know why I turned, but I did, and I saw Cinder pull the shiv from his neck, tossing it aside. As he met my eye, I knew in my heart of hearts, he’d never stop now, that his first goal in this new lease on life would be to hunt us down.

In that moment, staring back into his coal black eyes, I was suddenly perfectly awake, the world around me unveiled. I saw Cinder as he truly was, down to the root of his very being.

His entire life became an open book to me. How his mistakes and regret had shaped him into the heartless creature he’d become. I saw then the young man within the walls of Murella, who those closest had once considered virtuous, but over the long centuries, the malice that existed within him had taken hold. I saw the blood upon his hands, how he had betrayed his people, and burnt down their sacred silver tree, how this act and the centuries of torment that followed had made him bitter, and cruel.

I lifted my ruined hand, blood spilling onto the ground, my voice filled with all the power that still stirred in me. “By my own blood, I bind you. By your own name, let you be accursed.” I roared a word, a chill wind tearing across the mountainside as I spoke the long name that lived at the heart of Cinder’s being. “This is my doom upon you! Your own name shall be turned against you! You, and all who follow you, will know no peace. This is my doom upon you!”

At that moment, Cinder’s face twisted to fury. He lunged—only to be met by a burning sword as one of Tehlu’s angels descended upon him.

Denna tugged at my arm, her voice weak and pleading. “Let’s go.”

And so, we fled into the night.

# CHAPTER 41

## THREADBARE AND BOUNDLESS

WE DIDN'T RUN so much as stagger from the battle. The screams of the Chandrian and the thunder of Tehlu's angels tore holes in the night behind us, but we kept moving, one agonizing step after another. Denna clutched her side, her hand slick with blood, and the dusk-light of her face grew paler with every uneven stride. My mouth was dry. My legs ached. My mind replayed the scene again and again: the flash of Cinder's blade, Denna's knife buried in his neck. Her gasp when he struck her.

Down the craggy mountain slopes we fled, boots scraping against loose stone, the cold air burning our lungs. When the first dim flickers of sunlight appeared on the horizon, we reached the foothills, a sparse scattering of ironwood and desert willow. Finally, we stopped, collapsing into the shadows of the thickets. I peeled off my shirt, which was damp with sweat, and wiped the blood clear from my hands. Then I turned to Denna.

"I'm fine," she muttered, though she couldn't lift her head.

"No, you're not." My voice was harsher than I intended.

The rising sun laid plain what darkness had concealed. The wound in her stomach was red and wet, the skin around it swollen. My heart clenched as I recognized the cruelty of the injury: a blow meant to kill slowly. A wound intended to make the victim suffer as much from despair as pain. I'd seen enough in the Medica to know the signs, to understand the odds. I swallowed hard, shoving those thoughts aside.

"You're lucky I'm desperate and clever," I said, trying to force a quip through the tightening of my throat.

Denna gave a breathless laugh that sounded more like a cough.

I ripped the last clean strip of fabric from my now-tattered shirt and pressed it tightly against her wound. Then, with shaking fingers, I pulled at the edge of my shaed. The shadow resisted me, stubborn as a mule. It thinned and stretched, trying to snap back into place, but I dug my nails into it, and at last, a thread of darkness unraveled. I used it to stitch Denna's wound. By the time I was done, my hands ached and sweat dripped off my nose into the dirt.

Denna's faint smile had faded, replaced by a pale grim line. "That looks like something out of a nightmare," she said, staring at my work.

"It's keeping you alive," I said, more sharply than I meant. "Let's move. We need water."

\* \* \*



The desert stretched before us, an endless, sun-scorched expanse. I held the shaed above us to shield Denna from the worst of the heat, but the unstitched strand had frayed something vital in its magic. The edges of the shadow-borne cloak began to shred and tremble in the dry wind. It unraveled slowly—a thread curling away here, a piece of darkness tearing loose there—until all that remained was a single scrap the size of my hand.

I stared at it for a long moment and then tucked it gently into my pocket. Denna stirred weakly beside me.

“Bad luck?” she asked, her voice thin.

“For the shaed, maybe.” I gestured toward the endless sand. “We’ve still got worse to worry about.”

We walked for hours, and Denna leaned against me more and more. When she faltered, I carried her, ignoring the fire burning in my legs and back. I counted my breaths. I counted my steps. I told myself if I reached one hundred, I’d let myself think of water. Of shade. Of sleep.

On the second day, I nearly wept at the sight of a figure far ahead, shimmering in the heat haze. At first, I thought it was a mirage, a cruel trick of the desert. But the closer we came, the sharper the silhouette became: a wide-brimmed hat, a pack laden with wares, and the unmistakable hunch of a Tinker trudging across the dunes. I quickened my pace, though my every muscle screamed in protest.

The Tinker turned, and his face brightened when he saw us. “Ho there! Stragglers in the sands!”

By the time we reached him, Denna was barely conscious. “Water,” I croaked.

He handed me a leather skin with a look of pity. I poured some into Denna’s mouth before taking a swig myself. It tasted of sweat and old leather, but in that moment, I swore it to be more precious than wine.

“I have little else to spare,” the Tinker said, gesturing to his pack. “A bit of hard bread. Some cloth to wrap your faces. Not much. The desert takes more than it gives.”

“We’ll take anything you can offer,” I said, brushing the sand from my hand as I reached for the pouch at my belt. It wasn’t much: a few iron drabs, a chipped ring, a broken gearwheel I’d never finished repairing.

The Tinker shook his head. His eyes fell to Denna’s hand, where her slim silver ring glittered faintly. She must have realized it too, because she spoke just as I opened my mouth to argue.

“Take it,” she whispered firmly, twisting the ring from her finger. “It’s fine. It was never... never mine to begin with.”

The Tinker hesitated, then nodded solemnly and handed over the supplies. I tried not to look at Denna as she leaned back against me, as if no longer holding the ring had drained something out of her.

“Northwest from here,” the Tinker said, squinting against the horizon. “Follow the dunes until they dip. You’ll find a tribe of Tahl in half a day if your legs hold out.”

I nodded and helped Denna to her feet.

\* \* \*

We did not find the Tahl tribe in half a day, nor in two. By the third, the last of the bread was gone, and not a drop remained in the skin. Denna grew too weak to walk at all. Her breathing slowed, her murmurs lost the shimmer of her usual wit, and worst of all, a sweet, cloying scent began to rise from her wound.

I carried her as far as I could, my legs trembling with each step. My world shrank to the sensation of the burning sun overhead and Denna's weight against my chest. I spoke to her to pass the time, half to distract her and half to keep myself from breaking apart entirely. "We'll be fine. Just a few more miles and we'll come across an oasis. Or someone will find us. I'll trade them... well, I haven't much left, but I'll think of something. You know me. Clever, remember?"

Denna didn't reply.

I stumbled, my knees buckling beneath me. The sand gave way as I fell, my arms still wrapped around her. I lay there, tasting dust on my tongue. Weak and spent, I felt the weight of hopelessness drag across my chest, heavier than Denna had been.

Thin clouds shifted lazily above me, pale and distant—out of reach.

## CHAPTER 42

### SEVEN WORDS FOR SILENCE

WE LAY THERE in the endless desert, the sun a hot hammer beating down on both of us. I kept Denna's hand in mine, as if the contact alone was enough to keep her tethered to the world. Around us, the sand shimmered, an ocean without a shore. Somewhere far away, I could hear the dry screaming of the wind, but here, where we lay, there was only silence. A silence I dreaded, because I knew it would grow deeper if Denna took her last breath.

The thirst was maddening. My lips were split and bleeding, each swallow catching in my throat like broken glass. I tried not to think of it. Eyes half-lidded, thoughts dulled by exhaustion, I reached out to the world. I searched for water with every scrap of Naming I could summon. I felt the deep pull of the sand, but the water buried there was too far down. Too far to hear. Too far to Name.

Denna stirred beside me, drawing in a sharp, ragged breath. I turned to her and saw her lips moving faintly, though no words came. For a moment, I thought she was leaving me already. Then I heard it. A strange throaty chanting, carried faintly by the wind. My cracked mind dismissed it as delirium, but it was real. The rhythm of the voices shifted and grew louder, closer.

Strength I didn't know I had flared in me, enough to lift my ruined hand into the air. I waved it weakly, felt the dried blood crack along my bandaged fingers. "Help!" My voice came out hoarse, more a whisper than a shout. I tried again, biting through the pain of my parched throat. "Please... help us..."

For what felt like an eternity, nothing changed. Then a figure stepped into view, blotting out the sun.

\* \* \*

The Tahl saved us. There's no simpler way to say it. They gave us water, breaking the flask over our lips and letting it trickle down slowly. Denna sputtered but swallowed, though I could see the fever in her eyes, burning too brightly. They gave us food—flat bread and a spiced mash I couldn't name. Denna managed only a few bites. I ate more, though my hands trembled the whole time.

Trying to talk to the Tahl was like trying to make a bridge out of wind. I tried everything—Aturan, Temic, even broken Chaeldish—but they only stared back at me, uncomprehending. Finally, one of their women, older and gray-haired, gestured for me to

wait. When she returned, she signed in halting Adem hand-talk: slow, deliberate, each motion deliberate and careful.

*Help her, I pleaded in the silent, sharp hand-language. Please.*

Her sharp eyes softened. She crouched beside Denna and examined her wounds, her hands sure and steady. Then, without a word, she rose and went to speak with the others. Their voices grew heated, the cadence of disagreement clear even though I couldn't understand their tongue. When the old woman returned, she was flanked by two men, broad and grim-faced. They carried Denna delicately, almost reverently, onto a makeshift stretcher. Her lips parted slightly, murmuring something faint and unintelligible, her brow beaded with sweat.

We walked for hours beneath the failing sun, the stretch of endless desert giving way at last to clusters of trees. They were strange things, the trees of the Tahl oasis: broad, flat-topped, with bark that gleamed faintly silver beneath the last slanting rays of light. There was sound among the trees—not the dry rustle of leaves, but something more, an eerie, melodic hum like low voices caught on the breeze.

The nomads brought us into the heart of their encampment. Tents and yurts sprawled around the faint sparkle of the oasis, where water glinted in the moonlight. They carried Denna into the shade. Despite the relief from the sun, she worsened—her fever spiked, her words turning to desperate, senseless babble. Her hand found mine, gripping weakly as I knelt beside her.

A woman approached, older than the oldest I'd ever seen, her skin marked by deep lines, her eyes sharp despite her years. She crouched low, placing a wrinkled hand on Denna's forehead.

"She is very weak," she said in broken Aturan, her voice a quiet rasp.

My heart clenched. "I've heard... there are healers among your people," I said, the words trembling as they left my lips. "People who can work magic. Please. Is there nothing you can do for her?"

The woman's mouth pulled into a faint, almost apologetic smile. "There were days when we could heal almost anything," she said. "We sang songs strong enough to make the trees sway, to make the river sing. But those days are long behind us. What strength we have left is faint. A shadow of what it once was."

I pressed my hand against the dirt, leaning toward her. "I will take a shadow over nothing," I said, my voice hardening with desperation. "Please. Will you try? That's all I ask of you."

She studied me for a long moment. Then, with a tired sigh, she placed her hand over mine. "I will gather the others," she said.

\* \* \*

Night fell. Flames bloomed high and bright as the nomads built their circle of pyres in the sand. The firelight danced against the silver bark of the Singing Trees, which now swayed with a wind that wasn't there. The hum of their branches became sharper, rising and falling like a strange orchestra tuning itself before a performance.

Denna lay at the center of the circle, her skin pale, her breath rasping faintly in her chest. Five women emerged from the tents, long shadows cast behind them. Dark storm-colored

shifts hung loose around their frames. They entered the ring like ghosts, and silence fell over the camp.

Their song began low and mournful, like mist curling off the edge of the sea. Slow and aching, it wound its way through the air. The Singing Trees seemed to recognize it, harmonizing faintly, a growing whisper of counterpoint. The wind pulsed stronger, carrying the song higher, pulling me into it. It filled my chest and bones with vibration, and something deep and primal tore free within me.

The Witch Women raised their voices. Faster, louder. The fire bent inward, as though reaching for Denna, and the wood of the Singing Trees began to groan and creak. Then, one cry broke through the thrumming: sharp and pained. One of the women collapsed, her breath taken. Then another, until all five lay still, and the air softened. The wind died. The song ended.

Taeylia stepped forward, leaning heavily as if years had been added to her long life. She knelt beside Denna, placing her hands against her chest. A long quiet stretched between us. When she stood again, I saw the sorrow already written across her face.

"She is too far gone," Taeylia said softly. "Our song will ease her pain for a night. Perhaps a day. Beyond that, we can give no more."

I nodded, the motion hollow. My hands tightened into fists, but I didn't beg. I couldn't. I knew she spoke true.

"Make use of your time," Taeylia said, her hand resting briefly on my shoulder.

\* \* \*

I knelt beside Denna. Around us, the fires burned low, their light soft. I watched her face, tracing the faint curve of her lips, the quiver of her breath. My eyes fell to the ground, to a leaf from one of the Singing Trees, pale and smooth and new. Carefully, I plucked it from the dirt and pressed it into her hand.

Her eyes fluttered open. "What's this?" she whispered weakly.

"You wanted a leaf from a Singing Tree," I said, my voice catching.

Denna smiled, faint but lovely. "You remembered."

"I would always remember you," I said, the truth cutting as it left me.

"Sing for me, my Sir Savien," she whispered, her voice trembling.

"I love you, Denna. I always have."

Tears blurred my vision. Her lips moved faintly, but her eyes were already dimming.

"Hold me Kvothe," she said, her voice no more than breath. "I can't die alone."

Under the swaying trees, I held her as the fires died.

# CHAPTER 43

## INTERLUDE

### OUT OF THE CHILL

**K**OTE TRAILED OFF, his voice dwindling like a wick near its end. The quill in Chronicler's hand hovered over the page, ink threatening to drop. The quiet in the Waystone Inn thickened, heavy as a sodden cloak. Chronicler shifted in his chair, uncomfortable, while Bast's fingers fidgeted with the edge of his sleeve.

Finally, Bast broke the silence, his voice soft. "Oh, Reshi. I never knew."

Kote didn't look up. His jaw tightened, his gaze boring into the table as if it might collapse under the weight of everything unsaid. Then, at last, he rose. The scrape of his chair across the floor made them flinch.

"It's late," he said, his voice too steady, too careful. "There are things I need to tend to before dark." He managed a faint, brittle smile. "Eat something. We've more to get through tonight." Without waiting for a reply, he turned and slipped through the kitchen flap, leaving the two men in uneasy stillness.

\* \* \*

The night outside hit him like a bitter slap, the crisp autumn chill cutting through the heat still lingering on his skin. Kote stepped into the deep shadow behind the Waystone and let out a slow, shuddering breath. He walked to the rain barrel near the back wall and lowered himself against it, the old wood rough against his back. He let his head fall into his hands.

The memories rose before he could stop them, cold as the air. Denna, her laugh like sunlight on water, her voice soft around his name. Then the shadows came—the regrets, the what-ifs. Each a stone, building weight in his chest. He tightened his hands against his scalp, but it didn't help.

The tears came quietly, stealing down his cheeks unchecked. It wasn't something he could fight anymore—not tonight. He stayed like that, crumpled and silent, until something moved in the darkness.

A faint rustling cut through the stillness. Kote froze, his breath catching. The years of a past life hummed in his blood: waiting, calculating. His eyes searched the shadows. Bare branches swayed faintly in the breeze, but there was no wind.

Then a soft flutter. An owl shifted on a branch above, its feathers brushing against bark as it rose and resettled. Kote exhaled, forcing himself to breathe slowly, reclaiming his pulse. It was nothing. Only an owl.

As he stood to leave, something caught his eye near the base of the wall—a color too bright for the dim light around him. A selas flower.

Its crimson bloom faced the moon, fragile and undeniable. It shouldn't have thrived here, not with the frost that edged the nights, but it had. Kote crouched, staring at it, his fingers hovering just shy of its delicate petals. It stirred a memory from long ago: distant laughter, a name on his lips.

His voice broke the stillness, soft as breath. "We'll be together again soon."

He rose, brushing his hands. The chill lingered on his skin, but he turned away from it, slipping back into the Waystone.

Inside, the room was warm, but warmth was never enough.

# CHAPTER 44

## THE HOLLOW CROWN

**F**OR THE NEXT two days, I was not a man. I was a hollow shell, emptied of everything but the dark tide of my grief. The Tahl brought food I couldn't eat, water I drank out of reflex. My moments of lucidity were few, and I dreaded them.

When I closed my eyes, my mind filled with dreams that tore at me like claws. I saw Wil's face, blood streaking his brow, his trembling lips shaping words of accusation I couldn't hear. I saw Sim, eyes wide and wet, looking more broken-hearted than betrayed. Then there was Denna—not as she was when I held her, but distant and unyielding, turning her back to me again and again, slipping further away no matter how hard I reached for her. She didn't need words to make me feel the weight of my failure. And Auri—Auri telling me to live. Her last words to me were the only warmth I felt in those dreams. The only thread that tied me back to the waking world.

On the third day, I came fully to myself. Denna's body was gone, the pyres cold, and the circle at the camp's center cleared away. I never learned where the Tahl had taken her. When I asked, they gestured vaguely, signs I barely understood. *Gone*, was all they could say. Whether this meant buried or burned, I would never know, and the not-knowing lodged itself like a thorn in my chest.

Part of me wanted to scour the camp for answers, to demand a way to say goodbye. But part of me knew that even if I found her grave, I might not rise again after kneeling there. And so, with Denna's shadow heavy in my heart, I left the Tahl.

They gave me more kindness than I deserved—provisions, advice on surviving the desert, even directions to a mountain pass through the Stormwal. They sent me on my way with solemn nods, and I suspected they were glad to see me go. I had become the specter of death haunting their peaceful oasis.

As dusk fell and the first stars lit the sky, I walked west. My body felt lighter as I crossed the sands, though not for the right reasons. I had been hollowed out, burned to emptiness.

\* \* \*

Renere was not the city I remembered.

I arrived at the gates bruised and blistered, my clothes in tatters, my feet bare. The guards didn't look twice. No one did. There was a wary air about the city, a sullenness that sank deep into the cobblestones. The streets weren't abandoned—they were quiet in a way that



struck me as worse. Merchants whispered to customers, eager to conclude their dealings, and children played in alleys but kept glancing over their shoulders.

As I moved deeper into the city, I began to notice the signs—big, red-painted letters streaked across the walls. *Feyda*. The dead king's name was everywhere, bold against the stone. It was written on banks, on shopfronts, over doorways. I caught sight of a masked figure crouched atop another's shoulders, scrawling *Feyda* across the shutters of a tavern. They disappeared long before the patrol could sweep through.

The Maer's men were easy to spot. They walked in pairs, lanterns burning bright, their white and blue livery spotless against Renere's grime. They stopped anyone wandering too far from their homes, though the futility of their task was clear in the air. These streets belonged to fear now, with neither faith in the Maer nor full submission to the cultists.

I made my way through the fractured city, avoiding both guards and trouble. By the time I reached the Blind Beggar, the moon was high, its pale light revealing the cracked shutters of the old inn.

With practiced ease, I tripped the latch on the window and climbed in. The room was unchanged: dusty and bare, as though waiting for us to return. But there was no message, no trace of Bast. As I climbed back out, my stomach knotted with disappointment. I landed lightly in the alley, my heels hitting the stone.

"You're losing your touch, Reshi," came a voice from the shadows.

My body tensed immediately, my ruined hand rising instinctively to guard myself. A pair of bright eyes emerged from the darkness.

"Bast," I breathed, the tension draining out of me.

"I didn't mean to scare you," he said, though his grin was wolfish. He held up a familiar dowsing compass, its needle trembling against the glass. "This thing started moving as soon as you entered the city."

"Wil's compass," I said, my voice sharp with memory.

Bast nodded. "I kept it after..." His smile faded. "After everything went wrong."

My gut twisted, and I turned the conversation quickly.

"What is happening here now? Renere looks closer than ever to a civil war."

"Well, after the death of the King, and Regent what's his face?"

"Fascino," I suggested.

"That's the one. The Maer, the one you mentioned going to see in Severen, gathered half of Renere at the gates of the Citadel for an address." Bast looked away sheepishly.

"Go on," I prodded.

"He announced that the entire royal line had been slain, murdered in cold blood, by you."

I let out a mirthless laugh. "He did, did he? Figures." I said despondently. "Awfully convenient though, me just strolling along, taking out everyone who stood between him and Succession."

"He had an excuse ready for that. There were rumors already circulating that you were a former associate of his. Rather than deny it, he admitted as much but then claimed he had no idea what you'd intended to do. When he then denounced you, most of the clods believed it, but for those that didn't Alveron went a step further."

"Let me guess, ten gold marks on my head?"

Bast laughed, "Try, fifty and a Duchy, with a further twenty-five from the Jakis family"

"I had nothing to do with what happened to the Baron." I said, genuinely aggrieved.

"Not according to the Maer, or should I say the King."

"So he went through with it then." I said, unsurprised.

"Oh yes, royal coronation, the full works."

Without thinking, I went to sign ‘emphatic disgust.’ with my damaged hand only to realize it was no longer equipped to do so.

It was then that Bast noticed the bandage and the missing fingers. “Reshi,” he gasped. “Your hand!”

I held it up, taking it in, “It’s every bit as bad as it looks.”

“Maybe I can do something to help.”

Curious as I was, unaware what medical knowledge the Fae had of such things, I brushed it aside. “Not right now. You were telling me about the Maer.”

“Right. After he set the bounty on your head, Alveron trotted out a bunch of priests, then made a big show of kneeling before them, proclaiming his repentance for not stopping you, that he’d accepted the iron chains and a life in service to Tehlu in penitence. Rambling on about how he ‘holds justice foremost in his heart’ and blah blah, you know the type of rubbish your religious folk spout.” Bast let out a nervous laugh, “After he was crowned, his first decree was that you, and any of your cohorts, would be brought to justice in the same way Wil and Sim had.”

At their mention, I looked away. My teeth clenched. I thought of their families reacting to such news, learning that their sons had been branded accomplices to regicide. That Alveron would use them in such a way made my blood boil.

“That was when I had the idea,” Bast continued, “I was able to get a job carting out the bodies after the coup. That’s where I found Wilem and his compass. Honestly, it’s been so long since it happened, I was considering throwing it in the river, but when you got nearer, it just started moving again, I almost jumped out of my skin.”

“Were you able to see to them?” I asked ashamed.

“I did. At least I think I did. I’m not familiar with your manling burial customs, just another thing you’ll need to teach me.” he said, offering me a somber smile. “They’re buried next to each other, in a plot just south of here.”

I clapped my good hand against his shoulder. “Well, for what it’s worth, I’m glad you found me, Bast.”

“That wasn’t all I learned, Reshi,” he said, flashing me a knowing grin. “Auri is alive.”

# CHAPTER 45

## ONCE KING, ALWAYS KING

“**R**ESHI, IS THIS really necessary? It’s colder than the Fae Queen’s heart up here,” Bast groused, hugging his arms tight against himself.

“Shhh,” I hissed, motioning for silence. My eyes stayed fixed on the streets below, scanning the trails of torchlight that wound through Renere’s dark alleys.

The rooftop of the Counting House wasn’t a comfortable perch. Loose tiles shifted underfoot, and the air was sharp with the bite of winter. But none of that mattered. Auri was out there somewhere.

“She deserves better than this, Bast,” I murmured.

He didn’t argue. Instead, he filled me in with what little information he’d gathered. Auri had been taken from the White Citadel two nights ago, stolen by a group of Feyda cultists. The why of it didn’t matter to me nearly as much as the fact that no one had stopped them. Prince Trenati and his followers were using her to prop up their delusions: pawns and sacrifices in their fractured game of thrones.

“I’ll burn this city to the ground before I let them harm her,” I said softly.

Bast shivered, though it had nothing to do with the cold. “Reshi, you don’t have to handle this alone.”

As he spoke, I caught it. The faint sound of jangling metal carried on the wind. My gaze traced the noise to three figures moving by torchlight near a bakery on the corner of Teccam Square. They were masked, their movements sure. Painters of revolt, vandals of the night.

“Time for answers,” I said, already moving toward the awning we’d climbed earlier.

“Finally,” Bast muttered as he dropped down after me, his usual humor laced with anticipation.

\* \* \*

The painters hadn’t gone far. They were still at the bakery, the tall one holding a bucket while another painted bold red letters across the glass. *Feyda*. The dead king’s name, slashed onto the storefront like a bloody epitaph.

The man with the bucket saw me first. He nudged the tall one, who paused mid-laugh and turned. None of them looked particularly threatened by my sudden arrival. I couldn’t blame them. I was barefoot, half-starved, and unarmed. Not a threat, just a walking specter.

“Where is Princess Ariel?” I asked, my voice sharp as flint.

The tall one tilted his head, staring at me like a puzzle carved half-wrong. “The who?”  
“Ariel. The girl you took two nights ago. The one who doesn’t belong to your broken gods.”

He opened his mouth as if to respond, then closed it again. He looked, briefly, at the spray of paint dripping across the bakery glass: Feyda scrawled like blood.

Beside him, Clyde—young, soot-streaked, more boy than man—stammered uncertainly. “She... she was taken somewhere. The, uh...” He frowned, eyes flicking left and right like chased birds. “To the... stone place. North of the Citadel. There’s a gate. Old and black.”

“Who ordered it?” I stepped closer, voice low. “Who gave the command?”

Clyde blinked. “He did. He—” He stopped. “I—” His hands trembled. “I don’t remember his name.”

His brow furrowed. His lips moved without sound—trying to press meaning into shape.

“Tall man?” I supplied. “Dark-haired. Wears a ring you can’t quite look at.”

Clyde’s face twisted, as if remembering something painful. “Yes. Yes, that’s him... He had a title, once, I think.” He shivered. “But it feels like I dreamed it. He wasn’t... he wasn’t anyone. Not really.”

“He was a prince,” I said.

Clyde blinked. “Was he?”

He looked at me, confused and afraid. Then his eyes widened in sudden clarity.

“You’re... him,” he whispered.

I met his gaze. “Say it out loud.”

“Kvothe Kingkiller,” Clyde repeated, his voice barely audible.

“Good.” I leaned in closer. “Now, Clyde, tell me where they’ve taken her.”

\* \* \*

The boy’s information led us to the graveyard on the outskirts of the Citadel. Neither Bast nor I had any idea where the crypt might be, so we searched in silence, following paths that twisted among weathered stones and frostbitten elms.

It was Bast who found it first—a gate of black iron left half-open, the name *Calanthis* wrought delicately in the bars. We stepped inside, moving carefully along the gravel path lined with gnarled trees. Ahead, faint voices reached us, their cadence low and unhurried.

“Reshi,” Bast whispered, his tone cautious. “This doesn’t feel right. Maybe we should wait—see how many we’re up against.”

On another night, I might have agreed. But not then. Not with her so close. “Wait here if you want,” I said, my voice hard. “I’m going.”

Rounding the final bend, we came into view of the crypt’s entrance. A large stone slab sealed the tomb, and five figures knelt before it.

Something cold settled inside me. “Where is she?” I demanded.

One of the figures straightened. His robes sagged wrong on his frame, as though he’d forgotten how shoulders worked. His mask dangled from one hand, thin fingers twitching. He turned toward me.

No sneer. No defiance. Just a kind of distant awareness, like the light behind his eyes flickered from some other room.

“Too late...” he mumbled. “The river’s run. The name’s gone dry...”

“Trenati.” I said his name aloud—cutting through the dark like a thrown blade.

He looked up at me with wide, washed-out eyes. His irises were gone—only misted marble where color should be. It made it hard to tell whether he looked through me or past me.

“I had a name,” he whispered, as though I’d mentioned it first. “Didn’t I? They... they sang it once. In white halls. In summer light.”

“Where is Ariel?” I repeated, more gently. A priest in the ruins of something he didn’t understand.

“Ariel...” The syllables lingered on his lips like dust. “Yes, she was meant for the stone. Meant to make things right. To remind them. But I... I forget what she was meant to remind.” He smiled. “It’s all full of holes inside. Can you feel them?”

One of his followers turned toward him at that—confused by the lack of leadership. Their gaze held no reverence. Just mistrust. They didn’t know him—not really. They obeyed the habit, not the man.

“She’s still alive?”

He drew in a rickety breath, then offered the only true gesture left to him: a nod.

“Good.” I leaned in closer, my voice dropping to a whisper. “For her sake, you’ll live.” I pulled my hand away. “Now go. Run. Don’t let me see your face again.”

Trenati spoke one last time—his voice like leaves blowing through bone.

“You can’t open it. It knows me. And I’m... not me anymore.”

I turned toward the slab of stone. Great and grave and ancient. A gate unsealed only by those the world still remembers.

“Then it’s lucky I’ve kept my Name,” I whispered.

Closing my eyes, I listened for it—the quiet thrum that threads through stone, the weight of it beneath names and nations. I knew stone. Knew its silence. Knew how to ask gently.

I didn’t break the door. I asked it to forget who it had been locked for. And to open for me instead.

The slab shuddered, trembled once like a sleeper woken out of true, and fell crashing to the side.

Behind me, Trenati slumped to his knees, hands rising to grasp his own face as if trying to remember how it once fit. “That should have been mine,” he whispered.

I left him behind.

\* \* \*

I wasn’t sure what I expected—chains, rituals, some cruel geometry drawn on the floor. Instead, I found stillness.

Auri sat in the center of the chamber, moonlight painting her as though she’d been waiting there all along. Like she’d planted the moment weeks back, just so it could bloom now. Cradled in shadow, she looked so small—and so shockingly alive.

“Auri...”

Her head snapped upward. And just like that, the spell broke. She ran, her feet slipping almost soundlessly over ancient stone. She crashed into me like rain, not a weight, but a joy too old to remember.

“Kvothe,” she said, breathing the name against my chest like a psalm. “My Ciridae. You came.”

I held her fiercely, and felt the ache uncoil.

“I thought I’d forgotten your face,” she said, drawing back slightly, eyes wide and wild. “Everything was unraveling. But I remembered your name. Over and over. I knew if I had that, then I was still real.”

I swallowed hard. “You are real.”

Auri smiled, faint and glowing.

“Good,” she said still holding my hands. Her face gleamed in the moonlight, a mixture of relief and exhaustion.

“Take me home, Kvothe. Back to the Underthing, where everything is proper and safe and true.”

# CHAPTER 46

## THE ILLUSION OF WHOLENESS

WE LEFT RENERE under a cloak of darkness, slipping through the eastern gate like shadows fleeing the light. Caesura was sheathed at my hip, its weight a cold reminder of everything I wanted to forget. I didn't look back for long. The city's walls loomed in the distance, pale and sharp as teeth in the night. It was a place that had gutted me, and I swore, as I turned my back on it, that I would never cross its threshold again.

Bast led the way to the nearest Waystone, guiding Auri and me through unseen paths with the quiet confidence only he could muster. Crossing through the Waystone paths was a disjointed affair, the twists and turns feeling like someone had taken reality apart and put it back together wrong. Bast eased us through, and I trusted his guidance despite the unease curling at the edges of my awareness.

We emerged closer to Imre than I thought possible, stepping into a breeze as familiar as a forgotten melody. Stonebridge rose against the deep blue of the Omethi River, and the rustle of distant voices from the far bank reminded me of the life I had once known. For a fleeting moment, it felt like coming home. And then my stomach turned. It would never be the same. Wil and Sim were gone, and their absence shadowed every street and corner. The University, once a lantern lighting my way, now seemed like only dim and fading embers.

\* \* \*

Auri led us beneath the University. She lifted a heavy grate with a smile, her small hands moving easily against the rusted metal. Her excitement flared into the air, brighter than I'd seen it in months. Her steps were light, her motions fluid, and I let her take the lead.

"This way," she whispered, her voice dancing like candlelight.

I had been to the Underthing before, but not like this. She wound us through twisting passages with cryptic names: Yellow Twelve, uneven Cricklet, the shadowy halls of Mantle. Stones whispered underfoot, walls hung with faint echoes of forgotten voices. My skin prickled, not from fear but from the strangeness of it—how this place breathed beneath the world. After what felt like an eternity, Auri led us into a room carved from quiet.

It wasn't much: a small, round space with low ceilings and warm, flickering light. But it was hers. Every corner shone with her touch—trinkets on little shelves, treasures no one else would think to save. A bent strip of silver here, a spool of pale thread there. In one corner

was a crooked shelf that caught my gaze. On top of it sat neatly arranged baubles—a brass button, a shard of glass, the bones of a story I didn't yet know.

"You looked so tired when you came in," Auri said gently, her eyes soft. "Now you can stay as long as you need."

I couldn't bring myself to answer. My throat tightened with gratitude, with grief. I sank into the space she had made for me, feeling more of a trespasser than a guest.

"We're safe now," she said with quiet certainty, her words wrapping the room in something warm.

I nodded slightly but didn't trust myself to speak.

\* \* \*

For a time, things slowed. The Underthing muffled the world above, closing the door on everything that hurt. I felt myself begin to heal in small ways, though only in fragile, fleeting pieces. I would catch myself smiling—truly smiling—but it was always short-lived. Too often, the joy would curdle into loss, a cold realization dragging me down. There were moments I thought of Wil and Simon. They came unbidden, their faces stitched into my every quiet moment, reminders of things undone and words unsaid.

Bast offered his own brand of healing, though I barely deserved it. One night, he summoned me to a small corner of Mantle with an air of practiced mystery. He produced a sliver of Fae ingenuity, muttering something under his breath in a tongue that ached to hear. I watched as the magic worked, forming the illusion of fingers where I had lost them. They looked real enough—solid, unmarred. They even wore my naming rings, glimmering faintly in the low light of the room.

"They're not real," Bast said, his usual grin tempered by an edge of gravity. "But even illusions can be useful."

I flexed my hand experimentally, and though I didn't feel the fingers, they moved as if responding to me. It was impressive, though it left me hollow.

"Thank you, Bast," I said finally, though there was no weight behind the words.

He gave an easy shrug, but his sharp eyes lingered on me a moment too long.

\* \* \*

Much later, Auri approached me in Mantle, her head tilted to the side. "The moon was so lovely last night," she said, as if picking a thought from thin air. "It sat so close to the world, the way an old friend might."

I blinked, startled by the break in the silence. "It must be nice to know the moon so well."

"Not as well as I know you." She sat beside me, folding her hands neatly in her lap. "I went above last night—to see Fela."

I stiffened as a rush of shame spilled over me. "Fela?"

"She needed to know about Simmon." Her tone was light, but there was something else beneath it, something that tugged just beneath her words. She didn't linger on the details. Auri never did. But her eyes lingered in the silence that followed, watching me carefully.



The sharpness of her words struck me harder than they should have. Guilt roared up, raw and merciless. I should have been the one to tell Fela. It should have been *my* voice speaking Sim's name, carrying the weight of his memory. Instead, I had spent weeks buried in the dark world beneath the University, wallowing in my failures.

\* \* \*

The next morning, I sat at the small shelf Auri had made for me, a plain sheet of paper spread before me. I wrote two letters. The first was to Wil's family, the second to Sim's. Each was a fragile tapestry of emotion—a steadfast refusal of the Maer's lies woven through with trembling apologies for the part I'd played in their deaths. More than once, I had to pause, my hand shaking too much to hold the pen.

When the letters were finished, I placed them beside me, too drained to move. Those letters stayed by my side for days, gathering dust as my resolve faltered. I thought about taking them to the families myself, thought of their faces and how they might receive me. The shame alone pinned me in place.

Bast noticed. Of course, Bast noticed. "What are these, Reshi?" he asked, one eyebrow raised as he eyed the addressed envelopes.

"Letters," I said shortly, my voice distant.

"Letters to ghosts don't often change much." He crouched beside me, picking one up carefully. "Do you want me to take them?"

I opened my mouth to argue, to say this was my responsibility. But the weight of the task was already too much. I nodded stiffly, and Bast tucked the letters into his coat like they were precious.

As he stood, he offered a small, knowing smile, a flicker of warmth lighting the edges of his features. "You'll be all right, Reshi," he said, though his tone carried more hope than certainty.

I sat alone after he left, staring at the crooked shelf Auri had made for me. I thought of Wil and Sim, of Auri and Bast. And for the first time in weeks, though faint and thready, I felt the stirrings of something like hope. Something like strength.

# CHAPTER 47

## THE RECKONING

**T**HE UNDERTHING WAS no place for Bast. He was young and eager, restless and brimming with a hunger to *do*. Expecting him to cloister himself underground, even for my sake, was selfish and unfair. I told him as much. Reassured him that he was free to leave whenever the mood struck him. But he didn't.

I knew why, of course. Bast was worried about me—not that I deserved it. He pretended at indifference most days, teasing me as he always had. But I could see it in the way his eyes lingered too long when he thought I wasn't looking, the way his words sometimes faltered mid-sentence.

I let him go topside as often as he liked, knowing he needed it. Auri had shown him the way—her strange paths through climbs and grates and hidden doors. Then, one Hepten morning, Bast came back too soon. His steps lacked their usual carefree bounce, and his bright smile had faded into something darker.

"You look troubled," I said, blowing absently on a bowl of porridge. "Anything the matter, Bast?"

He hesitated, rubbing the back of his neck, his gaze flitting between me and something crumpled in his hand. "I didn't want to bring this to you, Reshi."

My eyes narrowed. "Go on."

Bast tossed the parchment onto the table. I smoothed it out, the crude ink lines staring back at me. A face—*my* face, more or less—was splashed across the page. Beneath it, in bold lettering, I read the words:

**"KVOTHE 'KINGKILLER,' SON OF ARIDEN. 100 MARKS."**

I snorted, sliding it away. "Nice to know I'm appreciated at such a fine price."

"There's more," Bast said, his voice lower now. "I saw him. Your old friend—the one with the stupid hat and the punchable face."

It didn't take much to guess. "Ambrose."

Bast nodded grimly. "He's in town, Reshi. He's been spreading the word, whipping up anyone who'll listen. Telling them you killed the king, that you've dirtied their streets with your Ruh filth." His tone turned venomous at the last word, and his hands curled into fists.

"That doesn't surprise me." I exhaled slowly.

"He's saying worse," Bast continued. "He's telling people you stole *his bride*."

I froze.

"Ariel. He claims she's his and that you've hidden her away like a thief. He's promising to find her, drag you through the streets, and take her back to Renere."

I felt something flicker inside me—an ember catching in a dry forest. "Take me to him."

“Reshi, wait—”

“I mean it, Bast. Take me to him now.”

I didn’t think about the Lethani. I didn’t think about the University’s Codex, or the Iron Law, or any other piece of wisdom whispered to me over the years. I simply moved, guided by the single instinct I had left.

\* \* \*

Ambrose stood in the square, right by the fountain. His entourage flanked him like a wall of polished steel, armed with swords and spears that gleamed in the sharp morning light. It was an oddly fitting place to find him—the very spot where I’d first called the wind years ago. Where I’d broken his arm and cemented our enmity.

He was midway through a blustering tale when I stepped into view. His voice carried easily over the gathering crowd, his wide-brimmed hat dipping as he gestured and sneered. Even at a distance, I could see the smirk curling his lips.

“I hear you’ve been looking for me,” I called out, my voice cutting cleanly through the buzzing square.

The murmuring died, a hush sweeping over the onlookers. Ambrose stilled, his grin faltering as his eyes scanned the crowd. When he found me, the smile snapped back into place like a blade drawn too quickly.

“You filthy Ruh bastard!” he roared, his voice trembling with hatred. “So you’ve finally shown yourself!”

I stood unmoving, watching as he shoved through his followers to put himself at the front of the group. The gap between us remained wide, though I caught the guarded edge in his steps. He didn’t dare come too close.

“I knew I’d find you eventually,” he hissed. “Kvothe the Arcane, murderer of kings, traitor of Vintas.”

“I’m not here for your lies, Ambrose,” I said, my words even. “I was there. But it wasn’t me. Alveron was the one who saw it through.”

“You lying Ruh! Nothing is ever your fault, is it?” He spat on the cobblestones. “Your blood is as filthy as your kind.”

He reached into his pocket and took out a small vial, holding it aloft for all to see. The blood inside sloshed in the sunlight.

I went cold.

“Your Copperhawk was clumsy, but they served me well enough. Did you think I wouldn’t find a way to make use of this?”

“Don’t,” I said softly, the word hanging heavy in the air between us.

Ambrose ignored me. “Once I’ve dealt with you, I’ll take Ariel wherever I please. Renere will be delighted to see her again, I’m certain. And you? I’ll leave your body in pieces, your head on a spike for all to see!”

I took a step forward. My voice was calm when I spoke again. *“If you do this, I will kill you.”*

Ambrose paused. His fingers tightened around the vial, his uncertainty flickering for a brief instant. But then his smirk returned, his ego demanding a show. He unstopped the vial, dipped his fingers into the blood, and whispered a word.

I saw Ambrose feel it—the resistance. His smirk faltered, his fingers trembling as he tried to bind me. Sweat beaded on his brow as he leaned into the effort, his lips curling into a snarl.

But I wasn't moving. I wasn't yielding.

The world tightened, narrowed, until it was just him and me, locked together in this terrible, silent struggle. The binding clawed at me like thorns in a furious storm, but I stood unmoving. Against me, Ambrose was nothing. Against my Alar, he was a child holding a thread, trying to tame a maelstrom.

"You think you can take me?" I asked, my voice low and sharp, a blade unsheathed. "You think you can *own* me with such a pathetic trick?"

Ambrose flinched at the venom in my words, but his ego—damn his ego—steeled him. He gestured sharply, shouted another binding, his voice cracking against the tension of what he didn't understand.

He didn't see it yet, but I already had his Name. It hovered there, unveiled, like a thread shimmering in the light. Fragile. Bare. His arrogance left him vulnerable—it always had. And now, he'd handed himself to me.

"Bind him! Now!" Ambrose shouted, summoning his men as though their crude hands and ropes could finish what he could not.

The ropes never reached me.

I raised my arm and spoke the Name of the wind. It wasn't shouted. It wasn't forced. The word flowed from my throat like the strike of steel, effortless and sure.

The air bucked and screamed, exploding outward into a cacophonous thunderclap. Ambrose's men were thrown like ragdolls. I didn't see where they landed. It didn't matter.

The crowd shrieked and stumbled back as debris flew in all directions, pebbles and dust scattering like the remnants of a broken world. But I didn't care about the crowd. My gaze never left Ambrose.

He staggered, his hat tumbling off his head, and for the first time, I saw real, unbridled fear bloom in his eyes.

"Stop, Kvothe," he said, and his voice wavered on the edge of begging. "You don't know what you're doing."

"Oh, I know *exactly* what I'm doing," I growled, my steps slow and deliberate, each footfall cracking the ruined cobblestones beneath me. "I know you, Ambrose. I *know* you better than you know yourself."

I saw him shrink, his shoulders curling inward. He didn't even run. He simply stood there, his lips trembling. He was a cornered animal now, and for the first time since I met him, I understood what that meant. Not strength. Not defiance. *Cowardice*.

The Name came to me in perfect clarity. Ambrose's essence—what he was, the hateful little threads that wove him together. I didn't hesitate. I sang it.

But the Name couldn't stand alone. It wasn't enough for how much fury I felt, how much he deserved this. His Name became part of a chorus: stone, air, fire, and water all wrapped around him, folding into a perfect note of unmaking. I wove him into the Names of the world, then tore the tapestry apart.

The square erupted around him.

The cobblestones shattered beneath his feet. The great stone fountain hissed and cracked, steam rising as the water burned itself to death. The very air around us shuddered, waves of

pressure rolling outward. For a moment—just a moment—the sky itself darkened, the light winking out as though it couldn't bear to witness what I'd done.

Ambrose screamed, but it wasn't a human sound. It was raw and piercing, a final note before the chorus consumed him. And then, silence.

The square stilled. My throat burned like acid, and I stumbled, my knees threatening to buckle. But I steadied, locking my legs beneath me. I had to see. I had to look.

Less than nothing was left of him. The crowd stood frozen, their faces pale, and as I turned to them, I saw myself reflected in their eyes. There wasn't admiration or belief there. Not even anger. Only terror.

I saw familiar figures among them. Elodin stood like a statue, his face unreadable except for the terrible weight in his eyes. And Fela... Fela looked at me with open revulsion, as though she didn't recognize me at all.

Their gazes burned into me. My chest felt hollow. My throat stung. I couldn't stay.

So, I ran.

# CHAPTER 48

## A TRAP OF MEMORY

**K**OTE SAT HUNCHED at the table, shoulders pulled inward as though sheltering from some unseen storm. Quietly, he nodded to himself before speaking, his voice burdened by the weight of memory.

“And the rest,” Kote began, his voice dry as parchment, “is just what you’d imagine.” His lips quirked into a ghost of a smile as though at some private jest. “With a price on my head and folks poking their noses where they shouldn’t, we disappeared.”

“Disguises,” added Bast from the corner of the room, his tone tinged with distaste.

Disguises,” Kote repeated, voice flat. He gave Chronicler a small, knowing look. “Stolen names, shadows for companions. This time, I was searching for somewhere no one else would think to look—hidden in the teeth between nowhere and nothing.”

His lips twisted into something like a smile, though it didn’t reach his eyes. Chronicler’s pen scratched across the page, the crash of its quill tip like boots on distant gravel.

“But leaving—truly leaving—that required pieces.” Kote raised two fingers, ticking off shadows on a hand that once strummed strings. “I would need money more than anything. Enough for horses. Food. Tools. And enough left to build this place from the ground up.”

Here, the innkeeper’s voice grew quiet, unspooling thread by thread. “The day before we left, I made one last trip to the University. At sunrise. I took backroads and alleys with nothing but a shadow wrapped tight as a cloak. Basil was at Stocks that morning. Call it dumb luck or the turning of a coin. Either way, it worked in my favor.”

Kote’s hand rested on the table. His fingers tapped once, twice. “The Stainless had done decent enough, more than I hoped. But my Bloodless? They were a king’s ransom. With all that trouble in the East—coup, rebellion, broken crowns on bloody floors—people were desperate for safety. Desperation opens pockets wider than greed.”

He paused, letting his words soak into the room. Chronicler’s quill faltered for a moment.

“The irony of profiting off that chaos wasn’t lost on me,” Kote said softly, voice tinged with something like regret.

He shifted in his chair and continued. “Of course, once I’d emptied the Stocks of every shim and drab, I did something ill-advised. I went to Kilvin’s office. I knew it was foolish, but... I couldn’t leave without saying goodbye. Old habits die slow.”

“And?” Chronicler asked.

“And nothing. His forge was cold, his desk drawer open—though knowing Kilvin, I suspect my visit was expected, even without a letter to say as much.” He sighed, the sound low as a bowstring tense from disuse. “I left, heavier than I’d arrived but quieter.”

Chronicler finished writing the thought and glanced up. “And what then?”

“What then?” Kote’s eyes drifted across the inn, settling on the beams above. He gestured around him. “I built this. Carved wood with my own hands. Heaved stone. Wrought iron. I put everything I had into it. Hidden edges, clever seams, and pieces I hope no one would ever examine too closely. This is what became of me. What became of Kvothe.”

He placed his hands flat on the table. His voice cracked, too quiet to echo. “Do with it what you will.”

He spread his calloused hands wide across the scarred tabletop, an old gesture weighed down by something strangely final. “I have paid the price of remembering. Do with it what you will.”

For a moment, neither Bast nor Chronicler spoke. The faint scrape of the fire in the hearth filled the void.

Then Chronicler set down his quill. His face twisted with hesitation, thoughts forming—and failing—on his tongue.

“There’s a question you aren’t sure how to ask,” Kote said, breaking the silence. It wasn’t a guess.

“Questions, actually,” Chronicler admitted. “When you said you left Imre, you said... ‘we.’ Bast came, clearly, but what of—” He hesitated, but pressed forward. “What of Princess Ariel?”

Kote’s expression darkened as a hand reflexively curled around the stem of his polished mug. “Safe,” he said tightly, centering his gaze on Chronicler. “That’s all you need know.”

Chronicler deflated but nodded slowly. “And the second question?”

“Folly,” Chronicler murmured, looking up at the blade mounted above the bar. “You haven’t spoken of her.”

Kote’s lips tugged to one side, his gaze climbing toward the weapon. “She was my attempt at an apology,” he said after a moment. “There’s an art to making a good sword, and I got most of it right. But not all.” He gestured vaguely. “She’s the wrong color. Perhaps a fault in the metals, or...” He trailed off, his expression faraway, lost to some hidden pain.

“You forgot her?” Chronicler asked.

“I owed it to them,” Kote said. “The Adem. Her shape is wrong, but her edges are keen. She waits for them when all this is over.”

The room fell silent again. Chronicler closed his ledger, but Kote’s voice stopped him mid-motion.

“You want to see it,” Kote said flatly.

“Your hand,” Chronicler replied, trying for nonchalance.

Without speaking, Bast rose from the shadows and unclasped the mirage covering Kote’s left hand. The smooth illusion faded, exposing the truth beneath. Two fingers gone. The thumb cleaved above the knuckle. Ugly, puckered scars ran the length of his ruined flesh.

For a long moment, Chronicler stared.

Kote flexed what remained of his hand and spoke softly, facing no one. “Some days, they still feel whole. It’s a cruel trick of memory. Success cuts hard, but failure cuts deeper.”

Chronicler stared at him, mouth parted slightly. His voice dropped several degrees. “That’s not how I see it.”

Kote’s reply was bitter, nearly spat. “It doesn’t matter how *you* see it. Look around, Chronicler. Everything’s gone wrong. Every path I’ve taken turned to ash beneath my feet. So spare me your philosophy.”

Chronicler set his quill down deliberately, standing sharply in his chair. His voice rose, trembling with something greater than anger. “No. Look around. Every stone of this place, every carved beam. You made this. You built it. And everything before wasn’t luck or

misfortune—it was you. Trebon. Renere. Levenshire. The hero of those stories hasn't vanished just because you're too cowardly to remember what he stood for." He slapped the table hard enough to send a tremor up the polished wood. "You're Kvothe. And forgetting won't change that."

The innkeeper said nothing, his gaze hollow, sinking into the shadow of himself as silence claimed the room.

The door creaked open.

\* \* \*

A figure stood in the doorway. He was thin, hunched, and pale, with wisps of white hair clinging stubbornly to his liver-spotted scalp. His shadow sprawled across the doorway, stretching unnaturally long in the flickering lamplight of the inn.

Kote straightened slightly, his green eyes narrowing beneath the shadow of his hair. He placed the tankard on the bar with deliberate care, the soft clink as it met the wood betraying nothing of the swirling unease gathering in his gut. "We're closed," he said evenly, his voice calm but carrying an edge that no one who knew Kvothe would mistake for mere politeness.

The man stepped forward, his soft-soled shoes brushing the floorboards with a faint scrape. "Closed to weary souls? Surely not," he said, his voice matching his appearance: dry, brittle, and just a touch too thin. "Have a heart, friend. I've traveled long and far beneath a cold moon. Can't a poor man share a piece of your fire?"

Kote tilted his head, considering him. Those black eyes glimmered in the dim light like wet stones, watching him too closely, lingering too long. There was something in the way the man moved, in the awkward, almost lurching rhythm of his unsteady steps, that struck Kote as just slightly wrong. The faintest sliver of a frown carved its way onto his face.

He let the air hang heavy between them for a moment longer before finally speaking. "I suppose it's no trouble. Have a seat," Kote said, gesturing to one of the scarred wooden tables nearest the hearth. His voice carried an easy cadence, as if this were the most mundane of exchanges. But his hands, unseen beneath the bar, had unconsciously balled into fists. "I can fix you something to eat. There's not much left at this hour, though."

The man shuffled farther into the room, each step slow and measured, as though he were feeling his way forward. He dragged one hand across the back of a chair as he passed, his fingers curling over the wood like pale claws. "Beet soup, perhaps?" he asked, cocking his head like a crow amused by its own question.

Kote's brow furrowed ever so slightly. There it was again, that thread of something strange in the man's tone. He turned his head toward Bast, who had been leaning in the corner, his dark eyes sharp and predatory. "Bast," Kote said, his voice steady as stone and utterly devoid of the warmth he'd offered his guest. "Our friend here could use something warm to eat. Take care of that, and while you're at it, switch out the barrels in the cellar. They'll need a firm hand tonight. Devon can help with that."

Bast blinked once, his expression unreadable save for the subtle clench of his jaw. "Of course, Reshi," he said at last, his tone calm, though the edges of his words wavered just enough for someone like Kote to notice. His gaze flicked momentarily to the strange newcomer, and then he moved toward the stairs, his fluid steps betraying none of the tension in his wiry frame.



Chronicler followed after him, his confusion plain. “Barrels?” he muttered quietly before the cellar door swung closed behind them, the latch clicking into place.

Kote’s attention slid back to the pale man, who now hovered near the bar. The man’s posture had grown just a bit straighter, and for the briefest moment, something flickered in his eyes—something sharp, something knowing.

“Can I get you a drink while you wait?” Kote asked, his casual manner returning, though the corners of his mouth remained tight.

The man glanced back at the shelves of bottles behind the bar, then smiled. It was a strange smile—thin, deliberate, and far too pleased for the circumstances. “A beer, if it’s not too much trouble.”

“Not at all,” Kote said, already reaching for a tankard. His left hand brushed the shelf beneath the counter, and there, his fingers found the cool leather grip of something much heavier than a beer mug. “You seem... familiar,” he added lightly, keeping his voice smooth as he turned toward the kegs. He began pouring the beer, the faint hiss of liquid breaking the tense silence. “Have we met before? You might remind me of someone.”

“Perhaps,” the man replied, his airy tone making the word seem like a wisp of smoke. “Far and away, perhaps. Time has a way of blurring faces, does it not?”

“True enough,” Kote said, sliding the filled tankard across the bar. But his smile, though faint and polite, didn’t reach his eyes. “Funny thing, though. Time usually doesn’t blur a smile quite like yours.”

Something flickered across the man’s face—a momentary ripple that didn’t quite fit his composed demeanor. He took a long sip from the tankard, his eyes on Kote’s the entire time. When he set the glass down, his smile had returned, wider now, his lips curling like the blade of a knife.

“Ah,” the man said softly, his voice lingering in the air like the chill of night. “And here I thought you might have forgotten me.”

The world froze for an impossibly long moment. And then, in a blur faster than the eye could follow, Kote’s hand lashed out—strong, precise, and utterly merciless.

The blow hurled the old man backward. He slammed through a table with an ear-splitting crack, scattering wooden shards across the floor. For a moment, his body lay motionless in a heap, limbs bent at odd angles.

Kote’s breath was steady as he flexed the fingers of his right hand, steam rising from the bare, scarred flesh. Slowly, he unraveled the rag that had been wrapped around it, revealing the battered knuckle dusters beneath.

“You,” Kote said quietly, his voice low and stiff as gravel beneath a boot.

The crumpled figure on the floor began to shift, laughter bubbling up like blood from a wound. It was louder now, deeper, and colder. “Little rabbit,” the man hissed.

Kote’s face was impassive. He turned and pulled Folly from its perch on the mounting board. The weight of the sword settled into his hands as if it had been waiting for this moment.

“I was wondering when you’d show up, Cinder,” Kote said, his voice bitter. “You’re early.”

The figure rose, flickering and shifting. The old man’s body melted away like frost under sunlight, replaced by something sharper, crueler. White hair fell around a pale, angular face. Silver-blue eyes shone with an unnatural light, and his grin stretched unnaturally wide.

“So clever, little rabbit. Did you miss me?” Cinder’s voice was sharp, like glass shattering, and threaded with mockery.

“We’ll see who’s clever,” Kote muttered, stepping toward the wall. He pulled a hidden handle, and the inn answered. Iron bars crashed down over the windows and door with a scream of metal on wood. The hearth roared to life, its flames leaping high and wild, casting chaotic shadows across the room.

Kote raised his burned hand, smoking and trembling. In his fingers, he held a single lump of coal. His voice was low, faint, but steady. “Ferula. I bind you. By the name of stone, be still as stone.”

Cinder’s movements faltered, his limbs locking in place as though he had been trapped in amber. His grin never faltered, but his eyes burned with hate. “You’re playing a dangerous game,” he said, his tone shifting from mocking to icy.

“I know,” Kote replied. Without another word, he disappeared into the cellar.

\* \* \*

“Charred body of God, what’s going on up there?” Bast hissed, his sharp voice cracking as he met Kote at the bottom of the basement stairs. His pupils were wide and wild, his usually unshakable confidence gone.

“It’s Cinder. He’s here,” Kote replied, his tone quiet and clean. No wasted words, no fear. His green eyes flicked over Bast and then to Chronicler, standing wooden and pale nearby. “I’ve slowed him, but we need to go.” He pointed to the far side of the room. “The cellar hatch. It’ll take us out to the stables.”

Bast moved instantly, bounding over the barrels to reach the hatch like a cat stirred to urgency. “A hand!?” he barked, glaring at Chronicler, who seemed frozen in place.

Chronicler flinched before fumbling forward, his fingers shaking as they wrapped around the heavy iron batten. With a grunt, he lifted it, casting it aside. It hit the wall with a reverberation that rolled along the stone walls and floor. Bast didn’t wait. He threw the hatch open, shoving Chronicler up the steps with impatient strength.

Kote trailed them to the foot of the stairs, watching silently.

Chronicler had barely cleared the opening when Bast turned, freezing in place. His face twisted with disbelief as Kote reached forward, his hands steady and his movements deliberate. The innkeeper grasped the thick iron bar and swung it down with a single hard motion. The latch clicked into place, the sound definitive as a snapped string.

“Reshi!” Bast’s voice cracked, loud and raw, as he slammed his hands against the hatch doors. “Reshi, what are you doing?”

Kote leaned his weight against the locked door for a long, still moment. When he spoke, it was with a voice as calm as still water. “Go, Bast. Take Devon and run.”

“Reshi, no! Don’t do this!” Bast pounded harder, and the impact sent small eruptions of dust from the seams of the wood, scattering like tiny stars in the pale lamplight. “OPEN THIS! Reshi, damn it, please!”

Kote closed his eyes for a breath, his face unreadable. Then he turned from the door and moved toward the stairs leading back into the common room. Behind him, Bast’s voice broke, spilling anguish into the dark.

“Don’t leave me...”

The words hung there, trembling, but the innkeeper didn’t pay any heed. Instead, he made his way back to the stairs leading up into the common room. From his pocket, he pulled two

small cubes of dull, blackened metal. Their appearance was plain, but they rang faintly against each other in his hand, a sound too high and sweet for their weight.

He crouched near the doorway and placed the cubes on the floor—one to the left, one to the right. No wasted motion. His fingers lingered on them as he muttered soft words under his breath, his voice just a thread against the thickening air.

The room shifted the moment he finished. The weight in the air tightened further, like a drawn bowstring. The fire stuttered and leaned sideways for half a breath, then surged back with a roar. The trap was set—silent, invisible, waiting.

Kote stood, already turning toward the chest near the forge. His gaze locked on it, a flicker of tension shadowing his otherwise controlled expression. Dust sifted from the ceiling as the boards above him creaked under heavy boots. Each step was slow and deliberate, and the sound set his teeth on edge.

He reached the chest in three strides. His hands moved automatically now, unhooking the ring of keys from the nearby shelf. The copper key first, fitting into the first lock with a satisfying click. The next lock turned with iron.

Another step overhead. Louder this time, closer. The distinctive creak of the staircase at the far end of the common room.

Kote's hand hesitated on the third lock for the briefest instant, his knuckles tightening. He inhaled once, sharply, and forced his focus back to the task at hand.

The steel key slid home. The lock clicked—louder this time, almost like an accusation. The last tumbler gave, but the lid didn't move.

Of course it didn't.

Kote straightened, his head tilting slightly toward the stairs. Cinder was here. He could feel him, as though the man's shadow stretched ahead to brush against his skin. The footsteps drew closer, the creaking announcing each one like the toll of a bell.

Kote turned back to the chest, his breath tighter now. His throat felt dry. His fingers flexed once at his sides, then he let the words come—quiet, as though he feared even the walls would hear.

"I am Kvothe."

The lid didn't stir. Dust settled. The silence thickened.

Kote's lips tightened and he whispered again, fiercer this time. "I am Kvothe."

The golden insignia on the lid gleamed faintly for half a heartbeat. But still, nothing. The chest remained closed.

The boots reached the first step of the staircase leading down into the common room.

Kote's jaw clenched. His voice, lower and rougher now, broke the air.

"*I am Kvothe.*"

The lid of the chest stirred, then slowly swung open, revealing a light too sharp and raw to be just light. It burned golden, yes, but there were cracks of something else within it: strands of emerald and threads of pale, flickering violet. It wasn't clean. It wasn't smooth. It was alive, spilling out unevenly like a bloodstain spreading across linen.

As the light touched him, Kote inhaled, his chest rising as though breathing for the first time in years. His scars didn't fade, but something in the way he stood now felt straighter, sharper. A tension he'd carried for years seemed to melt away.

For the first time in too long, Kvothe smiled—not a faint shadow of a smile, but something real and dangerous.

"Thank you," he whispered to the chest, his voice quiet but steady. There was no time for more.

The boots reached the stone floor of the common room. Behind him, the air turned cold, heavy with malice.

Kvothe stood, his back straightening fully as he turned to face the shadow that awaited him.

# CHAPTER 49

## TO ASH ALL THINGS RETURN

CINDER APPEARED, ONE step from the doorway, his dull grey sword in hand. His lips curled into an eerie half-smile, more wolf than man.

“There you are, little rabbit,” he said softly, voice as cold and thin as frost. “It’s time you joined your parents.”

I stood across the room, calm on the surface but raw beneath—anger, fear, and something sharper all tangled in my chest. My fingers brushed the scarred grain of the bar as I replied, the words coming with a steady precision. “Not yet,” I said, voice laced with a taunting edge. “I’ve still something to show you.”

Cinder tilted his head, pale locks catching the ebbing firelight, his dark, sunken eyes narrowing. “Such cowardice. If you won’t come to me,” he said, mockingly quiet, “then I shall come to you.”

He took a step forward—and stopped. An invisible ripple flared in the dim firelight, faint as a needlepoint shimmer. He lifted his hand, pressing to the empty air before him as though feeling for an invisible wall. His fingers met resistance.

“What is this?” His brow furrowed, and with a flick, his sword cut a silent arc. It struck the air, not stone nor wood, yet the same ripple flexed beneath his blade. Annoyance flickered in his face, twisting his mouth into a sneer. “What trickery is this?”

With steady hands, I traced the rough stones of the pillar beside me. “Did I mention I built this place?” My voice carried a soft, sharp note, calculated and calm. The distortion before him flexed again as Cinder pushed against it, his thin smile returning with brittle anger. He didn’t answer, but his sword drifted back, readying.

“Each and every stone,” I continued. “Dragged them all here myself. Set them down. Made sure they fit. All for a purpose.” I began to circle the room slowly, my hand brushing across the timber beams until I stopped near the hearth. “Do you want to know why I named it the Waystone?”

Cinder stood still now, watching me, a snake uncoiled, waiting.

“I thought you might.” I tilted my head at him sharply, then whispered the name of stone. It wasn’t shouted or spat, but rather hummed through my teeth, a reminder, a command.

The whole room answered. The walls groaned loud and deep, the sound rolling over us like the harrowing first note of some dreadful symphony. The inn trembled to its bones, bits of dust and stone flaking loose from cracks and crevices.

Cinder staggered, eyes darting to the rafters above as the wood let out an aching wail. “You fool,” he hissed, his voice tight with mockery and alarm, all the amusement gone. “You’d crush us both.”

“Perhaps I would,” I said, “but not before I make my point.”

I spoke the name again, with more weight, more surety. The inn shuddered. A support beam behind Cinder cracked violently, wood splintering with deafening finality. Bottles and jars rattled loose from their shelves, tinkling to the floor. Another thunderous crash—louder this time—echoed from above as dust filled the air.

I moved quickly, making for the cellar hatch. A single grunt of effort and the heavy iron batten slid free, falling to the floor with an accusing clang. I grabbed the edge and bolted up the stairs, throwing the hatch shut behind me.

“I’ll see you outside,” I said, though I knew he wouldn’t hear me over the groaning weight of the failing inn.

\* \* \*

The wall of the Waystone didn’t just fall; it erupted outward in a violent spray of timber and stone. The force rattled through the ground as a figure emerged through the chaos. Cinder pushed into the open air like a predator passing through the brush, unhurried yet lethal.

He swept away the haze of drifting debris with a single motion of his hand. As the mist of stone dust cleared around him, his expression shifted. His gaze lifted to the scene waiting beyond, and the breath that followed was sharp—not with fear, but with surprise.

The Fae stretched out before him in strange, otherworldly magnificence: rolling hills covered in vibrant blue blossoms rippling without wind, their petals glittering like the soft shimmer of stars. Above, the sky burned deep purple, a rich, impossible hue dappled with streaks of gold flaring like distant comets. Butterflies too large and too bright drifted lazily through the air, their translucent wings trailing ribbons of light.

“You brought me here,” Cinder said, his words inflected with astonished disdain. “This was your plan?”

“Not a plan,” I replied evenly, stepping forward across the perfect grass. “A reckoning. For Trebon, for my parents, for everything in Renere.” My voice sharpened. “For the crimes you’ve committed. This is the only fitting place for you to die.”

Cinder smiled, the grin twisting across his charred and weary face like the edge of a rusted blade. “You think this changes anything? Twice you’ve failed to kill me, and twice I’ve spared you.” His grip on his sword shifted. “No more sparing, little rabbit.”

I advanced with deliberate steps, speaking softly. “Have you not heard? Third time pays for all.”

At the final word, I snapped my hand up, my fingers framing the air. The wind answered first, rushing in a wild surge and lifting me sharply from the ground. My feet hovered above the earth, the wind making a banner of my hair, copper-red streaks blazing against the violet sky. I shaped my hands. I called the ground, and it answered.

The hills beneath me trembled as chunks of stone, some no larger than a fist, others as wide as carts, tore from the earth. They rose, glittering faintly with veins of iron, encircling me as though caught in some celestial orbit. Cinder watched me, his expression unreadable, but his blade tilted down, and he moved.

The first shard of stone shot forward, hissing through the air with a scream sharp enough to cut the silence. Cinder darted sideways, silent and unnaturally fast, and the shard struck

the ground with explosive force, dirt and earth spraying upward in plumes.

I didn't stop. Stone upon stone shot toward him, and Cinder spun between them with impossible grace, a wraith in the grass. One caught him, the edge shearing into his shoulder, stumbling his next step. Blood darkened his coat, but he kept moving.

He closed the distance faster than I expected, so I spoke again. The wind surged once more, but this time differently: a roaring vortex that tore the ribbons of the strange Fae flowers into its current. The gale slammed into Cinder, halting him mid-step. He fell back, bracing himself and driving his sword deep into the ground to hold his footing.

The tempest consumed him. Its fury wrapped around him. Only then did I call the fire.

With a whisper of my own blood, the flames surged upward from the grass. The inferno snaked through the vortex, wrapping into the wild churn of wind, forming a column of fire and motion. It engulfed him, and for the first time, I heard Cinder scream.

Still, he endured.

When the flames faltered, my breath came hard. I lowered myself to the ground, knees trembling. The ash and smoke churned, whirling together in shapes barely discernible. In the chaos, there was movement.

"It can't be," I muttered under my breath, disbelief bitter on my tongue.

From the smoke, Cinder stumbled forth, his flesh scorched raw, his clothing no more than hanging scraps. His eyes still burned—if not his fire, then some hollow will that kept him upright. He grinned, teeth blackened by the ruin of his face. "Come, little rabbit," he rasped, broken but still mocking.

\* \* \*

I sank into the Ketan, every ounce of will sharpening to a point. *Folly's* grey-white blade cut through the heavy forest air as I faced Cinder. His ruined body betrayed the savagery beneath: one shoulder hung low, blood streaked his pale, raw skin, but his black eyes burned as sharp as ever.

"You've run far," he said, voice smooth and bitter. "But all rabbits tire eventually."

I let my reply come with the blade. Climbing Iron sent *Folly* carving toward his chest, but Cinder was faster than he had any right to be, deflecting it with fluid ease. I pressed forward, flowing from one form to the next—*Iron*, *Crossing the River*, *Breaking Oak*. Each motion came with ferocity and discipline, but always, *Folly* found only steel.

Then, in Maiden Dancing, the tide turned. I spun low, *Folly* arcing upward. Her edge sliced deep into his shoulder, carving muscle and bone. Cinder staggered, his feral scream echoing through the night.

But his anger made him stronger. He came at me with sudden, blinding speed. His attacks rained down, heavy and precise, each strike a step closer to death. I tried for Chasing Stone, but he slipped through my guard. His blade bit deep into my right bicep, piercing through muscle. Pain tore through me, white-hot and overwhelming.

Focusing became impossible. My sword arm trembled, and my strength waned. Cinder saw it, and he smiled.

I couldn't fight him—not here, not like this. Survival was my only choice.

I turned and fled, forcing my legs to carry me through the dense, alien forest. Thorned brambles ripped at my sides. Roots tripped and clawed. Behind me, I could hear Cinder

crashing through the undergrowth, relentless, closer with every step.

“Run, little rabbit!” he called, his laughter as sharp as ice.

The forest deepened. Thick-trunked trees spiraled into the sky, their bark glimmering faintly in the pale blue starlight above. These were not the Fae woods I’d visited before—this place was older, colder, stranger.

When I burrowed to the edge of my resolve, I stopped. My hands worked quickly, pulling the *shaed* around me, wrapping me in darkness. The forest swallowed me. I crouched low, hidden, silent, waiting.

Cinder stumbled into the clearing. His breath came ragged; his blood-slicked blade hung loose at his side. He scanned the shadows, his voice cutting through the silence. “Rabbit, where are you?”

The wind answered for me. A single whispered word: “Ferula.”

Cinder froze at the sound. His head turned sharply, searching.

“Ferula,” I murmured again, letting the breeze carry the sound further.

He snarled, spinning toward the whisper, teeth grinding together. “Face me!”

The final *Ferula* whispered past him, curling faintly at the edge of his hearing. Enraged, he thrust his sword into the ground and spoke a binding word of his own. Light erupted again, sharp and harsh, flaring pale and unnatural. Bark glowed ghost-white; shadows stretched long.

But his light did not drive the darkness away. Instead, it summoned something.

The ground trembled faintly beneath us, and the air shifted—heavy, alive, expectant. A sound followed: soft, uneven, like velvet dragged across a splintered floor. Then came the light. Pale and bluish-white, it seared through the glade.

Cinder staggered back, throwing an arm instinctively over his eyes. Above him, something vast began to shift, its edges sliding unnaturally into view.

It was like flesh—not flesh like ours but something pliant and pale, stretched and uneven. It moved as though underwater, its bulk overwhelming the senses. And at its center, a subtle yawning—a mouth?—began to open. A cold, hollow sigh filled the space between stars and trees.

Cinder trembled. His defiance broke apart, and raw fear tore through his voice. He screamed, falling to his knees as the light grew brighter. The thing above him pulsed again, a final draw of breath, and something bright and vital was pulled from him. That dreadful sigh echoed once more, and with it, the creature folded back into the nothingness from which it came.

The air fell still.

Only when I was sure the creature above had gone did I emerge, Folly balanced in ready hands. Cinder remained crumpled on the ground where the light had abandoned him. His face was broken in every way possible, his coal-black eyes empty of whatever fire had kept him going. He moaned softly, incoherent and hollow.

As I approached, he lifted his hands toward me, trembling. Almost... seeking help.

I paused, watching him. The Cthaeh’s words echoed unbidden in my mind: *Your father begged before the end.*

This was not mercy I felt. It was resolve.

I stepped closer and, without a word, brought *Folly* down. The blade severed his hands cleanly at the wrist. Blood pooled around him as his shattered form collapsed further into the dirt.



# CHAPTER 50

## THE PROPER WAY

**W**HEN I STEPPED through the jagged wound in the Waystone Inn's wall, dragging it back into Temerant, the air outside clung to me. Sharp, cold, unnatural. Bast and Chronicler stood waiting, their faces full of questions.

Bast broke the silence first, his voice tight. "Kvothe—"

I held up my ruined hand to stop him. The fresh wound throbbed, a steady pulse in time with my heart. "Later," I said with a finality that left no room for argument. "There'll be time enough for questions later. But now, there's this."

I shrugged the heavy burlap sack higher onto my shoulder, feeling its damp weight shift slightly. The smell had settled in—iron and something darker, something cloying that turned in your stomach like sour milk.

Bast's sharp eyes tracked it, his mouth uncertain. "Do I dare ask what that is?" he asked, one brow curving upward.

"You'll see soon enough," I said, brushing past him before my gaze shifted purposefully to Chronicler.

"Where are we headed?" the scribe asked, his voice calm but tight, like a man taking great care not to show fear.

"Martin's," I said simply, already moving forward, my strides purposeful. Breath came short as the strain of the sack wore on me. But I welcomed it. It felt proper. Necessary.

"Crazy Martin," Bast muttered behind me, half to himself. "Oh, joy."

\* \* \*

The moon hung low by the time we reached Martin's hovel, its pale light bleaching the tree line like dead bone. I knocked three sharp times and waited.

The door opened just enough to show a sliver of Martin's face. "Tehlu's teeth, do you know what hour it is—" His voice cut off as his eyes landed on me. Or rather, on the sack. He opened the door wider, his sharp gaze flicking from the sack to my face.

"Is that what I think it is?" he asked, his voice flat.

"It is," I said, pushing past him into the hovel. The sack's weight seemed to follow me, heavier now than when I'd first shouldered it. "Is everything ready?"

Martin snorted as he bolted the door behind us. "For over a year now. But I'd hoped I'd never have to see you with... that."

The space inside was cramped and dark, the air thick with woodsmoke and something bitter underneath it. Martin moved quickly, lighting lanterns and working his way to the center of the room. He knelt and rolled back a thick, threadbare rug, revealing two large wooden trapdoors set flush with the floor.

“Stand back,” he said curtly, grabbing an iron gaff from the wall. He hooked it into an iron ring and heaved. The trapdoors groaned as they opened, revealing the pit below.

Torchlight flickered across the scene: the pit was deep, the bottom layered with ash, elm, and rowan. At its center sat the wheel.

The iron looked dull, heavy, and worn—but something about the way it rested gave it weight beyond its materials, as though the thing itself were waiting.

Chronicler shifted uneasily, his fingers twitching as if searching for his pen. Bast’s lips pressed into a thin line, his tail curling and flicking in nervous arcs.

Martin folded his arms, his tone dry. “I assume you remember how this works?”

I answered by stepping forward and resting the sack on the floor with slow deliberation. Its weight sagged against the boards, leaking silence into the room.

Chronicler spoke first, his voice low, solemn. “Let me tell you what to do.”

Bast followed, his tone softer, the words laced with reluctant familiarity. “Dig a pit that’s ten by two.”

I finished, my voice steady as I stared into the pit. The words came easy, roots grown deep. “Ash and elm and rowan, too.”

For a moment, the hovel seemed smaller, the air too thick, the space too tight. The pit below carried its own kind of silence—a waiting void of breath and darkness.

“Get me the ladder,” I said.

# CHAPTER 51

## A SILENCE OF THREE PARTS

IT WAS MORNING AGAIN. Dawn had crept quietly over the hills, painting the sky in soft hues of gray and gold, but the world itself seemed reluctant to wake. The town crouched on the horizon like a wounded beast, blackened scars visible even at a distance. Ash lingered in the air, so faint it was almost a memory. The road stretched wide and dry before us, open and empty, and in that emptiness lay silence—a silence of three parts.

The first silence was the most obvious, sharp-edged and hollow. It was the silence of things lost and broken. Once, there might have been a crackling hearth here, its warm fingers plucking laughter and conversation from the throats of men and women. There might have been tankards clinking, chairs creaking, the fumbling, joyful notes of a fiddler's jig. But the inn was gone now—reduced to soot and rubble. No fire. No fiddler. No laughter. Where once there was noise and life, there was now only the brittle silence of their absence, loud and immense. I could feel it pressing against my skin like winter's first frost.

The second silence hung heavier, closer, as if the air itself held its breath in witness. It was the silence of the townsfolk who had come to grieve but found their grief too private, too raw to share. There had been no eulogy for the innkeeper, no flowers dropped like whispers onto a coffin, no songs sung for the dead. Most had simply come to gawk at the ruin, shuffling away with their heads down before the ashes could stain their memories too deeply. In their place they left behind only this—an unanswered quiet, deep as a well and cold as stone.

The third silence was the faintest and the truest, and it lay on my shoulders alone. It was harder to hear, though if someone listened closely, they might sense it curling in the stillness like smoke. It was not the silence of an empty road or an abandoned home. It was my silence: the stubborn, unyielding quiet of a man who had lost too much and held what little remained with trembling hands. A silence full of weight and sharp edges, older than I cared to admit.

We walked for miles down the dry dirt road, my two companions behind me. I did not know if they felt the same silence pressing on them—but I doubted it. Their whispers rose and fell behind me like the timid flicker of a candle, inconsequential things I barely heard. I kept walking, shoulders square, each step deliberate like the counting of coin. The distant town was no longer visible behind us. There was only the road, stretching forward in whispers of gray dust and brittle grass.

And then I stopped.

\* \* \*

The lute rested on my back, where it had rested faithfully for so many miles. To some, perhaps it was only an instrument—wood and strings, held together with glue and a touch of polish. But for me, it was a voice. I had traded my own for it too often, let it say the things I could not find words for.

I took it in my hands now, gripping its neck with something between reverence and defiance. The road was empty ahead of me, the morning sun still faint and weak. My fingers moved on instinct as I pulled it close to me, brushing the strings just once—lightly. A whisper of a sound came, a note that might have been mourning, but also might have been hope.

My companions fell silent. They had been bickering about something unimportant, and now their words caught in their throats. I felt their eyes on me, but I did not turn to meet their gaze. This moment was not for them. It wasn't even for the burned-down inn or the absent townsfolk or the innkeeper I'd never had the chance to mourn.

It was for me.

I began to play.

The notes came soft at first, quiet as the sunlight on the road. They slipped free, climbing into the empty morning air. A simple melody, without flourish or artifice. But there was power in simplicity, and as I played, the silent world around me seemed to slow and pause, listening.

I let my mind drift. The melody was one I'd heard before, though I couldn't remember where. Maybe it was at the Eolian, played by some nameless girl with freckled hands and a voice of silver. Maybe it was something my father had sung once, long ago, his voice warm as pipe smoke. It didn't matter. The melody belonged to the world now, not me. My fingers guided it forward, coaxing it out like a thread pulled from a tapestry, unraveling itself into the air.

The road no longer felt empty. The brittle grass seemed less dry, the sunlight warmer, the silence—not gone—but different.

\* \* \*

When the song ended, the silence returned. But it did not press as heavily as before. It no longer felt like stone on my chest or a cold hand pressing against my throat. It was a silence that held something else now, some small thing I couldn't name.

I breathed deeply and placed the lute gently onto my back. For a moment, I stood there on the road, holding that silence close. Then, without a word, I began walking again.

My companions followed a few paces behind. They still said nothing, but I could feel their eyes on me, as if seeing me for the first time. I kept my own forward, fixed on the horizon. The road stretched on, wide and waiting.

The end.

# EPILOGUE

## THE LAST NAME SPOKEN

PEHYN DREW A long breath, steadying herself. The morning air was sharp and cold, as if to remind her that the moment was real. Vashet had said she was ready, but doubt clung to her all the same. What if the words failed her? She'd practiced until her throat burned, repeating the Atas under her breath even in the dark of night. Still, Vashet's teasing words rang in her head: "Three days was all it took, once." Pehyn had said nothing, but her cheeks had flushed in quiet frustration.

Her mother waited for her outside, wrapped in white, sharp-featured and steady as weathered stone. Penthe's hands rose, asking a silent question: *Are you ready?* Pehyn nodded, though the motion felt heavier than she expected. Penthe tilted her chin in the barest approval and turned, leading her daughter through Haert's winding streets.

The pathway beneath their feet was ancient, pale stones smoothed with use. Shadows played across the old village walls as the sun broke higher. The breeze teased Pehyn's hair, red as flame, and for a fleeting moment, she imagined herself something closer to courage.

\* \* \*

At the steps, Pehyn stopped. The crowd had gathered, their faces drawn but expectant. This was no personal moment—it belonged to them all. The air seemed to hum with their silent presence.

She climbed and turned to face them. Standing there, she suddenly felt the weight of their eyes. She searched them for judgment and found something far worse: trust. For all her fear, this was her place to stand, her duty to fulfill.

"First," she began, her voice unsteady, though it steadied as she spoke. "First came Chael."

The Atas began to flow, sharp and sure, until Pehyn no longer spoke but became its vessel. Name after name rang out, each one unfurling like steel tempered by fire. Her voice found its rhythm, her fear falling away, replaced by a quiet certainty. Through her, the blade's history unfurled, its story sharp enough to cut silence itself.

And yet, when she reached the end, her breath stilled.

"Last..." Her voice caught, the final name heavier than the blade itself. The crowd seemed to lean forward with her.

“Last came Kvothe,” she said, quieter now, but stronger. “The one who reforged me for a great and noble purpose.”

The audience didn’t move. The name lingered in the air as if etched into the sky, a thread tied taut between past and present.

\* \* \*

For a long beat, there was no sound. The silence felt alive, dense and full. Pehyn stood still at the top of the steps, her body light, as if unmoored from her fear. She looked out across the crowd and saw not judgment but unity, a shared story now as much hers as theirs.

Penthe stepped forward as her daughter descended. Her hands moved with deliberate clarity: *Well done*.

The words hit her not like praise, but like a tether. Grounding. Real. Pehyn’s shadow no longer danced ahead of her. It stood still, matching her stride as her mother turned and began the walk home.

Pehyn followed her mother home, her legs steady now, her shadow no longer dancing ahead but moving alongside her own.

# APPENDIX

## COLLABORATIVE MANUSCRIPT

The living workspace containing the latest changes.

- <https://github.com/frypatch/The-Price-of-Remembering>

## ORIGINAL MANUSCRIPT

TacticalDo's original fan fiction release.

- [https://www.reddit.com/r/KingkillerChronicle/comments/1dgnqjd/the\\_price\\_of\\_remembering\\_bk3\\_fan\\_fiction\\_release/](https://www.reddit.com/r/KingkillerChronicle/comments/1dgnqjd/the_price_of_remembering_bk3_fan_fiction_release/)

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- [https://www.reddit.com/r/KingkillerChronicle/comments/17badh4/chandriancthaeh\\_flowers/](https://www.reddit.com/r/KingkillerChronicle/comments/17badh4/chandriancthaeh_flowers/)

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- <https://www.reddit.com/r/KingkillerChronicle/comments/17h3hpy/comment/k6qforq/?context=3>

More proof its missing books behind the four-plate door.

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Present day chapters

- [https://www.reddit.com/r/KingkillerChronicle/comments/gcv88c/is\\_there\\_a\\_list\\_of\\_chapters\\_for\\_the\\_present\\_day](https://www.reddit.com/r/KingkillerChronicle/comments/gcv88c/is_there_a_list_of_chapters_for_the_present_day)

## CAST

**(IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)**

- Kvothe - custom
- Devon - Mark Strong? or custom?
- Bast - Ben Barnes or custom?
- Master Herma - lars mikkelsen
- Will - Alfred Enoch
- Sim - Jeremy Sumpter
- Master Brandeur - Harvey Fierstien
- Master Hemme - Bradley Whitford
- Master Elodin - David Tennant/Neil Gaiman
- Master Elxa Dal - Vincent Price
- Master Arwyl - Toby Jones
- Master Lorren - Bill Nighy
- Master Kilvin - custom
- Devi - Emma Laird/Ana de armas
- Remmen - Custom - Marcus
- Thianni - Custom
- Roderick Calanthis - Rupert
- Calanthis guard Ywick - Andy
- Trenati - Latin for Third son - Liam
- Regent Fascino - Eddie
- Lord Vatis - Douglas
- Bredon - trained
- Regent Lugosi - Tommy/Jarvis
- Amyr Claude - Edwin
- Galeshim - Kipling
- Baron Jackis - Gilbert
- Artemi Ilario (Kings Tailor) - Noah
- Talyia - Conny
- Old man Cinder - Gideon
- Maarten - Andy
- Auri - custom - Emily Kinney
- Denna - custom

# NOTES

## BOOK 3 PLOT POINTS ADDRESSED

Twenty things stand before, the beginning of book four:

- How Kvothe got to Newarre and became Kote (*see chapter 47/48*)
- Where/what are the Human Amyr and what became of them (28)
- What's in the lockless box (39)
- What/Who is behind the doors of stone, and where is it (39)
- What's behind the four-plate door (8)
- The demon Kvothe tricks to get his heart's desire (8) and the angel he fights to keep it (?)
- Who is princess Ariel (19) and how does he rescue her (45)
- Who is the king that will be killed and how does he die (35)
- What starts the war and who is the penitent king (31)
- Who does Kvothe kill in Imre (47) (Ambrose)
- Who is Denna's patron (38)
- How Kvothe meets Bast (18)
- What do the Chandrian want? (39) to elaborate there are several things 1) initially, to destroy all records of themselves (I'm guessing to stop the irritation/pain associated with having their names spoken (Selitos spoke... "May your face be always held in shadow... Your own name will be turned against you, and all who serve you." I'm guessing but by pledging allegiance to Lanre/Haliax you are then afflicted by the curse), 2) Ultimately they want free of the curse, if Iax can possibly break the curse for them then they are inclined to set him free, Lanre (Haliax) knows Iax is an extremely powerful namer/shaper as he helped imprison him. They need the Loeclos box, more importantly what's inside - this was why they waylaid the tax collectors between Severen and the Lackless estates, and also why they killed Acuelias Lackless, in their attempts to track it down, and why the family originally fractured in order to hide it.
- Where and how does Kvothe acquire the Rings: Stone (14), Wind (5), Amber (14), Wood (WMF from Meluan, doesn't acquire name), Bone (WMF stapes ring, doesn't acquire name), Water/Ice (30), Fire (30), Blood (?), Copper (?)
- Who is Encanis? – A warped amalgamation of the Chandrian and the Cthaeh, concocted by the Tehlin church to make Tehlu their god.
- Why did the Chandrian wait so long - (39) They held out, but after thousands of years of pain, accepted their names will never be forgotten, possibly Cinder was working against them stirring people up to seek out their names in order to force Haliax to work toward breaking the curse instead. Tortured long enough they started searching for a way to set Iax free as a trade to remove the curse, and end Haliax's immortality.

- Why does Kvothe call Skarpi a rumourmonger - His version of events with regards to Lanre's past is an Amyr framed version. The Ruarch used mankind as soldiers then after the creation war went back to lording it over them (details kept vague as we have little from this period to go on). Lanre, seeks power and gains it from the Cthaeh, he is also being driven by the Breath of Iax, what I assume is a small part of him that Skindanced in from the Great Beast at the Blac of Drossen Tor, both conspiring to drive him to unite humanity against the Ruarch, continuing Iax's war. Selitos never saw it coming, though the twist will be that it was warranted. Lanre then gets to be the tragic hero, and Skarpi gets to be called a rumourmonger, rather than outright liar, in the frame. The song of seven sorrows is the Chandrian's attempt to get the truth out after living for centuries listening to The Amyr's confounded version of events.
- What/who is the Cthaeh - Most likely the Tinker mentioned in Hesper's tale of Jax, however I have left enough room that it could also be Selitos, bound by Tehlu to the iron wheel, punished for his attempts to bring justice before crimes are committed. (This is purely guesswork, and I also imagine the Cthaeh's fate will come into effect in what would have been books 4 through 6)
- Who betrays Kvothe - The Maer (35) and to a lesser extent Denna
- What is the significance of the Lackless Rhyme. (39) Seven things stand before The entrance to the Lackless door, One of them a ring unworn (The ring of unearthened standing stones that form the portal), One a word that is forsworn, (Denna made to sing out a phrase to unlock the door, one of the reasons she was being trained by Cinder), One a time that must be right (phase of the moon, has to be a full moon(seems more poetic that way)), One a candle without light (Haliar's negative light candle which reveals the standing stones that are the Doors of Stone) One a son who brings the blood (Kvothe is a lackless heir his blood opens the Loeclos box), One a door that holds the flood, (the Doors of Stone are the cell doors constructed at Drossen Tor imprisoning Iax and his shaped army, opening them allows Iax and his army to flood out into Temerant) One a thing tight-held in keeping (the Loeclos box), Then comes that which comes with sleeping.(I suspect this involves needing to sleep/dream to open the DoS somehow, maybe passing through Faeriniel, however there isn't enough info to go on, and it is just another impediment to opening the doors, which is the main plot point, so i've unfortunately opted to skip it)

## PERCEIVED CHAIN OF EVENTS

### Source:

- [https://www.reddit.com/r/KingkillerChronicle/comments/1i6vq6c/a\\_beginning/](https://www.reddit.com/r/KingkillerChronicle/comments/1i6vq6c/a_beginning/)

### 5000 + years ago:

- The Ruarch exist and some among them can Name

- Iax Lackless(was probably closer to Luckless but we'll go with Lackless here to make it simpler) becomes a Shaper and creates the Fae
- Iax visits the Lady (She is a version of Ludis from Hespe's Jax story) from 'How Old Holly Came To Be' plays her music, and shows her the art of Shaping, promising to teach her if she returns with him.
- At some stage Humanity, and those of the Fae are shaped/created
- Iax and The Lady marry, and she becomes Lady Lackless/Luckless
- The Old Knowers become angry, thinking Iax and the other Shapers are going too far.
- The Lady confronts Iax over his creations and they fall out, she then leaves and returns to Temerant
- Iax isn't content, perhaps out of fear of reprisal from the Knowers who he considers jealous he desires even more power and speaks to the Cthaeh (likely the Tinker/hermit referenced in Hespe's story, and not yet bound to the tree by Tehlu)
- On the Cthaeh's advice Iax tries to pull the moon into the fae
- The attempted theft of the moon sparks the Creation war, with the Old Knowers attacking first
- Iax and the proud dreamers Shape weapons of war, creating creatures such as Durruna, Scrael, Skin Dancers, Draccusi, and Gremmen, and leave the Fae to invade Temerant.
- The Old Knowers start losing, need to increase their numbers, in their desperation they draw humanity into the fight, directing the attacks of Iax onto them
- Lanre and Lyra (likely a Ruarch herself) join the namers/old knowers against Iax and the shapers.
- Iax attacks and destroys cities of the Ergen empire, where the Old Knowers rule hiding as humans
- Iax attacks Belen but is foiled
- Iax is pushed back along the great stone road as Lanre unites humanity against the Shapers
- Humanity and Ruarch push the Shapers into a final confrontation with the plan to imprison Iax and his army within a space constructed in the same manner as the Fae realm.
- Lanre slays Iax's Great Beast at Drossen Tor, a breath of Iax skin walks into him as he lays dying
- Iax and his remaining forces are defeated at Drossen Tor and shut beyond doors of stone, Lyra and Lady Lackless are key in this.
- Lyra pulls the now Iax corrupted Lanre back from beyond the doors of death, speaking his new name, inadvertently making him immortal, as the rest of Iax is alive trapped behind the DoS, so whenever he dies he is pulled 'like a lodestone' back into the mortal realm.
- The Doors of Stone are buried (sidenote the lackless door/doors of stone is supposedly on the oldest parts of the lackless lands, in old holly she isn't far from her home when the final battle occurs, the location then becomes desolate over time, much like the desert over the other side of the Stormwal.)
- Matters return to as they were before the war with the Ruarch ruling over humanity.
- Lyra leaves Lanre to go on a journey maybe sue for humanities freedom

- Lyra ill, Lyra kidnapped, Lyra died (but no one sure)
- Corrupted Lanre (the enemy moving like a worm in fruit) speaks to Cthaeh to obtain power to bring her back, but he still cannot (I'm thinking it was when Lyra brought Lanre back that his name changed as he is now Hal-iax - the breath of Iax - as the other part of Iax is alive and beyond the DoS he is brought back drawn like iron to a lodestone, but either at then or at this point, one of them made it so he can no longer sleep, or forget, no solace in madness, or death.)
- unable to reach or resurrect Lyra Lanre blames the Ruach for everything
- Corrupted Lanre (the real Taborlin) convinces 6 other lords/kings, those who had served him during the Creation war, to raise their trusted armies and to destroy the cities of Temerant, and cast out the Ruach
- Selicotos in his anger at this seeming betrayal of a lesser species binds Lanre to shadow, cursing any who follow him.
- The Angels and the Amyr are formed
- Due to the curse Haliax and the Chandrian feel pain when their names are spoken
- Haliax hopes in time they will be forgotten, only this doesn't happen (perhaps because of Cinder, as he wants to be free of Haliax and cannot until the curse is lifted) and all seems hopeless. (side note maybe Haliax knows their names but they don't know his.)
- The human Amyr tries to hide the Chandrian's names, for the greater good, as anyone who finds and speaks their names dies.

### **3000 years ago (roughly):**

- The descendants of Lady Lackless, likely of the Yllish branch of the family, who inherited the key to the Doors of Stone, shape a box to hold the key, locking it away to ensure its safety. This is then passed down through the Lackless line for generations.

### **3000 years ago to present:**

- Thousands of years pass, and finally Haliax can stand it no longer, their plan is to free Iax in return for ending their suffering. So their purpose becomes to set him free in return for ending the curse, and removing the skinwalker part of Iax from him, so he can become Lanre once more and die.
- Iax is freed, his Alar being greater than Selitos's, he is able to interrupt it, and thus break the curse. The reason for Haliax's immortality was that a part of Iax left the body of the great beast when Lanre slew it and entered him, Iax is able to extricate this part of himself from Haliax reducing him back to Lanre. The stone shattered is left deliberately vague, but is specifically the key originally used to lock the doors of stone, and is not the mountain glass used by Selitos (simpler this way, otherwise there would need to be a key as per the Lackless rhymes and the Mountain Glass coming together at once.)

### **Reasoning for the above chain of events:**

I'm paraphrasing, but Shehyn's story mentions, the following key points:

*The Ergen empire had an enemy* - This is unclear at this point, it could be a number of people, possibly Iax, or Haliar, or maybe even the Ctheah.

*The enemy was not strong enough to destroy Taranial* - Lanre succeeds in this which means by process of elimination it is likely Iax being referred to here.

*Moved like a worm in fruit, not of the lethani, poisoned 7 others against the Ergen empire* - Again I'm leaning to Iax manipulating Lanre from within. Iax being the worm, Lanre being the fruit.

Of the names spoken only two are Deep Names I suspect;

Ferule (Cinder) and Alaxel (Haliar) I believe Kvothe does this as one is dead in the frame (Lanre/Haliar), and the other he wishes to lure to the Waystone (Cinder/Ferule).

This is the big one, what would make those who are already lords or possibly (as stated in both Cyphus's case) kings amongst their people, trusted according to Shehyn, raise an army and turn on their own cities? This I suspect is the distortion in Skarpi's version of events, the reason he is called a rumourmonger in the frame. They were indeed lords amongst men, but they were ruled by the Ruarch, their possible creators, perhaps even hiding amongst them. Though I doubt it, it's also possible they were all birthed into the world like Menda supposedly was via immaculate conception. These 'lords and Kings' along with their armies, which would be Lanre's former allies and subordinates from the Creation war then turned on them, betraying their Ruarch oppressors, including Selitos.

The reason I say this is simple, each of the Chandrian could have been swayed by the promise of power, they doubtfully however could have convinced whole armies to do so on their behalf, they would have needed a reason to take such a risk.

I'm still of the mind that the 'thing' the Chandrian were originally attempting to do was cast out the Ruarch from Temerant or at least the human occupied territories, who were in large part oppressors of humanity.

With Aleph being the original creator/shaper of man, and thus having sway in how they are treated. We know from Felurian that mankind didn't exist at one stage, so why would they become embroiled in a war with the Shapers unless possibly forced or tricked into it by the Ruarch?

Where Tehlu states: "I will leave this world behind so that I might better serve it, serving you." This would imply the Ruarch come from another world, and via a means (implied immaculate conception based on Trapis's tale) are able to access Temerant. I wonder if Lanre learnt this. Possibly from Lyra?

Lyra was probably of the Ruarch (see Laniel young again), and sought Aleph's council in order to obtain better conditions for humanity, however the other Ruarch murdered her, so they could retain the status quo. This being the final straw for Lanre who then started the rebellion. Which is referenced here as a betrayal, the idea that a mere human, a lesser race, would oppose them.

## RATIONAL BEHIND CERTAIN PLOT CHOICES

- As Pat doesn't strike me as the sort to write one-dimensional, good-vs-evil characters, it was important to give the Chandrian justification and some form of redemption. This is backed up by Denna's song, which appears to indicate that the



Chandrian, or at least some of them, want to set the historical record straight. They feel slighted.

- Though I agree there is some merit that Denna is a Lackless, ( see [https://www.reddit.com/r/KingkillerChronicle/comments/1pvew4/is\\_denna\\_a\\_lackless\\_long\\_post\\_spoilers/?utm\\_source=reddit&utm\\_medium=user&utm\\_name=KingkillerChronicle&utm\\_content=t1\\_e7ityff](https://www.reddit.com/r/KingkillerChronicle/comments/1pvew4/is_denna_a_lackless_long_post_spoilers/?utm_source=reddit&utm_medium=user&utm_name=KingkillerChronicle&utm_content=t1_e7ityff)) I really hope Pat doesn't opt to go in this direction, and thus ruled it out.
- Lack of resolution regarding the Cthaeh. Kvothe himself says at the beginning this is as much a story of the Chandrian as it is about himself. Given this, and his lack of knowledge on the Cthaeh indicated in WMF, I suspect Pat intends to leave Cthaeh's fate to the sequels.
- Kvothe is descended from Iax on his mother's side, again I hope there isn't any substance around Iax somehow raping Laurian/Netalia from beyond the Doors of Stone. It would get really messy if the plot goes in that direction. Also the text clearly implies Kvothe resembles both Laurian and Arliden. Mother's eyes. Father's hands and voice.
- What's in the box; I like Zhorangi's theory Auri is in the Waystone, and maybe in the box, but it's really hard to write that in a way that doesn't come off as stupid. So went with the implication that he may have retrieved a part of himself and his shaed which has now healed.

## ELEMENTS I CONSIDERED CHANGING

- This one only came to recently and I would change it if I wasn't so near completion, inside the Lackless box is the moonshard used to bind the moon to the Fae realm, this is said to be Iax/Jax's greatest desire, Haliax bargains it to Iax in return for freeing him from life.
- [https://www.reddit.com/r/KingkillerChronicle/comments/le2ucq/severen\\_is\\_located\\_where\\_myrtaraniel\\_used\\_to\\_be/](https://www.reddit.com/r/KingkillerChronicle/comments/le2ucq/severen_is_located_where_myrtaraniel_used_to_be/) This thread makes a great case for Severen being Myr Taraniel and the seat of original power for the Amyr possibly, could have had Dagon reveal the human chapter are within Severen still, Instead of having him ride slightly further out to the Leveritis.
- Considered having two stones in the Loeclos box the other being the mountain glass used to curse Lanre, but just didn't feel right or really add anything
- Could have done with another scene, just Bast and Kvothe, to help build the Camaraderie. Considered having them venturing out in Vintas alone together, maybe some locals picking a fight with them, where Bast gets to see another side of K and he teaches him something.
- I subscribe to the theory Auri's in the thrice locked chest and it's a portal of some kind, but I couldn't think of a way to write it that didn't come off as a bit weird.
- No visit to Junpui, although PR has indicated this will be in DoS.

- I love the theory of Bredon being Aculeus Lackless and not Cinder, and think it would make a great twist especially if Kvothe kills him when he was only trying to aid him in secret, and is after the same people he is, perhaps is a Modegan Rider? however I couldn't then think of a suitable way/twist to reveal the Chandrian at the end.
- I considered having the final battle be the 6 remaining Chandrian versus Kvothe's allies hiding in Newarre, Elodin masquerading as the priest, martyn as crazy Martin, Auri, maybe keep will and sim alive, Devi, and Fela, and this would have been cool, but also really messy, and would have taken away from Kvothe's rivalry with Cinder.
- These aspects of the girls and boys version of the lackless rhyme are purposefully ignored, 'She's been dreaming and not sleeping. On a road, that's not for travelling. Lackless likes her riddle raveling' and 'Then comes that which comes with sleeping'. As theorised by some this likely relates to travelling through Faerinial after the DoS are opened, however I suspect they don't alter the final conclusion, and as there is so little information covering them, I've opted to skip them.
- Toyed with Kvothe calling Denna back from beyond the doors of death at the end, then having to fight and kill one of the ruach, and then Denna escapes in the night, but no way would he be waiting in the Inn if this were the case, so I opted to leave it.
- For an added twist I considered having Cinder allude to the Chandrian not being responsible for killing Kvothe's troupe, but decided against it. [https://www.reddit.com/r/KingkillerChronicle/comments/10hw76y/were\\_some\\_of\\_kvothes\\_troupe\\_killed\\_using\\_arrows/](https://www.reddit.com/r/KingkillerChronicle/comments/10hw76y/were_some_of_kvothes_troupe_killed_using_arrows/)
- Considered having Elodin be Abbe Leodin but there are two reasons why they aren't the same person; Kvothe says he buried the Scrael wrong, and Elodin taught chronicle after Kvothe left which means he's likely still at the uni. From a story point of view his presence just gets in the way. Also as previously mentioned this would rob Kvothe of some of his agency in the final confrontation.
- I originally considered adding a key to the Loeclos box to be in the archive, the Chandrian then make an appearance to claim it with a huge set piece ensuing, but it was hard to conceive of a scenario that would make that work.
- Would have loved to include more of Denna's backstory, her relationship to Yll and who is chasing her that makes her keep moving on, but there just isn't enough there, without inventing whole new sections, which is against the remit for this fan edition.
- File this under doubtful but possible - Is Cinder to Haliar the equivalent of Bast to Kvothe, attempting to manipulate the Chandrian into action. Maybe originally Haliar wanted for the Chandrian to be forgotten by time, but now Cinder acts as a Patron to people (Arliden perhaps, and Denna very likely) to get them find and call their names, until Haliar has to accept they cannot hide, and need to break the curse.
- In another completely different direction, what if Kvothe pledged allegiance to Haliar for some reason? This would explain why he changed his name and created the thrice locked chest to seal it away. Perhaps the original High King of Modeg was the 'one who remembered the lethani' and locked his name away so that Haliar couldn't speak it and cause him pain like he does Cinder, exerting control over him. Question is; why would Kvothe pledge allegiance to Haliar? Perhaps forced to do so in order save someone, this creates other problems as well though, why free Iar

before the frame if not to clear the curse? In this version by swearing allegiance he too would become one of the Chandrian, and his sign would be silence.

- Scene between Kvothe and Fela when he returns to Imre after Sim's death.
- Scene with Manet when he takes up the Master's chair.
- Scene near the end before nightfall and Cinder arrives where Kote shaves, maybe add a line about it being proper to be clean shaven in some cultures before death.

## **ALTERNATE ENDINGS**

- All the Chandrian come to the Waystone, but Kvothe has more help waiting in secret, i.e. Elodin, Auri, Devi possibly ect.
- In his battle with Cinder, Kvothe blows a horn in the Fae which summons the Scythe who in turn take Cinder.
- Same as above, but Cinder reveals the Chandrian acted based on what the Ctheah told them, Kvothe then goes and burns down the Ctheah, with the audience left to wonder if this was what the Ctheah wanted all along. - This ending has the added benefit of closing out the entire story, rather than leaving it open-ended.

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