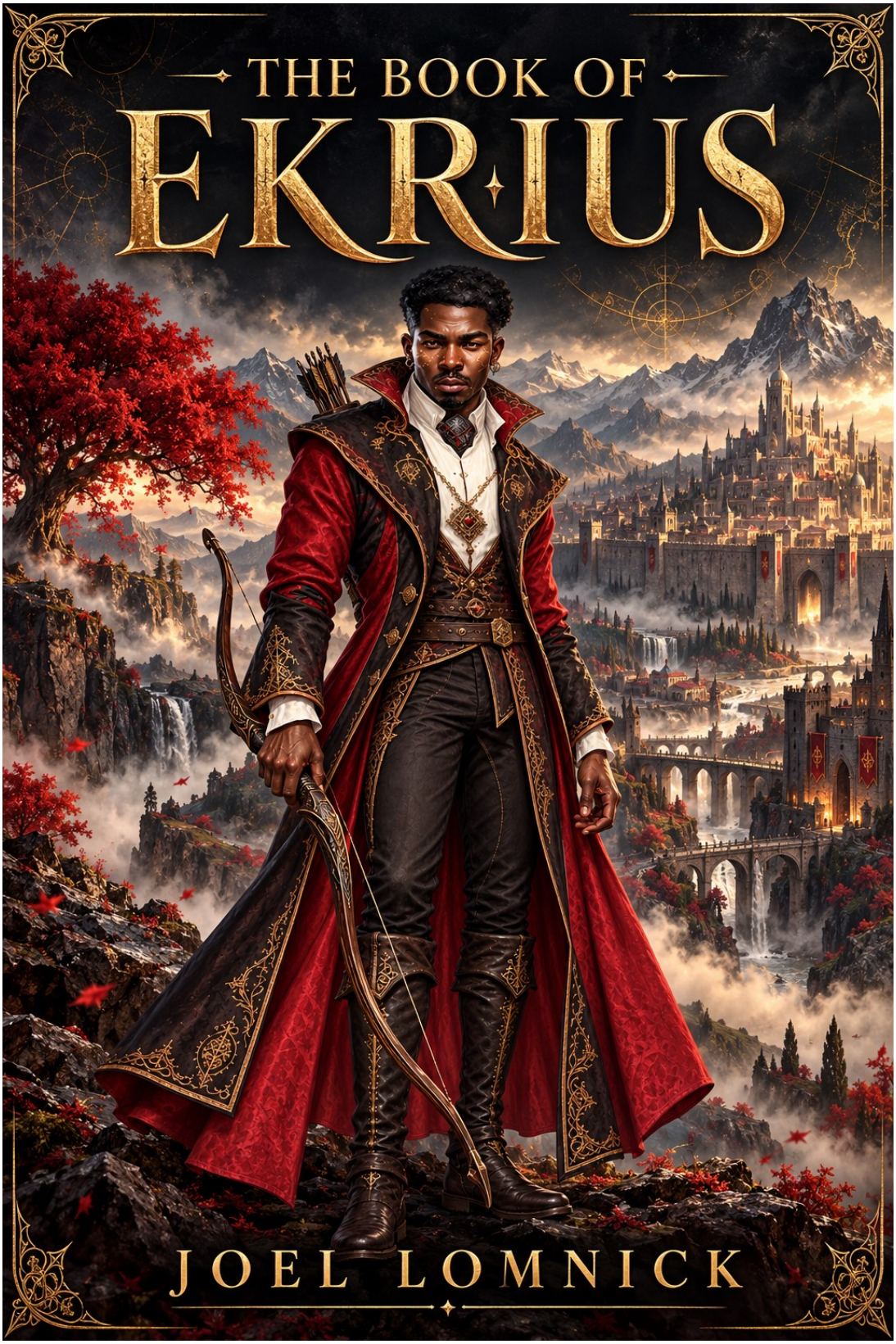

THE BOOK OF
EKRIUS
JOEL LOMNICK

The Book of Ekrius

Book One of the Six Friends

Joel Lomnick

Copyedited 155-Page Draft

October 18, 2026

The Book of Ekrius

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A work of fantasy fiction.

Prepared for author review. This draft preserves the original adventure while developing its six central characters.

Cover and cast artwork developed with AI assistance under Joel Lomnick's direction.

For the ones who make room at the table.

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Meet the Wayward Flames



Ekrius Ashborne, Jarik Fairwind, Sera Veythorn, Kel Brasswick, Mera Flint, and Rian Emberfell form the unlikely company at the heart of this story. These portraits introduce their distinct appearances and developed adventuring identities. Their clothes, bearing, and specialties hint at different ways of facing the world. You will meet them before they become the people pictured here, and discover what those identities cost them to earn.

The Roads We Walk

This map introduces the region Ekrius comes to protect. Begin with the Ash Roads, where the six friends grow up, then look for Lanternwood, Skyspan, the Swallow, the Hill of Three Roads, and the Warden Lodge as their journeys unfold. The roads connect homes, markets, dangerous crossings, and places of refuge. Knowing where a path leads is only part of understanding it. The people along it reveal what taking that path may cost.



An illustrated guide to the adventure’s setting. Distances and borders are not drawn to scale.

Reading the Character Records

A game built around imagination
Dungeons & Dragons was created by Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson and first published in 1974. It grew from miniature wargaming into adventures centered on individual characters. A Dungeon Master presents the world; players choose what their characters attempt; rules and dice help resolve uncertain outcomes. You do not need to have played to follow this book.

Why I wrote this adventure
My autobiographical series, Lionheart, Volumes 1 & 2, explores family, faith, friendship, loss, and belonging. It follows the habit of earning a place by being useful, and the work of learning to accept care. Ekrius carries those questions into fantasy: what does protection cost, and can a protector trust others enough to rest? My engineering life informs the wards and roads; music, dance, service, and chosen family shape the company. This is a passion project, not a retelling of my life. These companions have fictional lives and choices of their own.

Ancestry and individual character
Race, species, and ancestry describe fantasy heritage and inherited traits. Ekrius is a tiefling, Sera a half-elf, Mera a mountain dwarf, and Jarik, Kel, and Rian are human. These are imagined peoples, not real-world racial categories. Ancestry does not determine morality. Upbringing, temperament, relationships, and decisions shape each person.

The characteristics
Six ability scores summarize strengths: STR (Strength), physical force; DEX (Dexterity), agility; CON (Constitution), stamina; INT (Intelligence), reasoning and knowledge; WIS (Wisdom), awareness and judgment; CHA (Charisma), presence and influence. Charisma is not beauty, and no score measures worth. PB is proficiency bonus, reflecting training. Max HP is maximum hit points, a rested capacity to withstand harm and strain. AC is armor class, how difficult someone is to hit with ordinary equipment. Written condition notes describe injuries and burdens the numbers cannot capture.

Classes and subclasses
A class is an adventuring discipline. Rangers track and read terrain; rogues use precision and specialized skills; bards combine expression with magic; artificers unite craft and magic; fighters train for combat; warlocks gain power through a pact. A subclass is a specialty, such as a Battle Master fighter. Levels indicate developing capability. Two classes indicate training in both disciplines. Some paths establish a specialty earlier than others; Rian's patron, for example, is part of his pact from the start.

Growth and chapter records
The openers show each character at chapter entry, before the events that follow. Unclassed children and apprentices have no assigned adventuring statistics. Practice, mentors, significant events, and costly choices drive growth at different times. Greater power does not erase flaws or injuries. The portraits show later identities, not childhood equipment. These abbreviated records use the 2014 fifth-edition framework with compatible options; they are not complete game sheets. Ekrius narrates from memory and his companions' accounts. Notice what each person sees, misunderstands, and chooses: their ways of reading the world matter as much as their powers.

Prologue
Where the Roads No Longer Need Me

Character records at chapter entry

Later-life frame at the lodge.

Ekrius Ashborne

Tiefling. Ranger 17 / Rogue 3 - Gloom Stalker / Scout.

STR 12 DEX 18 CON 14 INT 9 WIS 16 CHA 12; PB +6; Max HP 161; AC 16

Lives at the lodge as his active service winds down.

A Chair Beside the Maps

The first person to tell me I was retired was a woman carrying a leaking bucket. She had come to the lodge to complain about the roof, which she said was proof that a man could save a city and still fail to notice water landing in his own soup. I told her I had noticed. I had moved the soup. This did not improve her opinion of my maintenance schedule.

By then I had enough maps to wallpaper a palace and no desire to enter one. They hung from pegs, crowded shelves, and occupied the table where sensible people ate. Some showed caravan routes. Some showed water sources, dangerous crossings, or the houses where a traveler could knock after dark without being charged for the privilege of remaining alive. A few contained mistakes. I kept those where I could see them. Age had made me suspicious of anyone who displayed only their successful work.

The storm came over the western ridge before supper. I felt it in the old break in my left wrist, then heard it push through the trees behind the lodge. Rain found the roof with the enthusiasm of a debt collector. The fire snapped; my boots steamed beside it; a silver thread in the cuff of my coat caught the light. I had worn that coat through a war, two inquiries, and one wedding at which Jarik had been told, in writing, not to sing. It had survived everything except my attempts to mend it.

There was a bow on the wall behind me. Black wood, a repaired grip, gold wire along the limbs. People who visited sometimes stared at it before looking at my face, as if the weapon might confirm I was the person they had traveled to meet. I understood the impulse. Legends are easier to recognize than men who have just dropped stew on their shirt.

On the table lay the east-road survey, freshly amended by someone whose handwriting was larger and more confident than mine. A ravine had shifted after three days of rain. The old path had become a convenient way to die. The new one climbed through trees to a shepherd's winter shelter, crossed firmer ground, then joined the ridge road beyond the flood basin. Whoever had drawn it had included the shepherd's name and the fact that his dog disliked red hats.

That last detail pleased me more than the contour lines. A map should tell you what you need to know. It should also remember that someone lives there.

I reached for my quill, stopped, and read the survey again. No correction presented itself. I turned it sideways, which is an embarrassing thing to do when you are hunting for a reason to remain useful. Still nothing. Outside, the younger wardens were putting shutters over the lower windows. One of them laughed. Another told her that if she dropped the hammer again she could introduce herself to the foundation and explain the delay personally.

I knew that voice. Tali had arrived two winters earlier with a pack twice the size it needed to be and the determined expression of someone planning to become exceptional before lunch. Now she argued about drainage with people older than her and usually won. I had taught her to look at the ground before agreeing to anything. Bruni had taught her how to argue without making an ox nervous. The second skill was harder.

The woman with the bucket was called Iven. Years before, I had met her beside a road she could not afford to leave. Her children were grown now. She had come to the lodge to manage supplies for a season and stayed because, she said, somebody had to prevent the wardens from mistaking a pantry for a philosophical exercise. Tonight she set the bucket beside the hearth and studied me.

"You could eat before it gets cold," she said. "Food does that, even when you stare at it with authority."

I put down the quill. She watched until I took a spoonful, then nodded as if an unruly shipment had finally arrived at the correct address. I might have resented it if the stew had not been excellent.

A red leaf lay beneath a small piece of glass near my bowl. Its edges had gone almost black. Most visitors assumed it was a trophy from some magnificent encounter. It was a leaf from the tree outside the temple where I grew up. I had kept it through more moves than I could count, and once, when a collector offered to buy it, Mera asked him whether he also purchased other people's teeth. The negotiation ended promptly.

I touched the glass, then moved my hand away. There are memories you can visit without having to live inside them for the rest of the evening. I had learned this late and still required practice.

The leaking roof had another consequence. It drove a field mouse from the rafters into a cupboard, where it discovered the lodge's entire supply of wedding sweets. I heard Iven shout my name with the particular force people reserve for a fire or a man putting his boots on the table. I arrived carrying a knife. She pointed at the cupboard and asked whether I intended to negotiate with the mouse or simply frighten the jam.

We found three sweets behind a flour sack, two under a plate, and one in a nesting arrangement that suggested the mouse had been expecting guests. I reached for the ruined packet and stopped. Jarik had sent those sweets. His note was still on the shelf, addressed to the Former Terror of the Eastern Approaches, Present Menace to Upholstery. Beneath that, in smaller writing, he had said the baker who made them employed two people from the old ration queue. They had their own rooms now. He thought I would like to know.

I had answered his questions about the roads but avoided his invitation to visit. There was always a survey that required checking, somebody's apprentice who needed advice, an inquiry that might proceed more efficiently if I supplied one more recollection. Useful reasons. Reasons so useful they had protected me from spending an evening with a friend who knew when I was frightened.

Iven set a bowl beneath the damaged shelf. "Will your knife be needed for the letter too?" she asked. I told her she had become intrusive in her old age. She reminded me that she had been intrusive when we met and I was simply less mobile now. While she carried the flour into the kitchen, I wrote Jarik a proper answer. Yes, I would come. No, I would not inspect the foundations unless invited. Yes, I understood that the invitation extended to supper rather than a committee meeting.

A knock interrupted me. One of the young wardens stood outside with a red-eyed man whose coat was buttoned incorrectly. His daughter was among the travelers at the lower station. He had been hauling timber on the northern slope when he heard that the old road had washed out. He

asked whether I could tell him she was safe. A simple question with no honest simple answer. I offered him the chair nearest the fire and explained what we knew, including when the next message should arrive.

"But you're Ekrius," he said. He said it softly, with hope rather than accusation, which made it harder. I had heard my name used as a request for certainty before. I told him I was, and that my name did not change the water. The people outside were good at their work. His daughter had shelter available and people looking for her. I would wait with him until we heard.

He sat with his hands between his knees. I nearly gave him a speech about fear, then remembered that when my own father was detained I had hated every person who explained patience while going home to their intact families. Instead I asked his daughter's name. Suli. She hated boiled carrots, he said, and had recently begun correcting the arithmetic on his invoices. We talked about invoices. Iven brought another bowl. When the report came later, I could tell the messenger which child we were asking about without describing her as a number in a wagon.

Someone Else Takes First Watch

Tali came in with rain in her curls and a rolled survey beneath her arm. She stopped near the fire, looked at my bowl, and appeared to reconsider whatever emergency she had planned to announce. Iven gave her the look adults use when they have already discussed you while you were outside. I disliked that look. I had used it on all five of my friends and considered it an excellent management tool until it began happening to me.

"The east road," Tali said. "We have six travelers at the lower station. Two wagons, one lame mule, a woman who says she can walk, and her daughter who says she can't."

"Which one can't walk?"

"The mother. The daughter means the mother. They haven't reached an agreement about grammar or the ankle."

She spread her survey beside mine. Same ridge, same shepherd's shelter, same red-hat warning. Her version included a timetable and two names against each watch. Harun would take the upper crossing. A local woman called Renn knew the drainage channels near the shelter and

had offered to guide the travelers for a fair price. Nobody had described her contribution as volunteering. Another small thing that pleased me.

I asked about the mule. Tali said they would leave it and one handler at the lower station until the water fell. I asked about the ankle. They had a litter and four bearers. I asked about the stretch beneath the split oak. She pointed to the amended route without speaking.

I could have invented another question. Instead I listened to the rain and felt the familiar unpleasantness begin beneath my ribs: a physical objection to allowing danger to occur beyond the reach of my own hands. People had mistaken that feeling for courage for years. Sometimes it had been courage. Sometimes it was only fear wearing useful boots.

"Do you want to look at it yourself?" Tali asked. She tried to sound casual. I could hear the effort. There had been a time when I would have thanked her for offering me a reason to interfere.

I looked down at the map. Two people had checked the ridge. A third had supplied local knowledge. They had somewhere dry to stop and a clear condition for retreat. The route did not need my blessing. Tali needed to know I understood that.

"Take Renn's advice if the channel has moved," I said. "The survey isn't an instruction to ignore the person standing in the water. And pay her tonight. Not when somebody in an office remembers her name."

Tali smiled, then tried to hide the smile beneath the seriousness of command. "Already arranged. Harun says you can have the first dry watch tomorrow if you absolutely need to supervise something."

"Tell Harun I supervised him before his beard surrendered."

"He anticipated that and says the beard filed a formal grievance."

She went out laughing. I watched the door close. Nobody waited for me to rise. Outside, voices called instructions I recognized, followed by others I had never taught anyone. A good sign, although I required several breaths to admit it.

Iven took my empty bowl. "You look as if somebody stole your occupation," she said. "Finish your tea. You can be offended after dessert."

Later, when the first report arrived, it was carried by a boy who wanted to know whether road wardens received complimentary pie. The travelers had reached the shelter. The mother was furious about being carried and warm enough to express it. Nobody had lost a wagon. Renn had found a better place to cross than the one on our survey. Tali had changed the route and written down why.

I added the crossing to my map. Then I signed her name beneath the correction, not mine.

After the messenger left, Suli's father stood so quickly that his chair struck the wall. He apologized to the chair, then to me, then laughed at himself with a sound that almost broke in the middle. He wanted to go down at once. I understood. Tali's instructions were to wait at the upper station, where an escort would meet the last group. I explained the route, gave him a lantern, and let him walk out with a young warden who had no reputation at all.

For several minutes I watched the place where the lantern had disappeared. My wrist hurt. My knees were grateful to remain inside. Those two facts did not settle the question of whether I belonged in the chair. I had spent a large portion of my life using discomfort as proof of devotion. Sitting comfortably while other people worked felt, at first, like being caught stealing.

Iven returned the knife to its rack. "You stayed with him," she said. I told her anybody could have done that. She looked at me for a long time, then asked why I had spent so many years behaving as though that made a thing unimportant. I had no satisfactory answer. She accepted the silence without rescuing me from it and began setting tomorrow's bread to rise.

When the dough was covered, I asked whether she had ever regretted staying at the lodge. Pell had her own household. Tobe worked two valleys away. There were places she could go where nobody asked her how many sacks of oats remained. She pulled the cloth straight and said she sometimes regretted the oats. She did not regret choosing where she lived. The distinction embarrassed me because I had helped people defend their choices and then quietly treated my own as obligations nobody was allowed to question.

I set the next blank sheet on the table. I had been asked to explain how a warden had become powerful enough to protect the roads. The story I could actually tell involved the people who had taught him when to put down the bow. I suspected the publisher would receive more arguments

than expected. That seemed fair. Every employer I had worked for had received plenty of arguments.

Before the Roads Had Names

This is the part where a sensible storyteller assures you he always knew what he was becoming. I had no such advantage. As a boy I believed the adults who said the walls would hold. Later I believed knowing the danger meant I could prevent it. Both beliefs cost people things I could not return.

The people in this book have heard portions of it. Some supplied the portions I had not seen. Where a story was told to me afterward, I will tell you that. Where my memory is uncertain, I will not purchase confidence by pretending otherwise. I have had enough of immaculate records that cannot account for the people standing beside them.

You will meet five friends. Jarik will insist he deserves introduction music. Kel will ask whether the music can be powered by steam. Mera will object to both of them on grounds that are practical, moral, and occasionally airborne. Sera will notice which question I avoid. Rian will notice who has not eaten. Between them they have improved my life immeasurably and made several simple errands last an entire season.

Do not mistake their later titles and reputations for who they were at the beginning. We did not arrive as a balanced adventuring party, chosen by the gods and helpfully equipped. We arrived hungry, proud, useful in different ways, and occasionally too ashamed to ask the obvious question. Most of our finest decisions began as arguments. Some of our worst were unanimous.

I can tell you now that we lived. Survival is not the whole outcome. There are names I will have to write that do not belong to anyone at my table anymore, and choices I still cannot make sound clean. If that means you know the six of us survive, good. You can pay attention to what staying alive demands of them.

The first map I remember was my father's. It showed our street as a grey patch beneath a label somebody else had chosen. He spread it on the table while my mother mended linen for houses where the lamps never dimmed. I asked why our building was missing. He said the map

had been simplified. My mother, without looking up from her sewing, asked whether anybody had tried simplifying the rent.

That is where I want to begin: at that small table, before I owned a bow, before the Circle came with its crates, before any of us knew how much trouble could hide inside the word protection. The roof leaked there too. Apparently a man can travel the world, acquire a respectable cloak, and still fail to escape certain themes in architecture.

Outside the lodge, the storm moved east. I set another sheet beside the survey and wrote the name of the street as we had called it, not as the council preferred. Then I began with the six of us beneath a red tree, convinced that knowing one another's names meant knowing one another. It was a reasonable place to start, and an expensive thing to believe.

Chapter 1
Child of the Ash Roads

Character records at chapter entry

Childhood before formal adventuring classes. Unclassed characters have no assigned ability scores, HP, or AC yet.

Ekrius Ashborne
Tiefling. Not yet classed.
A child who watches the streets from the rooftops.

Jarik Fairwind
Human. Not yet classed.
A child who performs in the streets and helps his neighbors.

Sera Veythorn
Half-elf. Not yet classed.
An observant child who keeps her thoughts guarded.

Kel Brasswick
Human. Not yet classed.
A child learning to tinker with whatever he can find.

Mera Flint
Mountain dwarf. Not yet classed.
An older neighborhood child with no formal combat training.

Rian Emberfell
Human. Not yet classed.
A child already helping to care for his family.

The Streets They Left Off

Our building had three floors, two honest staircases, and a third that required a working relationship with gravity. We lived above a dyer's shop. On days when the dyer worked in red, my mother's sheets came in smelling of iron. On blue days the alley cats acquired decorative feet. From the window I could see the second city wall, the top of the temple roof, and the crimson tree whose roots had been negotiating with the street longer than anyone could remember.

My father, Dovan, measured roads. Not the glamorous kind of measuring performed by men who pointed at distant hills while somebody else carried the poles. He was the man carrying the poles. He could tell where rain would gather by looking at a field and knew how much a bridge shifted when a loaded wagon crossed it. The city paid him to collect those observations and employed another man to decide whether they counted.

My mother, Ena, washed linen for households inside the wall. She could identify a wealthy man's illness from his laundry and considered this a more useful diagnostic skill than most temple physicians possessed. She had deep brown skin, hands roughened by soap, and a singing voice that could make a cramped kitchen seem briefly larger. When the water froze in winter she sang while breaking the ice. She never described this as resilience. She described it as needing to finish before her fingers stopped cooperating.

I inherited her coloring and my father's habit of looking twice. My horns were small, swept close to my skull beneath curls that resisted every comb we owned. Visitors sometimes asked whether I could feel evil approaching. Mostly I could feel the back of my head catching on a shirt. Tiefling ancestry had not come with useful instructions.

I learned the neighborhood through errands. Mrs. Peret paid a copper if I carried her coal upstairs without spilling it, and another if I pretended not to see the extra bowl she left for Jarik. The west alley flooded first, so you went around by the temple when the air smelled of rain. The second guard on the south gate accepted bribes but disliked being offered them where his

younger brother could watch. The baker threw away yesterday's bread after sunset unless somebody asked before he had officially decided to discard it. Timing mattered.

The official map omitted all of this. On its smooth grey patch, there were no stairs, hungry boys, or women whose knees had swollen too badly to carry coal. My father explained that a city plan served a particular purpose. I asked what purpose. He rubbed the side of his nose and said I asked questions like a person who had never needed to keep a job.

The first time I walked with him beyond the wall, I saw a boy my age riding a pony. That was all. No revelation, no prophecy. I wanted the pony. I wanted the boy's boots and the pastry in his hand. Years later I would develop a sophisticated analysis of unequal infrastructure, but at the time my political position was that he could have shared the pastry.

Jarik would have asked for half. Sera would have asked where the boy was going and why his groom looked frightened. Kel would have wanted the saddle buckle. Mera would have judged whether the pony had thrown anybody worth throwing. Rian would have offered it his own breakfast. Together we became six competing methods of getting through a morning.

Mera was older than the rest of us. Her family had come down from the mountain workshops when a mine closed and a debt followed them farther than the work did. She was already broad through the shoulders when I was still growing into my elbows. She called us children with impressive conviction for someone whose father called her his youngest girl. Her little brother Bren, who was actually younger than me, found this hierarchy exhausting.

Bren followed her everywhere carrying stones in his pockets. He said he intended to learn masonry. Mera said he intended to ruin the hinges on their front door by hanging from them. Both claims had evidence behind them. When Mera returned from the freight yards, Bren would run to her. She would scoop him up with one arm without interrupting her argument, as casually as lifting another sack.

The year I learned how much a city could charge for being poor, my father came home with no wages and a paper saying his survey had delayed road clearance. He had recorded a collapsed culvert. The foreman had recorded insubordination. They detained him the next morning for

refusing to certify a route that could not carry its assigned weight. My mother read the paper once and put it face down. Then she went to work because we still needed to eat.

I remember that she did not cry where I could see. I remember being grateful. It took me years to understand that gratitude properly.

On the third morning of his detention I went with my mother to the records office. She wore the good brown dress she used for funerals and appointments where somebody might mistake clean clothing for an argument. She had pressed it beneath a board overnight. I carried a packet of references from men who had employed my father, and she carried the rent money because we did not yet know which kind of fee would be required.

The office had two queues. One waited outside beneath a gutter, the other inside beside a stove. A porter directed us toward the gutter before my mother spoke. She asked what distinguished the queues. The porter said the inside line was for petitioners with appointments. She asked for an appointment. He said we would have to present the detention number at the desk inside. When she repeated his explanation back to him, he sighed as though she had personally invented the difficulty.

We waited in the rain. A woman ahead of us held a jar wrapped in cloth. Her son had been taken after a market inspection and she had brought the medicine he needed. Every few minutes she checked the lid. I asked whether her son was ill. My mother touched my sleeve, not to silence me but to make me look at the woman's face before asking anything else. She had been standing there since yesterday. The jar contained the last dose she could afford.

Inside, the clerk glanced at our references and set them beneath a weight. My mother asked when my father would be released. He wanted the case number. She supplied it. He wanted the detention number. She supplied that too. He asked whether she understood that those were different things. For a moment her mouth tightened so hard I thought she might strike him. Instead she asked which missing number would get her husband home.

The missing thing was a certification from his supervisor. The supervisor would provide it if my father acknowledged that the culvert report had exceeded his assigned duties. My mother asked whether he had exceeded those duties by finding the broken culvert or by writing it down.

The clerk said he could not advise her on employment matters. She folded the references carefully and made me count the coins again before we left. We had paid to learn that somebody else must decide whether we were allowed to ask.

The woman with the jar was still outside. Her medicine had gone cold. My mother gave her the address of a washerwoman who knew a guard's sister. She did not promise anything would come of it. She said the washerwoman would listen. On the way home I told her the clerk was stupid. She said he understood his job very well. That was worse, and for years I was angry with her for explaining it to me instead of agreeing.

At home I unfolded my father's unfinished survey. The culvert crossed a line that meant nothing to me then, the boundary between two offices responsible for maintenance. Neither had accepted the expense. I imagined carrying the map back and showing the clerk how the water would flow. I believed a properly explained fact would make the right thing happen. My mother let me talk until I had reached the end of the argument. Then she asked whether I had eaten. When I said that was not the point, she put a bowl in my hands and said it was one of the points. A person could be correct and hungry, and hunger generally made the next decision worse.

The next afternoon I earned three coppers carrying coal for Peret. I wanted to keep one for a pastry. I counted the money in my palm long enough for her to notice, then put all three in my mother's jar. Nobody had asked me to do it. Nobody called me noble. That night, while everybody slept, I resented the pastry fiercely. I include this because accounts of poor children being generous frequently forget to mention that the children had wanted something too.

A Temple with Cracked Wards

The temple was called the Hearth of the Returning Flame. Nobody in the Ash Roads used the whole name unless they were requesting money. We called it the Hearth, and the priests called the congregation wayward flames, which was a kind way of saying the gods apparently expected a complicated attendance record.

Father Daren taught me to sweep the aisles without disturbing people who were sleeping in them. He was patient with children, generous with books, and unwilling to speak plainly when

the subject was money from the upper wards. These facts coexisted. I liked him, and later I would want very much for liking someone to settle the question of whether they had harmed me.

My mother sang in the evening services. Jarik came for the bread and sang loudly enough to convince people he had arrived for theology. His mother had died the winter before; his father had gone away on road labor and never returned. He wore a mustard scarf somebody had given him because it was too bright to lose. He lost it repeatedly, always in places where someone else could use it.

Sera sat where she could see the door. Her mother was human, her father an elf whose absence had become a family subject nobody discussed in front of visitors. The other children occasionally made jokes about her ears. She taught three of them why that was a poor investment of their afternoon. Afterward they commented on her hearing with great respect.

Kel arrived with screws, bits of wire, and the optimism of a boy who believed enough parts could solve any problem. His aunt Omi had raised him after his parents died in a kiln accident. She sold pickled vegetables from a cart and told people her nephew was going to build something famous. He told her he already had; she said his next famous invention should avoid setting the curtains alight.

Rian knew the words to every hymn about deliverance. He also knew which families stayed after service because going home meant admitting the stove was empty. He would carry extra bowls to them without asking permission. Daren called it service. Rian called it looking around. His mother worked nights in a finishing mill and slept sitting upright when she came to the Hearth. He watched her as if he could prevent exhaustion by paying attention.

I served as an acolyte because the temple needed small people who could reach the lamp hooks. In the storeroom I found old ward diagrams: concentric routes, annotated maintenance dates, the same city from angles I had never seen. My father had taught me distances. These drawings taught me where the city wanted power to travel.

On one diagram, the stone above the lower stair had been marked for replacement eleven years earlier. I could reach the actual stone if I climbed the parapet behind the temple. Its edges

were worn smooth, and a crack ran through a hooked rune near the base. When the ward brightened each evening, light caught in that crack and broke into two separate threads.

I took Daren up to look. He climbed slowly, holding his robe above the wet steps. He put his palm close to the stone without touching it and told me the ward was still active. I said I had noticed; I wanted to know whether it would stay that way. He promised to put in a request. A week later somebody drew a chalk bridge across the fracture.

For a while it worked. The glow steadied, and I hated how relieved I felt. That was my first lesson in temporary repairs: sometimes they buy necessary time, and sometimes they buy the people responsible an opportunity to stop thinking about you.

Daren found me reading the request ledger afterward. I asked why the upper temple had received replacement stone while we had received a drawing. He said the upper temple protected more important junctions. I pointed to the houses beneath our wall. He stared at the page longer than necessary before answering that this was not what important meant in the document.

I did not yet have a word for the feeling that produced. I had a broom, eleven copper pieces, and a father in detention. None of those were especially effective in an argument about priorities.

The chalk repair became my private occupation. I checked it before sweeping, after service, and sometimes from the alley at night. The city inspector arrived on a bright afternoon when the fracture was difficult to see. He had polished boots and a folding rule that he opened without using. Daren introduced me as a helpful boy. The inspector thanked me for my concern before I had explained it. I was beginning to recognize that phrase as a door closing politely.

Kel had come with a jar of blue water and a length of thread. He wanted to mark how far the crack traveled when the stone warmed. The inspector said dyes might interfere with the ward. Kel asked what kind of interference. The man said it was complicated. Kel, who liked complicated things, immediately asked him to begin with the uncomplicated part. Daren coughed into his hand. I have never established whether he was hiding a laugh or a warning.

We were told not to touch the stone. This was sensible advice. We were also told it had been inspected satisfactorily. That was less sensible. Sera waited until the inspector went inside and asked me what he had actually measured. I said nothing. She asked whether that meant the stone

was dangerous. I said yes. She told me that not measuring a thing did not prove it was broken. She was irritatingly right. We had a visible crack and no reliable account of its depth. That was enough to demand a proper inspection, not enough to invent a catastrophe.

She made us write the difference on a scrap of paper. What we saw. What we thought it might mean. What we needed to ask. I disliked the exercise because it reduced my magnificent accusation to three untidy questions. Kel liked it because one of the questions involved heat. Rian liked it because nobody had yet eaten the bread he was carrying. We settled beneath the tree and made a list between mouthfuls.

Mera brought a yard worker called Sed, who examined the mortar without approaching the rune. He had repaired loading walls and knew when a settling joint was carrying weight it had not been built to hold. He thought the stone should be replaced. He also thought the parapet above it was loose. When I asked which problem mattered more, he asked whether I preferred falling from a roof or having the roof fall on me. Jarik said he preferred neither and would like this entered into the official record.

We took Sed's explanation to Daren. This time he listened differently. Another adult had come to support us, and the scars on his hands spoke a language the priest recognized. I hated that our own observations had required translation into a grown man's authority. Sed seemed to notice. On the way out he told me that the difficulty of being heard did not make me wrong, but it did not make me right either. He said to keep the paper with the questions. A man who stopped asking them as soon as somebody listened would become expensive to have around.

For two weeks we put a basin beneath the leaking stair and moved the sleeping mats away from the parapet. Daren provided the mats. My mother helped persuade the families to move. One man refused because the new corner was beside the latrine. Rian found him another place instead of repeating the danger more loudly. I considered that an unnecessarily long conversation until the man stood up. He used a crutch and needed the wall beside his old mat to rise without help. In the safer corner, he would have needed somebody's help to stand every morning. Rian had noticed what I had failed to ask.

Nobody died during those two weeks. That sounds like a modest achievement until you have tried persuading an office to pay for it. The stone was not replaced. We had made people safer, and the unresolved repair remained unresolved. I could hold only one of those thoughts comfortably at a time. Daren thanked us after service. I wanted to ask whether he had thanked the inspector too, but my mother saw the shape of the sentence before it left me and steered me toward the washing up.

Six Different Ways of Seeing

We started calling ourselves the Wayward Flames after Jarik was accused of distracting an entire row during a sermon. He said the row had been waiting desperately for distraction and he was performing a public service. Mera said if he wanted a name for the group he should pick one that did not sound like a laundry fire. The name stayed. Most things Jarik proposed survived by becoming too irritating to argue about.

Our first proper operation involved Butcher Jorek and a coin box. He had shorted Omi on an order she needed for a catering job, then accused Kel of stealing when the boy pointed at the scales. Mera suggested an immediate corrective discussion. Sera suggested waiting until Jorek moved the money from his belt to the stall. Jarik suggested distracting him with a convincing medical emergency. We rejected the last plan because his first attempt at a seizure made two customers applaud.

I watched from the roof while they arranged their positions. Jorek had hired a new boy to clear bones from the counter. The boy kept one hand curled against his stomach and paused whenever a customer looked directly at him. Rian, who was supposed to be watching the lane, went straight over and bought him a cup of stew with our last legitimate coins.

This disrupted the plan. It also made the boy talk. Jorek kept the real weights under the counter and the light weights beside the chopping block. The coin box had a bell inside its hinge. The boy had been told he would pay for any missing money, even if a thief took it. Sera looked from him to us and shook her head. We could steal the box and make a hungry child responsible for it, or we could find a different way to be clever.

Kel asked to see the scale. Jarik began loudly admiring its craftsmanship. When Jorek demanded to know what was happening, Mera lifted the hidden weights and set them beside the false ones. She did not raise her voice. She asked which pair he wanted the customers to test.

The customers developed an interest in measurement. Jorek developed an interest in refunding Omi. We left with her money, a bag of bones, and no theft to confess. Jarik described it as a daring financial extraction. Sera said that if he used that phrase near a guard she would deny knowing him in whatever language was most convenient.

Under the crimson tree we argued about whose contribution had mattered most. Kel reminded us that he had identified the bell, even if Rian had been the one to feed the boy. Mera said neither of them would have convinced Jorek to pay without the possibility of her moving the discussion closer to his kneecaps. I said there had been a patrol approaching. Jarik told me I had a gift for introducing weather into a conversation about joy.

It was a small win. Omi bought medicine that week and added extra pepper to the stew she made us, which she said would improve our judgment. It did not. Still, the boy at the stall was spared a punishment, and for one evening the only problem we needed to solve was how to stop Kel from disassembling the communal spoon.

Later that month Mera stopped bringing her father to temple. Bren said he had gone away for work. Mera said Bren should mind his business. Sera, who had been absent for two days herself, watched that exchange and said nothing. We were beginning to practice the silences we would later mistake for loyalty.

Our success at Jorek's stall did not turn us into agreeable children. By the following week we had developed a dispute about the bones. Jarik thought Omi should make soup for everyone because everyone had helped. Kel pointed out that Omi had already been the person cheated. Mera said dividing the proceeds of not committing a robbery was an absurd basis for household accounting. I wanted to know whether we could discuss this somewhere I was not holding the increasingly fragrant bag.

Rian took the bones to the boy at the stall. The boy's name was Davet. His family rented a back room with no stove. This complicated our grand settlement because bones were not soup

and owning them had not made anyone warm. We carried them to the temple kitchen, where a woman called Nemi asked who would scrub the pot afterward. Six hands pointed in six directions. She folded her arms and waited. This is how the Wayward Flames first encountered a more experienced negotiating authority.

Nemi made us chop onions. Jarik claimed to be allergic to domestic limitation. She gave him twice as many onions and said the treatment was exposure. Mera laughed so hard she had to sit on a flour sack. Sera, who could lift a purse without making a sleeve move, cut her thumb on the first carrot. She stared at it, offended, then accepted a bandage from Rian with a warning that this information was not to travel. Naturally it traveled no farther than every meal we shared for the next twenty years.

While the pot simmered, Davet asked whether we could make Jorek stop keeping wages when a customer complained. Mera said she could make him stop breathing. Davet went very still. His sister also worked there. He did not need a dead employer. He needed the man to pay them. Mera leaned against the hearth with her hands tucked beneath her arms. For once she had no answer ready. I was glad Rian did not try to improve the moment with a lesson. He asked Davet how the wages were recorded.

They were not recorded. Sera suggested keeping marks on a piece of wood, but Davet could lose that or have it taken. Kel proposed a hidden counting device. It would have cost more than the missing wages and required a cooperative carpenter. Jarik finally said the baker next door kept an order book and might let Davet make a mark there each evening. Somebody else could witness it. A small, dull solution with no rooftop component. We disliked it for several breaths, then recognized that it might work.

The baker agreed if it did not involve him in a public dispute. Jarik promised discretion with the seriousness he usually reserved for an audience. Mera visited Jorek at closing and told him the boy now had a record. She did not threaten him. She did stand where he could see the flour bag she had carried under one arm. The next week Davet received his whole wage. The week after, Jorek reduced his hours. Our intervention had helped and then acquired an edge we had not anticipated.

Davet came to the tree furious. He had earned less overall. I tried to explain why the record still mattered and he threw the counting stick at me. It struck the trunk instead. Rian let him finish shouting. Sera asked what work his sister could do. Nemi needed somebody at dawn, three days a week, carrying water. The baker knew a woman who wanted deliveries. None of it was enough by itself. Together it covered the lost hours, at the cost of Davet walking farther and sleeping less.

There was no celebration for this second solution. We accompanied him on the first delivery because a dog guarded one of the courtyards and Jarik had made extravagant claims about his charm across species. The dog found him unconvincing. Mera distracted it with the end of an onion loaf. Kel suggested a mechanical dog deterrent until Sera asked whether he could build a mechanical ability to stop talking. Davet laughed for the first time that week. It did not repair his earnings. It did make the next gate easier to approach.

That evening Mera told me she hated problems you could not hit. I said she must hate most problems. She agreed and flicked my ear hard enough to improve my posture. Then she asked whether I thought her father would have found a better answer. I said I did not know. She picked at a loose thread on her cuff and said he usually did. I nearly asked where he was. Something in her face made the question feel like taking a hand from a person balancing on a wall, and I left it there. I would later wonder how many of our worst silences began with an intention that tender.

The last warm evening before the autumn rains, the neighborhood held a dance in the temple yard. Somebody had a fiddle, somebody had a drum, and my mother had an argument with both about the speed of the first tune. Daren let people hang lamps from the washing hooks and asked us not to climb the cracked parapet. For once there was an instruction I had no wish to dispute. The tables stood away from it. The ground was dry. We had finished the washing early enough to arrive before the first bread disappeared.

Jarik borrowed a yellow waistcoat that did not close. He claimed it was meant to be worn open and accused anybody asking about buttons of limiting the design. Kel wore a shirt Omi had dyed green to hide a permanent blue stain. The result was two different greens and a blue place nobody could ignore. He said it made him easier to find in a crowd. Mera wore the good dark

skirt she disliked because its pockets were smaller than those in her work trousers. Bren followed her carrying a polished stone he had decided was a suitable gift for the musicians.

Sera came late. Her mother had finished a copying job after sunset and wanted to sleep. Sera did not want to arrive alone, so Rian went to collect her while claiming he had forgotten something on the way. She knew. He knew she knew. They allowed each other the courtesy of an errand neither needed to explain. She wore a ribbon at the end of one braid, plum like the altered jacket she would later acquire. Jarik told her it suited her. She waited for the second half of the joke. He said there wasn't one. She looked briefly uncertain about what to do with a compliment left undefended.

I had been given a clean shirt with a stiff collar that caught beneath my horns. Ena cut a slit beneath the back seam, bound it neatly, and said I should have told her before enduring it all evening like a tragic monument. Once the shirt fit, I discovered I had been blaming the crowd for some of the discomfort caused by my own clothing. I was still a boy with too many elbows. At least I could turn my head.

The first dance required partners changing at the end of each line. Mera understood the pattern immediately and counted under her breath. Jarik understood half and embellished the rest. Kel followed the count so carefully he forgot to move until it was over. Sera refused to participate until the fiddler said he needed somebody who could tell left from right without consulting a committee. She took Jarik's place in the line and led him through the turn with a hand against his shoulder. His bow was ridiculous. Her laugh was not cautious at all.

Rian danced with Omi. She was well enough that evening to insist, though she stopped after the first tune to sit down. He brought her water. She told him the appropriate next action was finding another partner, not hovering until she became embarrassed about needing the chair. He obeyed. She watched him go with an expression that was tired and fond and sharp enough to send him on if he looked back. Kel sat beside her and adjusted the lamp so it did not shine directly into her eyes. They talked about nothing I needed to overhear.

Bren gave his stone to the drummer, who accepted it solemnly and placed it beside the drum as though it were a fee negotiated by the musicians' guild. Mera called him over to stop him

giving away the rest of his pockets. He said it was his favorite. She asked why he had given it away. He pointed to the dancers and said he had liked the music more. She stood quietly for a moment, considering his answer, then offered him the first piece of the honey bread she had been saving.

A boy from the inner streets arrived with two friends and began laughing at the patched lamps. I expected Mera to remove him. Instead Jarik offered to teach him the next dance. The boy refused, then stayed because one of his friends accepted. By the third tune he was taking turns like everybody else, badly and with intense concentration. Sera whispered that this did not establish his moral improvement. I said I had only been pleased he stopped talking. She conceded that as a reasonable standard for the evening.

We left after the lamps were lowered. My mother and father walked ahead, his coat over her shoulders. I was tired enough to let my hand trail along the wall without checking every break in it. Jarik had lost the yellow waistcoat to somebody who could button it. Kel smelled of lamp oil. Mera carried Bren, asleep with his face against her neck. For a street the city had simplified out of its records, we had occupied a remarkable amount of the night. I did not think of it as evidence. I thought I would like another piece of the bread.

The First Honest Wage

The clerk who summoned me knew my father's name. That made me trust him more than I should have. He wore a clean coat and offered tea I was afraid to spill. On his desk lay a census form for the lower wards, and beside it a release order with a blank space waiting for a signature.

He said the city needed local information to improve emergency planning. How many people slept in each building? Which cellars connected? Where did families gather when the weather was bad? My father had been uncooperative, but that did not mean his son could not demonstrate civic understanding. The release order moved a little closer to the edge of the desk.

I knew every answer. Knowing things was what I had to offer. I wrote the houses, the sleeping places, the temple overflow, the children whose parents worked nights. I drew shortcuts

the public survey had missed. The clerk said I had an unusual talent and put his signature on the other paper. My father came home the next afternoon.

He asked whether anyone had spoken to me. I said a man at the temple had helped. My mother held my father's face between her hands and asked no questions until he had eaten. I watched her cry into his shoulder and decided the lie had done something good. It was the first time I had proof that an action could improve the room you were standing in while damaging somewhere you could not see.

Months later Captain Hessa came looking for a local guide. Her caravan needed a route past the market congestion and out through a gate that did not charge for every wheel. She was a square woman with a soft voice, a badly mended sleeve, and a talent for asking questions people could actually answer. When I said I saw things, she asked whether I could distinguish observation from guessing. I told her usually. She said usually was a start, provided I marked the difference.

Daren wanted me to stay at the Hearth. My father asked what Hessa paid. Once he heard the amount, the theological portion of the conversation concluded. My mother sewed a small pocket inside my shirt for the tree pendant I had carved and told me to wash properly when there was water. She trusted the gods with my soul but appeared to consider the rest of me her responsibility.

The others walked me to the gate. Jarik lent me the mustard scarf, then asked if I could return it before he missed it. Kel gave me a brass disk that clicked when shaken. He said it might indicate nearby magic. Mera shook it and said it indicated that something was loose. Rian pressed bread into my hand. Sera slipped me a pencil she had sharpened at both ends, apparently in case I felt compelled to write my way out of danger with exceptional urgency.

I had a cheap bow Hessa advanced against my wages, leather armor that smelled of its previous owner, and exactly enough confidence to leave the gate before asking myself whether I should. If you prefer character sheets, this was Ranger One. Eleven hit points, an unimpressive armor class, and no spell in my head that could make a bad decision inexpensive.

Hessa gave me a test before paying the balance of the advance. She laid three route descriptions on a crate and asked which I preferred. One was short, one avoided tolls, and one followed higher ground through a village that charged for water. I chose the short one. She asked why. I pointed to the distance. She asked what the distance told me about the bridge. There was no bridge noted. I looked up and discovered she had been waiting for exactly that mistake.

We walked the short route together while the wagons finished loading. The bridge existed, which briefly restored my confidence. So did the missing boards, which removed it again. A woman washing blankets downstream said a cart had nearly broken through the bridge the day before. Hessa thanked her and asked whether anybody had been hurt. Only the driver's pride, she said, although his wife had suggestions for finishing the job. We bought water in the village and used the higher road.

I was angry at the wasted walk. Hessa said it had cost two people an hour instead of fourteen people a wagon. She paid the woman for her time, bought a blanket we needed, and wrote the bridge condition beside the route. Then she handed me the pencil. I had to record my own mistake in the caravan book. It remained there for every later guide to read. I thought this unnecessarily humiliating until I saw the page where Hessa had once led a grain load into a toll enclosure with one entrance and no space to turn.

The camp cook read over my shoulder and said I had begun an excellent tradition. I asked whether he meant admitting mistakes. He said he meant doing it while somebody else was still willing to feed me. The man had a scar through his eyebrow and a manner so dry he made the dust seem emotional. I had expected my first day as a ranger to involve a more respectful audience. Hessa offered me an apple and told me that if I wanted admiration, I should find employment with people who did not need my route to work.

Before we left, I went home once more. My father was sitting by the window with a length of cord across his knees. Detention had left him coughing and unwilling to be touched from behind. He asked me to show him the route. I showed him the corrected one. He ran his finger along the ridge, nodded, and asked why I had not chosen the shorter way. I told him about the bridge. He smiled at me then, really smiled, and I felt the lie about his release settle deeper beneath my ribs.

"You looked," he said. "That's the work."

I wanted to tell him everything. I could almost see the office again, the clean sleeve beside the census forms, the line where I had written how many families slept in the Hearth. My father's thumb was pressed into the paper over the ridge village. My mother was counting what the advance would buy. I told myself I would explain when the trip was over, when his cough was better, when the story had become something I could prove had done no harm. Then I kissed my mother's cheek and went to earn an honest wage with a dishonest beginning still folded inside me.

At the first bend I looked back. The tree was visible above the roofs. My father stood with his arm around my mother; Mera had lifted Bren onto her shoulders; Jarik was already telling someone he had personally trained the caravan's new scout. I waved until the wall hid them. Then I turned toward the road and began earning the money I had promised to bring home.

Chapter 2
The Wayward Flames

Character records at chapter entry

After Ekrius's first paid caravan work. Unclassed characters have no assigned ability scores, HP, or AC yet.

Ekrius Ashborne
Tiefling. Ranger 1.
STR 12 DEX 15 CON 13 INT 9 WIS 14 CHA 12; PB +2; Max HP 11; AC 13
Has earned his first caravan wages and acquired basic equipment.

Jarik Fairwind
Human. Not yet classed.
Organizes bread and crowds.

Sera Veythorn
Half-elf. Not yet classed.
Works as a copyist and keeps a notebook.

Kel Brasswick
Human. Not yet classed.
Works in a lamp shop and has not learned spellcasting.

Mera Flint
Mountain dwarf. Fighter 1.
STR 16 DEX 12 CON 15 INT 10 WIS 13 CHA 10; PB +2; Max HP 12; AC 16
Freight-yard weapons training.

Rian Emberfell
Human. Not yet classed.
Cares for his mother and has not entered a pact.

Bread, Knives, and House Rules

My first caravan journey lasted eleven days. On the third, I directed Hessa toward a track that looked dry and deposited our lead wagon in a drainage ditch. On the fourth, Bruni taught me the difference between mud that had dried and a crust that had learned to lie. She did not shout. She handed me the shovel. I remembered the lesson unusually well.

When I came home, Jarik asked whether I had killed anything. I said I had nearly killed a schedule. He told me that sounded less impressive and suggested mentioning the wagon without specifying my relationship to its position. Mera listened to the actual story and asked how many people had helped dig. Five, I said. She said I owed five people something besides gratitude.

I brought my mother wages, my father a rubbing of an old milestone, and the group a piece of hard cheese that had become more structurally reliable than our staircase. Kel proposed using it as a doorstop. Rian ate his portion before the vote. The resulting argument occupied most of the evening, which was the nearest thing we had to a welcome-home ceremony.

The Ash Roads had changed in small ways. Somebody had painted over the notices demanding unpaid work at the north wall. The temple pantry had a new lock. Jarik's scarf had acquired a purple patch shaped like a fish because Omi had run out of mustard cloth and refused to be limited by another person's aesthetic insecurity. More importantly, families were collecting bread from the Hearth three nights a week instead of two.

Jarik said he had helped arrange it. There was a list for workers who volunteered at the ward repairs. The city provided ration vouchers for their dependents. He had discovered that officials rarely checked whether the names remained attached to anyone capable of turning up. A dead grandfather could apparently contribute excellent labor if the handwriting was convincing.

"You didn't hear that," he said when I looked at him. "You heard that administration has many beautiful mysteries."

I should have asked to see the list. Instead I asked how many families were eating. He said nine, and I felt the answer settle where a question should have been. My father's release had taught me to accept a good immediate result as evidence that the method could wait.

Our house rules were written by Sera on the back of a broken sign. Nobody ate alone if we could help it. We took from the cruel, not the hungry. We did not sell one another to guards, creditors, priests, or anyone with a ring they expected us to kiss. No cursed shortcuts. If I warned against a route, we discussed it before somebody ran down it to demonstrate independence.

That last rule had originally been shorter. Mera amended it after I told her not to cross a yard and she discovered I had based the warning on a dog that was asleep. The yard belonged to her aunt. So did the dog. Being observant was not a legal monopoly on knowing things, she informed me, while the animal rolled over and offered her its stomach.

Sera kept the sign beneath the tree in a waxed wrapping. She had begun carrying a small knife and a notebook. Her braids were always tied back when she went inside the wall, and she had a plum-colored jacket her mother had altered from an upper-ward hand-me-down. When I asked what work took her there, she said copying. I understood that answer because I had used it myself.

Kel worked evenings with a lamp repairer. His aunt needed medicine that the Hearth distributed only when the city delivered it. He could now solder a joint cleanly and make a battery from things most people discarded. He was proud of earning, embarrassed about the amount, and easily persuaded that one exceptional commission could solve both problems. I knew these things. I did not yet know the commission.

Mera loaded freight and trained with the yard guards after their shifts. A woman named Tessa taught her to use the position of her feet before trusting the strength of her arms. Mera brought those lessons home and insisted we all learn how to fall. Jarik protested that he already fell frequently. She said the objective was to stop leading with his personality.

Rian took work wherever it left him free to look after his mother. He could lift more than I could and carried it as if he should apologize for not carrying more. Once I found him outside the temple dividing a heel of bread into six pieces. I told him there were only five of us coming. He said somebody else always arrived. He was right. He frequently was, in ways I failed to record because they did not resemble my own usefulness.

Our new house rules lasted until the next market day, when Jarik offered to recover Sera's mother's wages from a copying agent. Sera told him she had not asked. Jarik said he was displaying initiative. She said initiative was what people called interference when they liked themselves. By noon he had acquired an appointment, borrowed my clean shirt, and promised the agent a performance at a private supper. By dusk we owed the agent an entertainer and had recovered none of the wages.

The difficulty, Sera explained through teeth that barely moved, was that her mother's contract charged for damaged parchment. The agent attributed every blotted sheet to her, including sheets copied by other workers. Jarik had thought a charming conversation would embarrass him into paying. The agent had instead offered to deduct the lost wages from Jarik's performance fee. Since there was no performance fee, we had negotiated our way into a new kind of nothing.

Mera offered to attend the supper with a hammer. Sera said that would cost her mother the work. Kel suggested we make a duplicate ledger. I asked whether anyone had the original. Sera put a page on the bench between us. She had copied it weeks ago. We stared at her. She said she knew he was cheating but could not prove whose mistakes he was charging for. Jarik asked why she had not told us. She asked when he had stopped talking long enough to hear her.

He took that badly. He had offered help, made himself ridiculous, and wanted some credit for the first part. She had been dealing with a problem that could put her mother out of work and wanted him to stop turning it into an occasion for applause. Both were right about something. Neither chose the useful part to repeat. Rian eventually carried the bench away because they had begun arguing over who was allowed to sit on it.

The next day Sera's mother came to find Jarik herself. She was narrow-shouldered, with ink at the edge of one thumbnail and the stillness of someone who had learned to keep anger out of rooms where wages were decided. She thanked him for trying. Then she told him exactly what the agent could do if the supper became a confrontation. Her name would vanish from the next copying list. So would two other women's names, because the agent liked to make a lesson extend beyond its intended pupil.

Jarik listened with his hands beneath his knees. I had rarely seen him do that. He asked what she wanted him to do. She wanted him to perform, accept payment if offered, and repeat nothing he had learned from Sera. She had another position nearly arranged. Three more weeks of tolerating the man would allow her to leave without borrowing rent. It was a plan that relied on patience rather than any of our talents. Sera walked her mother home without looking at us.

Jarik performed at the supper. He came back with six silver pieces, a stolen rose, and a story in which every guest had been secretly moved by his artistic brilliance. We let him tell it. Later I found him sewing the six coins into a packet for Sera's mother. She returned four. He kept them, which may have been the hardest part of the entire operation. Some help requires the helper to survive being given less authority than he expected.

Sera altered our sign. No one would intervene in another person's family matters without asking. Mera wanted an exception for immediate danger. Rian wanted an explanation of immediate. Kel asked whether a fire caused by somebody's family counted. We spent the entire evening drafting one rule and still failed to settle every possible fire. I thought at the time that we were wasting effort. Later I would have paid dearly to be bored beneath that tree again.

Before Jarik returned my clean shirt, he offered to improve it. I found him cutting a narrow strip of teal fabric beneath the tree while Kel held the sleeve. They claimed the cuff needed distinction. I asked whether distinction would wash out. Sera said that depended on whether I meant the fabric or their confidence. Rian looked as though he had already decided the alteration was a bad idea and would help finish it anyway. Mera was holding the shears. This did not suggest a recent history of unanimous approval.

The cloth came from a retired performer's costume. Jarik had bought it cheaply because one section was burned. He wanted each of us to have something that had not begun as somebody else's discarded necessity. I pointed out that this description still applied to the cloth. He said I possessed a gift for murdering an occasion before checking whether there was food. Then he showed me the copper stitching he intended for Kel, the plum edge for Sera, and the indigo strip Rian had chosen while pretending he had no preference.

Mera declined trim and asked for a pocket large enough to hold her work gloves. Jarik declared it the least romantic commission of his career. She said it was his first commission. He told her the distinction made her behavior more disappointing. In the end he sewed the pocket with the strongest thread we had and lined it with red. She looked at it when he was not watching, then slipped her gloves inside with a care she usually reserved for sharpening a blade.

My cuff came out crooked. Ena fixed it that evening without removing the teal. She asked whether I liked it. I said it would show dirt. She said she had not asked whether dirt liked it. I wore it on my next trip through the market. Nobody treated me differently. I still knew it was there. At the tree the following afternoon, Jarik inspected it, approved my mother's correction as though she had submitted it to him, and took half my apple as an artistic fee. I argued because the apple was excellent, and let him keep it because so was the crooked idea.

The Woman Who Brought Enough

Maelis arrived on a clear afternoon with three carts of flour, two guards, and a smile capable of opening doors whose owners should have checked the hinges. Her coat was warm brown edged in gold. She wore no visible holy symbol. The crates bore a flame enclosed by a circle, neatly painted where every hungry person could see it.

Daren introduced her as a representative of the Circle of Ember. The Circle supported neglected districts, he said. It worked with the city and private benefactors to improve local resilience. My mother, who was unloading linen nearby, asked whether resilience was the item in the sacks. Maelis laughed and said that today it was flour. She had the good sense not to correct a woman already carrying half the room's weight.

The food was real. That fact mattered. Later, when people asked why we had listened, they said the signs should have been obvious. Perhaps they were. Hunger makes a visible sign out of a full bowl too, and it is usually closer to your face.

Maelis asked names and remembered them. She noticed Rian taking the last bag to a woman who could not lift it. She thanked Kel for fixing a lantern nobody had thought to mention. When Bren asked whether the circle on the crates was a wheel, she crouched to his height and said it

was protection with no gaps. Mera moved her brother gently behind her and asked who inspected the gaps. Maelis stood again without losing the smile.

"People who live with the consequences," she said. "Eventually, I hope, people like you."

I saw Mera consider it. That was Maelis's real skill. She did not offer us absurd things. She offered respect, wages, work that mattered, and the chance to stop begging. Every good thing arrived attached to a door she intended to control.

Jarik loved her immediately, or loved the room she created around him. She let him talk. She asked him to introduce the families collecting vouchers and complimented his ability to keep a crowd calm. He bowed, knocked his elbow against a flour sack, and filled the air with a white cloud. She laughed with him instead of at him. For a boy used to being tolerated, the distinction was considerable.

Sera watched the guards. I watched the distribution routes. Rian watched the line shrink until the last woman received a bag. Kel watched the brass fittings on the wagons. Mera watched which children the guards addressed without permission. None of us saw a complete picture. We assumed being six made us comprehensive.

That evening Maelis came beneath the crimson tree carrying no guards. Rain had begun, but droplets bent away from her coat. Kel stared. She asked whether he would like to learn how the field worked. He said yes before Sera could ask what tuition cost.

Maelis offered us messenger work. Small packages, local routes, no theft. She paid half in advance. I asked why she did not use the city's runners. She said the city's runners knew the city as the city wished it were. We knew the parts that actually existed. I felt complimented in precisely the place where I should have been most careful.

Sera asked who would receive the packages. Maelis supplied names and addresses. Mera asked what happened if a delivery looked unsafe. We could refuse, Maelis said. Rian asked whether there was enough work for other people. Maelis looked at him with an expression I mistook for kindness. "We always need people willing to carry responsibility," she said.

We voted. Sera and Mera wanted to decline. Jarik and Kel wanted to accept. Rian wanted to try one job. I said I could map the route and watch what happened. That sounded like caution. It was also a way of agreeing without having to admit I wanted the money.

Maelis invited us to watch the second distribution from inside the storeroom. It looked like trust. She gave Jarik a board and asked him to check households against vouchers. She gave Kel a lantern to repair, then left a box of excellent spare parts where he could reach it. Rian was asked to help a woman with a sleeping infant. Mera was offered paid work unloading sacks. Sera and I received the route list. Each task was useful. Together they separated us before we had agreed how to compare what we saw.

The woman with the infant had no voucher. Her husband had been listed at another address, and the list allowed one household allocation. Jarik began explaining the rule, stopped, then checked the baby's bare feet. Maelis came over before he called her. She issued the flour herself, signed the exception, and told the woman to return if the clerk questioned it. The woman cried. I saw Jarik watching Maelis with the relief a thirsty man gives a well.

Later he said there were people who could make a rule bend toward kindness. Sera asked who had written the rule. He said that was not a fair answer to a hungry baby. She said it was still a fair question. Maelis was standing close enough to hear. She agreed with Sera, calmly, and said institutions should welcome scrutiny. Then she asked whether Sera wanted paid training in recordkeeping. Sera's face closed so quickly that I missed the temptation beneath it.

I took an extra route sheet home. My father recognized the survey marks and asked whether the Circle was employing city draftsmen. I told him I did not know. He asked who paid for the supplies. Again I did not know. I was irritated by the questions because none changed the fact that flour had arrived. He said he had once accepted a road job paid for by a quarry owner. The road had been excellent. The owner had used it to remove stone from land he did not own. A useful road did not establish a clean title.

I asked whether he wanted us to refuse work until every coin's ancestry had been established. He set down his cup. "I want you to ask before the person paying has become your only way to eat." My mother, folding a sheet between us, said the advice would be easier to follow if the city

paid him what it owed. He looked at her and said he knew. They were not arguing with each other, though it sounded that way to a boy hoping somebody would declare a winner.

At the temple Maelis asked Daren to introduce families whose houses shared cellar walls. She said ward inspections could be combined, saving disruption. Daren named three households. I supplied a fourth before realizing he had paused. Maelis thanked me. My father's warning returned with humiliating clarity. I had not accepted another coin. I had still given her something valuable.

That night I drew the storeroom as I remembered it. Flour by the north wall, vouchers near the door, lamps on the inner bench. I marked where each of us had stood. Sera watched me finish and asked what I was measuring. I said the room. She tapped the spaces between our names. "Start there," she said. It was the first time I understood an arrangement of people could be as deliberate as an arrangement of streets. Understanding it did not yet make me willing to give up the work.

Small Favors, Warm Packages

The first package weighed more than its size suggested. Kel held it against his ear until Mera pointed out that if it contained a curse, he had just offered the curse excellent access. He passed it to me, affronted. Jarik wanted a password. Sera said the absence of one should have been discussed before we left. Rian had brought bread for everybody. We were, in other words, exactly as prepared as usual.

Our route went through the dyers' lane, over the covered drain, and down to the abandoned aqueduct. A woman stopped us near the drain. She had a child on her hip and another pulling her skirt. I knew her by sight but not by name. When I said we were working, she said so was she; could we spare the attention required to look at her door?

The stone around the threshold had grown warm. Her little girl had burned a finger on it the night before. Kel crouched and examined a copper staple embedded beneath the sill. He recognized the workmanship, or thought he did. Something moved across his face before he said it was probably a grounding point. I asked grounding for what. He said he would need tools.

"I'm Iven," the woman said. "If your tools tell you anything, remember which door to bring them to."

I wrote her name. Sera watched Kel put his hand over the package. Its warmth matched the sill. At the aqueduct, the man waiting for us wore gloves despite the mild weather. He touched the seal and light ran along old mortar between the stones. For a moment I could follow a red thread toward the temple, then away beneath the street. Kel stepped back so sharply he hit Rian.

The man paid. He did not ask for a receipt. Jarik made a joke about the quality of the service; nobody laughed. On the way home Sera said we should stop. I said we should know what we had carried before deciding. She asked whether information was something I wanted or something I used to postpone choosing.

We took three more deliveries. I will not make that sound less ugly by describing them as investigation. They were paid work. I watched, sketched, and told myself watching changed the nature of participation. Rian argued that the wards were brighter. Jarik said the pantry had not run out that week. Mera said bright lamps did not explain warm doorstones. Kel said he might be able to find the specifications.

He did not find them. He found something else: a coupling inside a maintenance cart, one he had assembled six weeks earlier. I saw him turn it over, then put it back. When I asked about it, he said he had worked on several like it. That was true, and it was a careful way of not answering.

On our third delivery we found Iven scrubbing soot from her sill. Her daughter Pell was sitting on a stool with two fingers wrapped in linen. I wanted to examine the threshold. Iven wanted to know why we had not returned yesterday. Kel began explaining that he needed a particular instrument. She held up the burned hand and said the stone had not waited for him to finish shopping.

Kel knelt beside Pell. He told her what he intended to touch and asked whether she wanted her mother to hold the lamp. Pell said she wanted the thing out of the door. He said he could not promise that yet. It was the plainest answer he had given anyone that week. He measured the heat with a strip of wax, repeated the test beside the kitchen hearth, and asked Iven when it

changed. She said the hottest period came after the upper temple bells. Not sunset. Not the lighting of her own stove. The bells.

We waited through one tolling. The wax softened at the third bell. At the fourth, the copper staple beneath the sill gave a tiny metallic click. Rian heard it before Kel did. I felt the temptation to call this proof of the whole array and recognized Sera watching me. We had proved a timing pattern at one door. We needed another door, and a record, and somebody willing to say why the bells mattered. Information was becoming a collection of inconvenient limits on the story I wanted to tell.

Mera fetched Sed, who said removing the staple could fracture the stone. Iven asked whether keeping it could burn the children. He said yes. She took Pell into the courtyard and asked Rian to watch Tobe. Then she told Sed to break whatever he needed to break. The decision took less than a minute. Knowing the choices had made it simple to describe and horrible to make. Her landlord would charge her for the damage. She asked us to witness what had been there before he called it carelessness.

The staple came out in two pieces. One remained hot in the bucket long after the other cooled. Kel wrapped both and labeled the cloth. Sed packed the opening with ordinary mortar. We bought enough lime to replace the cracked edge and spent a morning doing work none of us performed especially well. Jarik stepped in the bucket. Mera corrected his understanding of where feet belonged. Pell laughed until she forgot to protect her sore fingers and began crying instead. The laughter stopped at once. Rian stayed beside her while we finished.

The sill cooled. That was a win, without qualification. Iven could put her children to bed in a room that no longer hurt them. The repair also disconnected a side branch of the street lamps, and three neighboring doors went dark. At dusk a man accused her of stealing public protection. He had a daughter too. He was frightened too. Sera explained the burned hand; he said his own child should not have to walk home without light because somebody else's door was defective.

Jarik offered to carry a lantern along the lane until the lamps were repaired. It was generous and impossible to sustain. He had evening work. I had a caravan departure approaching. We took turns for four nights while Kel found a lamp repairer willing to inspect the disconnected branch.

The man wanted the staple as payment. Kel refused. It was evidence. We paid cash and ate mostly porridge that week. Nobody congratulated us on the trade.

When Maelis heard, she reimbursed Iven's mortar. She praised us for taking initiative and said the next delivery would support safer replacement fittings. The word safer passed through me like an offer of absolution. We had found harm, corrected some of it, and been told the people paying us wanted the same result. I wanted that explanation to be true so badly that I took the receipt she offered without noticing she had kept the original staple diagram.

Kel noticed. He put his hand in his coat where our two fragments were wrapped. He said nothing until we were alone. Then he asked whether I thought a maker should be responsible for every use of a part. I answered too quickly that a knife maker was not responsible for a stabbing. He nodded as though I had supplied a permission he had been seeking. Sera, coming around the tree, heard the end of it and asked whether the maker knew the knife would break in somebody's hand. Kel became furious. He said she could turn any conversation into a trial. She said he had brought the question.

We did not carry another package that afternoon. We accepted one final delivery later that week. I counted that pause as caution, though it was mostly the consequence of two friends refusing to speak. Later, when I found the last paid route sheet beneath my bed, I saw that the address had been a sleeping house with seventeen children. I had marked the fastest approach in blue. The paper had no mark for the people inside. It was not the same as what the clerk had done with my census. It was close enough to keep me awake.

Sera disappeared into the upper wards after our fourth payment. I followed her as far as a clerk's alley, then stopped because she had never followed me into the place where my father was released. We treated privacy as a mutual courtesy. Sometimes it was. Sometimes it was the bargain people make when they are afraid of being asked the same questions.

One of the delivery payments bought Rian's mother a hat. Rian argued for medicine. She had medicine for the week, she said, and would like a hat that did not make her look as though she had been hired to frighten crows. He looked at me for support. I found a sudden interest in a

nearby wall. She selected dark blue felt with a crooked little feather, put it on, and asked the seller whether the mirror was reliable or merely flattering.

We took her home the long way because she wanted people to see it. She knew the names of three shopkeepers I had passed for years without speaking. She asked one about his wife's sister and told another his new sign was spelled wrong. Rian carried her old hat beneath his arm. By the second corner he had stopped counting how far we were from home. She made him buy a hot bun and insisted he eat half where she could watch.

At their door she asked whether the new work made him happy. He said it paid. She said she had worked long enough to recognize a different question being answered. He told her the Circle noticed what he did. She took off the hat carefully and put it on the high shelf before replying. Being noticed felt good, she said. So did getting paid. Neither required giving a person the right to decide what he would do next. He kissed her cheek and said she worried too much. She told him this was accurate and not a reason to stop listening.

Later, when we sat beneath the tree counting the remaining coins, he asked whether I thought she looked less tired. I said she had looked pleased. He nodded as though pleasure were a symptom he had forgotten to check. Then he offered me the rest of his bun. I took it because he had already eaten his half and, for once, what remained really was his to give.

Maelis invited us to a meeting with her geometer. By then I had overlaid our deliveries on a tracing of the ward network. The packages had not followed the strongest defensive line. They had made a smaller loop around the Ash Roads, tightening near the crimson tree. I showed my father. He studied it, asked who had given me the work, and folded the tracing without answering.

"Don't take another delivery," he said. "And don't leave that where somebody can borrow it."

I asked whether he thought it was dangerous. He said danger was not always the part of a job they forgot to mention. Sometimes it was the job. Then he went to find Daren, and I went to the meeting because I believed I could still be the person who learned enough to stop what the adults were doing.

What Rian Signed

Kael had ink on his fingers and a map of our neighborhood detailed enough to make me feel suddenly naked. Every alley appeared. So did the cellars, the crowded sleeping rooms, the stair behind Mrs. Peret's kitchen. He had corrected several distances from my old census drawing but retained my symbol for a family sheltering someone unofficially.

I could not look at it without knowing. I could not speak without telling the others how I knew. So I asked about the power routes, which was a legitimate question and a coward's hiding place.

Kael explained that the district sat at a convergence. The new array would draw destructive energy away from the city's main wards and burn it clean through a local anchor. He said burn as though describing a candle. Sera asked who lived at the anchor. He said the residents would participate under supervision.

"Who takes the heat?" Mera asked. Her voice had gone flat. "The stone? The tree? My brother's bedroom? Pick something you can point to."

Kael said an anchor required conviction as well as geometry. An invested local participant could stabilize the pattern. He spoke to Rian when he said invested. Maelis said nobody was being forced, and Jarik looked toward the volunteer ledger on the side table. I saw his expression change. That was another chance for one of us to speak. We were collecting them.

Rian asked what happened if nobody agreed. Kael said the work would continue with other candidates. Younger candidates were often more adaptable. The word younger entered the room and stood beside Bren, beside Iven's children, beside every small person Rian had carried a bowl to after service.

He asked to read the contract. Maelis said of course. She put the parchment where all of us could see it, then began talking to Jarik about vouchers while Kael explained the framework to Kel. It was an elegant arrangement of distractions. Sera moved toward Rian, but one of the guards asked whether her mother had settled comfortably after her recent difficulties. She stopped.

I looked from her to the guard. She looked away. Mera said we should leave. Rian said he needed a minute. I stood close enough to smell the ink and asked him not to sign anything we did not understand.

"You don't understand everything either," he said. He did not sound angry yet. "You still make decisions for us. You tell us which roads to walk. You say you know when something will hold."

"I tell you when I'm guessing."

"Do you?" He touched the parchment with one finger. "I'm tired of offering people another map of the same locked gate. If there's a way to put something in my hands, I need to look at it."

We argued outside afterward, because he asked for privacy with Kael and I let him have it. Mera said we should drag him out. Sera said a person cornered into choosing would defend the choice harder. Jarik said perhaps we could ask Maelis to explain the terms again. Kel said the contract might be reversible if the physical link had not been made. Nobody asked what Rian had actually read in the final paragraph.

When he emerged, his hand shook. A small tongue of orange flame appeared above his knuckles, then vanished. He laughed in surprise, delighted and frightened at once. He showed us as if he had brought home a bird.

I wanted to be glad for him. I also wanted to seize his wrist and scrub the power off. Neither desire entitled me to do either. He said he had signed for himself. Sera asked whether that was all. He looked directly at her and said, "That's what I'm carrying."

At home I copied our ward overlay again. This time I put red marks where power would escape if the old wall stone failed. Most converged inside houses I had named for the clerk. I took the drawing to three officials in two days. One said the model was incomplete. One told me to trust qualified people. The third asked who had given a caravan boy access to controlled survey information.

Daren listened longest. His hands trembled when he saw the drawing. He said he had been promised a safer district and had signed the temple participation agreement on that

understanding. I asked whether he had read the annex. He said the Circle handled the technical language. He was a good man in several rooms. In that one, he had helped put us in danger.

I told the others the city was going to route the overflow through us. Mera wanted to get families out. Jarik said the authorities would call it a riot if we started emptying houses. Kel stared at my red marks. Sera asked where I had obtained the occupancy information. I said I knew the streets.

Before we gathered that evening, I went to Rian's room. His mother was asleep with her work apron still tied. A basin stood beside the bed, within easy reach because bending made her cough. Rian was trying to thread a needle so he could mend a torn cuff, holding the fabric against his knee while tremors kept pulling the thread away from the needle's eye. Every failed attempt made him quieter. I offered to mend it. He said he could manage. The next tremor sent the needle to the floor.

I picked it up and sat beside him without taking the shirt. For a time we listened to his mother's breathing. He asked whether a thing could be a gift if it hurt. I said I did not know. He turned his palm upward. There was no obvious wound, only a faint line that glowed when the room darkened. He had tried to warm water for his mother and boiled it so fast the cup cracked. He had hidden the pieces because he could not bear to disappoint her with the first good thing he had brought home.

I asked what the contract required. He said service. I asked to whom. He said the Circle had arranged it. When I asked what stood behind the arrangement, he looked toward his mother's bed. I lowered my voice, ashamed of having made the room feel like another office where he had to prove the right to ask for help. He took advantage of my shame and changed the subject. We both knew it. Neither said so.

He told me about his little sister, who had died before I knew him well enough to remember her voice. Her name was Leth. His mother had once owned a ribbon from her hair, blue with a torn end. During a bad winter she had sold it along with the last small ornaments in the room. Rian had gone looking for it at the market for weeks. There had been nothing he could offer that

would distinguish one blue ribbon from all the others. He said he thought of that every time somebody asked for patience while a family ran out of things to sell.

I had no argument that could survive standing in that room. The Circle's danger remained real. So did the years in which respectable people had watched Rian carry burdens and called him good without offering to take one. I asked whether he would let me help him read the terms again. He said the copy had not yet been delivered. I said that itself was a warning. He told me he knew what a warning sounded like. He had heard them all his life. He wanted, once, to be the person who could do something after hearing it.

When I left, his mother's cup was still on the table, its handle repaired with ordinary glue. He had not thrown it away. I remember that more clearly than the glow in his hand. There was power in the room now, and his first worry had been the loss of something she loved. I wish I had found a way to speak to that part of him before we found ourselves arguing beneath the tree.

Rian put his burning hand flat against the tree. The bark darkened beneath his palm. "Then we make sure it holds," he said. He sounded as if he needed the statement to be an answer. The leaves above us moved in a wind none of us could feel.

Chapter 3
First Steps off the Map

Character records at chapter entry

Before the protection ceremony. Unclassed characters have no assigned ability scores, HP, or AC yet.

Ekrius Ashborne
Tiefling. Ranger 1.
STR 12 DEX 15 CON 13 INT 9 WIS 14 CHA 12; PB +2; Max HP 11; AC 13
Prepares escape routes after his warning is dismissed.

Jarik Fairwind
Human. Not yet classed.
Organizes food and worries about the volunteer roster.

Sera Veythorn
Half-elf. Not yet classed.
Watches the Circle closely; has no formal adventuring training yet.

Kel Brasswick
Human. Not yet classed.
Knows the coupling design.

Mera Flint
Mountain dwarf. Fighter 1.
STR 16 DEX 12 CON 15 INT 10 WIS 13 CHA 10; PB +2; Max HP 12; AC 16
Has trained in the freight yard but has no martial specialty yet.

Rian Emberfell
Human. Warlock 1 - The Fiend.
STR 14 DEX 13 CON 14 INT 10 WIS 10 CHA 16; PB +2; Max HP 10; AC 12
Has entered a new pact; his hand trembles after casting.

A Night of Protection

The morning of the ceremony, my mother sent me to buy onions. I had spent the night drawing evacuation routes and preparing to confront people who could ruin my life with a signature. She handed me two coppers and said whatever the city was doing, it apparently expected her to season supper. I resented the errand until I reached the market and heard three different explanations of what would happen that night. The onions turned out to be useful reconnaissance.

A fish seller said the Circle was renewing the wall. A cooper said our district had been selected for a divine blessing. A boy selling lamp wicks said the priests had told the children to sleep inside because they might otherwise interrupt the alignment. He asked whether alignment could interrupt through a closed window. I said I did not know. He looked disappointed, then sold me an extra wick at a discount because I had not pretended.

Iven was packing clothes in a sack when I passed her door. Her daughter Pell had drawn a square around the replacement sill with chalk. A city crew had relaid it after our repair and restored the lane lamps. Iven said it had begun warming again the previous night. I told Iven about the risk and showed her the route to the dyers' gate. She said she could take her children to a cousin, but the cousin would not accommodate Mrs. Peret, who lived alone upstairs. I said we would find someone to help. She asked when. I went back to the tree and added a person to every route on my drawing.

Mera helped move the first families in daylight. It looked like visiting until somebody noticed the blankets. Bren carried a bag almost as big as his torso and told everyone they were conducting a tactical withdrawal. Mera told him to conduct it without dropping her mother's cooking pot. He saluted with both hands and dropped the pot. For a moment she laughed so hard she had to sit down.

I remember that laugh clearly. Memory gives you no explanation for its choice of treasures. There are speeches I cannot recover and a sound from beside a dented pot that I could recognize in a crowd thirty years later.

By afternoon the gates had acquired extra guards. Nobody was forbidden to leave, they said, but the roads were restricted during the working. Families had to register destinations. Jarik argued that his aunt was expecting him. A guard asked which aunt. Jarik named one with such confidence that I almost believed he had acquired a new relative. The guard checked a list, found the aunt recorded as dead, and told him to stop wasting time.

We retreated before Mera could improve the situation physically. Sera said the list had appeared too quickly. Jarik said he would find another story. Rian, who had barely slept, said he might persuade Maelis to release families with young children. Mera told him he was not to bargain for Bren. Rian said he was trying to help. Her answer was immediate: wanting to help did not make everything he did help.

I went to the temple to look at the master diagram again. My father found me there and told me the old drain behind the dye shop remained open. He had already cleared it with two neighbors. My mother would take people through when the evening hymn began. He asked whether I could come with them. I said I needed to stay near the circle. He looked at me, and I knew he understood I was hiding part of the reason.

"You don't have to earn coming home," he said. "Whatever they told you at that desk, you don't owe them your life."

He left before I could ask which desk he meant. He had known more than I wanted him to. I watched him go, then folded my private copy of the census into the lining of my coat.

At the dyers' gate, my mother made people put down what they had brought. She did not mean leave it behind. She meant arrange the bundles so she could see who needed two trips. A man carrying a locked chest objected to having his property examined. Ena asked whether it contained something heavier than his wife, who was leaning against the wall trying to breathe. He put the chest down. She asked him to help his wife before she became something the rest of us had to carry too.

Iven had Peret's blankets, two children's coats, and a saucepan tied to her belt. Pell was angry because Tobe had been allowed to bring a toy horse and she had been told her box of shells would be too heavy. I began explaining weight. My mother took the shell box, removed the

wooden lid, put the shells in a cloth, and handed them back. The child stopped crying. I had been trying to persuade her that losing a beloved thing was reasonable. Ena had looked for a way to avoid losing it.

The drain smelled as if the city's entire history had been stored there wet. My father and two neighbors had cleared the first blockage, but water still covered the floor beyond the bend. We needed to know whether it rose or fell. I tied his measuring cord to a broken brick and watched the current catch it. Sed asked what I intended to measure. Direction, I said. He pointed to a darker stain above the water. The level had been rising since midday. The far outlet was probably partially obstructed.

We could go now with fewer bundles or wait while somebody cleared it and risk the guards closing the lane. The choice was obvious to me. It was less obvious to a woman whose sewing basket contained the tools that bought her meals. Rian took the basket and said he would carry it. Then he took a second person's bundle and nearly fell when the added weight pulled his trembling arm. Mera removed both without a word. She gave one to me, one to a neighbor, and told Rian to stop assigning every spare hand in the world to his own shoulders.

Jarik brought a rumor that anyone leaving would lose their ration entitlement. We could not establish whether it was true. It did not need to be true to work. Two families turned back at once. My mother asked their names, addresses, and where they would wait if the temple emptied. She did not call them cowards. The old man from the sleeping mats would not move because his nephew had promised to come. I wrote his place beside the chimney on my drawing and told him which window faced the drain. I wanted to promise we would return for him. Sera touched my elbow before I said it.

Outside, Bren was showing Tobe how to fold a blanket so it would not drag in the muck. He could not get the corners even and kept starting again. Mera was impatient with him. Then she saw him trying to tuck the smaller boy's feet into the dry part and softened so visibly that I looked away. Some tenderness belongs to the people inside it. We were young enough to believe we would have endless opportunities to see it again.

My father asked me to take the last group. I said I would, after checking the ceremony. He gripped the measuring cord between us. Not hard. Just enough that I had to stop folding it. He asked whether there was anything he needed to know about the papers I had seen. I could hear the drain behind him, water moving under brick. People were calling for the next bundle. I told him there were old occupancy records. His face changed. He let go of the cord, and I used the interruption to leave before he could ask whose handwriting appeared on them.

Hold Your Place

The temple filled before dusk. Jarik stood near the back guiding people toward doors he had never needed to describe as exits. His voice kept its easy rhythm, but he repeated each instruction twice and checked whether the listener had understood. That was the first useful performance of the evening.

Daren spoke of protection and obligation. The word obligation caught Rian visibly. Sera asked him what the contract required. He said they would discuss it after the ceremony. She said people who proposed later as a time for answering usually preferred never. He pulled his sleeve over the glowing line at his wrist.

In the side hall, Kael unrolled the district plan. He placed six small weights around the symbol of the tree. I knew where each of us would stand before he said our names. Jarik stared at the paper beneath the weights; Kel stared at a drawing of the wall coupling. Mera asked where the ordinary residents were meant to go if the working failed.

Kael said the evacuation provision had been waived by the local representatives. Rian made a small sound, almost a cough. I looked at him, then at the fine writing beneath the diagram. I could not read it from where I stood. Maelis moved into the space between us and asked whether we wanted the work delayed while the outer threat continued to gather.

"Yes," Sera said. "That is exactly the outcome I'd prefer while we read the parts you keep hiding under your elbows."

For the first time Maelis lost the warmth. She told Sera that delaying the array could jeopardize agreements made on behalf of certain families. Sera's face closed. Jarik began to

speak and stopped. Mera rested her hands against the table and said no one was threatening anybody's family in front of her twice.

There were six guards in the room. There were children outside and a gate we no longer controlled. I wanted to walk away from the table and announce the whole thing. I also knew my voice would start a rush at doors too narrow for it. That did not make silence good. It made the next choice unpleasant.

I asked Kael to show me the sequence. He mistook the question for cooperation. He pointed to the outer ring, the wall junction, the tree, and the six positions. Power entered at the wall, passed through an indexed coupling, then descended into the anchors. Once linked, we were to remain on our marks until the ward settled. I asked how long. He said as long as necessary.

Kel leaned forward. "That coupling has no active limiter," he said. "The bypass will hold ordinary inspection flow. It won't hold a surge."

Kael looked at him. "It met the submitted specification."

"Then the specification is wrong." Kel's voice broke, not from fear alone. "I know that piece. I know what it does."

Maelis said the Circle had allowed for contingencies. Mera pushed her weight off the table. She had seen enough. I caught her eye and pointed, slightly, toward the door where Jarik was still guiding residents. We needed minutes, and Kel had bought us only seconds.

While Kael gathered his weights, an attendant came with a bowl for our belongings. Nothing metal was to remain across the marked lines, he said. Mera asked whether this instruction included the six guards' swords. He said those stood beyond the conductors. She looked at the nearest blade, extended well inside the chalk, and waited. The attendant shifted his feet. Maelis told the guard to move. It was a tiny concession, exactly large enough to make the room feel as though objection could work.

Kel surrendered his loose tools reluctantly and kept the flat brass scraper sewn into his cuff. I saw him check it. I said nothing. Jarik put a copper ring in the bowl. It had belonged to a woman who gave it to him for helping with a funeral collection. He asked who would keep the possessions safe. The attendant said everything would be catalogued. Sera asked for the

catalogue before leaving the room. He looked at Maelis. She smiled and said of course. The inventory was never finished.

We had several breaths alone near the side door. Sera wanted to steal the index book before Kael took it outside. Kel said we needed the book in use to know which version of the sequence was active. Mera said every extra explanation ended with us standing closer to a trap. Jarik watched the families taking their places and asked what happened if we announced the danger now. People had brought chairs. An old woman wore her best hat. A mother lifted her little boy so he could see the tree. They thought they had come to witness their district being included in the city's protection.

I could tell them. I wanted to. I also saw the guard across the nearest exit, his spear held horizontally at waist height to keep the crowd in its lane. Sera asked whether we could move that guard first. Mera said yes, immediately. I shook my head. A struggle would bring the other five. Rian said he could ask Kael to stop. We all looked at him. He flinched as if we had slapped him, then went anyway. I had never felt so much love and anger for a person at the same time.

He returned saying the sequence had already begun at the upper temple. A stop now might send the surge back through houses on the northern line. Kael had shown him the pointer moving on a glass dial. It might be true. It might be another means of making the next crime seem necessary. Kel said the dial measured incoming flow, not whether a controlled shutdown was impossible. Rian asked him how certain he was. Kel hesitated. The question was fair. The answer arrived too late to restore any confidence.

I gave Jarik the drain route. Sera took the uncompleted inventory and wrote the names of the guards across the blank bottom. Mera flexed the hand she would soon be unable to close. We agreed on a signal: if I left the mark, the others would go. I did not explain why I had to be the one to decide. There was no vote. I mistook their exhaustion for agreement and my fear for qualification. When I remember that room, I remember the places where each of us could have stopped lying. I also remember how carefully it had been arranged to make telling the truth feel like the dangerous choice.

When we finally went to the tree, I took a position with a view of the cracked wall stone and the lower alley. Sera stood beside the route to Iven's house. Mera had already sent Bren with my mother, then gone back to count the remaining families. He should have been beyond the drain before the hymn finished. Should have is a cruel way to begin remembering somebody.

The chalk marks glowed beneath us. Rian stood opposite me, staring at his own hand. Jarik kept moving his lips without sound. Kel counted beats in the ward's pulse, and Sera watched Maelis instead of the light. Above us, the tree's leaves went still.

The Cost of Moving

The first pull felt like a hand closing around my ribs. Light threaded up from the pavement, thin as sewing cotton, winding above my ankles. The hymn changed key. Power moved through the overhead ward in a smooth gold stream and struck the coupling near the broken stone. There it divided. One strand continued around the wall; the other descended toward us too quickly.

Kel shouted that the limiter was open. Kael raised both hands and began forcing the flow back into line. I could see the chalk bridge above him crumbling grain by grain. A patch designed to buy a month was being asked to bear a city's faith. Nobody could sing it stronger.

I stepped off my mark. The thread at my ankle tightened hard enough to take skin. Maelis ordered me to remain. Daren called my name with the sound people make when they are about to discover what their promises cost. I pulled Sera toward the alley and shouted for the others to move.

Mera moved immediately. Jarik followed her, then turned back when he saw Rian still standing. Kel dropped to his knees and scraped through the chalk between two anchor points with a brass tool. That interruption saved his life and threw power into the tree before I had cleared the inner ring.

The explosion did not begin with noise. It began with pressure, a silence so complete my teeth hurt. Then the trunk split along a red seam and the street rose beneath my feet. I hit stone with my shoulder and lost the next few moments to something bright and shapeless.

When sound returned, it brought everybody at once. I heard a roof breaking, a woman calling a name, Daren trying to make a prayer fit over panic. Fire ran along the ward routes. It did not behave like fire in a hearth. It chose corners. It reached for copper and old nails. At Iven's threshold it burst through the replacement stone. Our repair had interrupted the connection; the city's repair had put it back.

Sera was pulling Pell through the window. Iven pushed Tobe up after her, then turned back for Mrs. Peret. I went toward the door, but Mera caught my belt and swung me away as the lintel fell. She took the edge of the impact on her forearm. I heard something break. She swore once, shoved me toward the window, and lifted the woman with her good arm.

A rip opened above the temple roof. Something with hooked limbs unfolded from it, caught the bell frame, and lowered itself toward the people below. I had seen sketches of fiends in temple books. The books had omitted the smell. It was hot metal, old meat, and the horrible sweetness of fruit left too long in a closed room.

I fired before I had settled my feet. The arrow struck the frame. The creature turned. A second arrow hit its shoulder and did very little. I had eleven hit points when the evening began and the grim suspicion that the creature's opinion of eleven was recreational.

Jarik rang the handbell from the food line. He shouted that the lower doors were open and everyone should follow the mustard scarf. His voice carried over the screaming, not magically yet, but with a command I had never heard him use. People moved. Mera stood between them and the thing coming down the wall, bracing a roof beam with her good arm because her injured hand could no longer grip a weapon.

Kel crawled to a junction box and struck the coupling with his hammer. Nothing happened. He struck it again, crying, then reversed the tool and pried the manual latch from its housing. The descending light snapped sideways. The fiend hit the pavement, suddenly heavier, and Mera drove the beam across its neck. I put an arrow into the place she had opened.

We did not celebrate. Another tear opened near the drain. Smaller things came through in a knot, dragging chain between them. Rian stood at the base of the tree with both hands raised.

Power passed through him into the ground, and I understood that he had become the part of the system Kael had not bothered to draw as a person.

I ran toward him. He told me to stay back. I ignored him and grabbed his coat. The fabric burned my palm. He said the thread would follow if he left the root. I told him we would cut it. He looked at the contract mark inside his wrist and said he could not.

Sera appeared beside me holding Kael's dropped index book. "Not cut," she said. "Change the destination. Kel! I need to know where this line goes if we open it at the coupling."

Kel looked at her, at Rian, then at the wall. "Into the old overflow trench. If it's clear. If the plate isn't fused. If I can get up there."

Mera pushed the beam into Jarik's hands. "Three ifs," she said, already moving. "That's practically a guarantee for him."

She lifted Kel onto the lower parapet despite the damage in her arm. I covered the stairs. Sera held the book open while Rian called out the sequence of marks burning across his skin. He knew the contract's order. That knowledge frightened me almost as much as the fact that he could still speak through what it was doing to him.

The plate opened. Light plunged into the abandoned trench behind the temple, melting stone. Rian fell. I caught him under the arms and dragged him away from the tree while the last of the power tore a branch from above us. When it hit the ground, it landed where his head had been.

At the mouth of the drain my mother was helping children climb through broken brick. She saw me carrying Rian and began to run toward us. I shouted that she should keep the opening clear. She stopped, face changing with an effort I would understand only later, and turned back to the children.

Bren was not with them. He had gone back for the pot after the bag split at the first bend. A neighbor saw him beneath the west stair when the first wave struck. Mera found his stones scattered beside a broken lintel. I did not see her kneel. I saw her when she stood again, holding the little cloth bag against her chest with the arm she could barely move.

Between the two tears in the air, I lost sight of Jarik. Later he told me what happened in the lower hall. A woman carrying twins had stopped at the doorway, unable to decide whether to go

toward the fire or toward the creature on the roof. He had taken one child and begun talking about the weather. He did not remember the words. He remembered the baby's sleeve caught beneath his thumb and how terrified he was of dropping somebody whose mother had just trusted him.

I learned Mera's part from a freight worker who had been beneath the stair. She had heard a child crying in a room already filling with smoke. The worker told her the wall was coming down. She asked where the child was. He pointed. She walked into the room with her arm broken and came out dragging a boy by the back of his coat. It was not Bren. The worker said she looked at the child, then at the stair, and went on searching. She never mentioned that boy when we talked about the night. His mother remembered for both of them.

What I saw myself was a narrow strip of ground between the temple and the drain, lit in pulses as the wards failed. Every bright interval changed the shape of the obstacles. A cart appeared where there had been space. A woman fell. A rope we had tied as a handrail caught fire. I cut it loose and somebody shouted that I had taken away the only thing an old man could hold. He was right. I replaced it with my bow, held sideways between two people, and felt the weight go through the limb in a way it had never been made to carry.

A little boy came back against the flow. I caught his shoulder and shouted that he had to turn. He shouted back that his grandmother had no shoes. I nearly dragged him onward. Then he pointed to the stones beyond the door, where embers were falling across the only route she could walk. I gave him my coat. We wrapped it around her feet and took her between us. His information was not more important than the danger. It was the part of the danger I had not bothered to see.

At the outlet the water had risen to my thigh. My father had found the obstruction, a fallen grate held under pressure against a broken pillar. He could move it only if we took some of the weight. Kel was still on the wall. Mera was searching. I asked two strangers to stand beside me and made them repeat where they would place their hands. One had never touched a tiefling willingly in his life, if his face was any indication. He gripped my wrist anyway when the grate

slipped. We moved it far enough to leave a channel, not far enough to clear the drain. The water fell slowly. We sent the smallest people through first.

Sera reached us carrying a ledger inside her jacket. I shouted that she should have been helping the injured. She looked down at the man leaning on her shoulder, then at the bandage she had tied around his thigh, and asked whether I intended to finish that sentence. I had seen the book and missed the person. The realization struck almost as hard as the falling stone had. I took the man's other side. Sera kept the ledger dry with her chin while we helped him through.

There was a moment near dawn when the smoke thinned enough to see the tree. A branch was hanging by a strip of living wood. Red leaves fell into black water. I wanted one. I had lost sight of Bren and did not yet know about Omi, and some small stupid portion of me wanted to save a leaf. I picked it from the water and put it in the only pocket that had not burned. For years I treated that impulse as shameful. Now I think a frightened boy had reached for something he recognized. Not every action in a disaster has to justify its place in a report.

What We Carried Out

We counted people in the yard beyond the wall because the guards would not let the injured occupy the road. My father argued with them until Hessa arrived with empty wagons and asked which official wanted his name recorded against the obstruction of medical transport. She was not shouting either. I began to suspect the truly dangerous people saved their breath for precision.

Rian breathed in small, sharp pulls. His left hand had closed around nothing and would not open. Kel sat beside him holding a strip of his aunt's apron. He had searched the corner stoop after getting down from the wall. Omi had stayed with a neighbor who could not walk. Neither had reached the drain.

Mera had not cried. She had let a healer set and splint her arm, then asked whether Bren was on any of the other wagons. After the third answer she stopped asking. Jarik sat close enough for his shoulder to touch hers. He did not try to make her laugh. It was one of the kindest things I had ever seen him decide not to do.

At dawn Daren came through the gate carrying the temple ledger. His robe was scorched. He gave the book to Sera and said he wanted a copy made before the Circle collected its records. She asked whether he was admitting he had signed the agreement. He said yes. She asked whether he expected forgiveness for bringing the evidence. He said he expected her to take the book. She did.

The council's first notice called the event a minor fiendish incursion. It commended the local population's resolve and announced that repair crews would be assigned when safety permitted. We read it while a woman washed ash from the face of her dead husband. Nobody had told the notice writer about the husband. I doubted it would have changed the adjective.

We had saved the families who reached the drain. We had interrupted a working designed to make us permanent conductors. We had kept Rian alive. Those were victories, and I will not dishonor the people who performed them by describing the night as nothing but failure. But Bren was dead. Omi was dead. Forty-three names went into the first list, and the list grew when the search teams reached the blocked cellars.

Kel told me about the coupling two days later. He had been paid to assemble a bypass. The limiter failed his test. The buyer offered more if he certified it anyway, and Omi needed the medicine. He had told himself it would only carry inspection flow. He said the words as if they tasted bad, then waited for me to decide what kind of person he was.

I wanted to tell him I had drawn the houses. Instead I said we needed his account in writing. He nodded. I hated him briefly for making confession look possible. Then I hated myself for using his shame as somewhere to put my own.

The first days after the incursion had their own geography. There was the wall where families waited for names, the wagon where the healer kept the clean cloth, the water queue that grew longer after sunrise, and the patch of ground nobody used because the dead lay there beneath whatever people had found to cover them. I learned that a place can become familiar in the time it takes to dread crossing it.

Jarik organized the food line badly on the first morning. He placed the bread near the water, creating a knot of people each of whom believed somebody else was cutting ahead. Two men

began fighting. A mother stepped between them and shouted that she had been waiting since before dawn. Jarik tried to calm everyone with a joke. Nobody laughed. He stopped, lifted the empty bread crate onto its side, and asked the mother where the line should start. She pointed to the shade. He moved it there.

Her name was Ress. She had managed a mill kitchen for nine years. Within an hour she had people collecting water separately, a place for those who could not stand, and somebody checking the far side of the wagons for families too ashamed to queue. Jarik introduced her as the person in charge. She said that would last until her own children needed her and somebody should learn the arrangement before then. He stayed beside her all afternoon, repeating instructions instead of adding flourishes. In the evening he gave her the crate to sit on.

Kel tried to hand his coupling account to the first investigator who arrived. The man asked whether he had a license. Kel said no. The man told him unlicensed fabrication was an offense and put the statement into a folded case without reading it. I reached for the paper. Sera caught my wrist. She had already copied it. The investigator asked why we needed copies if we trusted the inquiry. She told him copies were what made an inquiry possible. He wrote down her name with unnecessary care.

Mera's mother brought Bren's second boot. The first had been recovered near the stair. She had washed both and set them beside the bandage tin because she could not decide whether a funeral required them. Mera stared at the pair. Jarik began to stand. I stopped him, then hated myself for deciding what she needed without asking. Her mother picked up one boot and told us he had always put them on the wrong feet because he wanted to get out the door before somebody found him an errand. Mera laughed once, a harsh little sound that tore through all of us. Then she put her face against her mother's apron and we left them room.

Rian's pain came in waves he tried to conceal by asking about everybody else. He would hear a footstep and open his eyes to say he was better. The healer finally told him that if he lied about the burning she could not tell whether the treatment worked. He said she had more injured people to see. She replied that she was one person and required honest information rather than

his decisions about which patient deserved her. He looked ashamed. She softened her voice without changing the request. It helped enough that he told her when the next wave began.

Daren spent a morning reading the names aloud beside the dead. Some families wanted him there. Others sent him away. He went when told and returned when called. My mother asked him to read for Omi because Kel could not speak without losing his breath. Mera's mother asked a woman from the mountain workshops to speak for Bren. Daren brought water and stood at the back. It was the first time I saw him accept that being useful might mean being unwelcome at the center.

The council offered payment for burials, provided a household head signed a declaration that the deaths resulted from the incursion. Sera spread the form on a wagon board. The declaration said nothing about the working or the Circle. A widow beside her said she knew exactly what it meant, but the grave keeper would not wait for a better inquiry. Sera had been ready to urge refusal. The widow asked whether she intended to buy the burial herself. Sera stopped. We pooled what money we had for two families. There were many more than two. Some signed. We did not erase their right to seek the truth because they had needed somewhere to put their dead.

On the final evening before Kel and I left, we sat around a fire made from a ruined door. Jarik handed each of us a cup of broth and told us to stop commenting on its personality. The soup contained too much turnip and some unidentified herb Ress had declared edible with limited enthusiasm. For a while we argued about that. Six people who had not managed a full conversation for days found ten minutes to accuse one another of crimes against seasoning. Rian smiled without opening his eyes. Mera drank her broth. It was ordinary and inadequate and more important than anything I could have said about friendship.

I asked what they wanted me to bring back. Sera wanted a signed technical opinion and the qualifications of whoever wrote it. Jarik wanted enough coin for a real pantry. Mera wanted somebody to admit that Bren had been in the district before it became an incident. Rian asked for the sky from somewhere that did not smell of smoke. Kel said nothing. He had not yet imagined a thing he was entitled to want. I took all those requests with me, although only one would fit in a letter without explanation.

We did not leave as a party. Rian could not travel. Mera would not abandon her mother. Sera stayed to duplicate the ledgers. Jarik organized food because the Circle's carts had disappeared. Kel came with me to find a licensed artificer who could examine Rian's injuries and give the survivors a technical account the city could not dismiss.

My mother packed bread. My father handed me his old measuring cord and said a useful map included the place where you had been wrong. I told him I would write. He looked at me for a long time, then said he would read.

Under the wounded tree I gave Rian the pendant my mother had sewn a pocket for. He could hold it only with his good hand. He said I should keep my own starting point. I told him I knew where it was. Mera stood beside us, her arm bound, Bren's empty stone bag tucked beneath her belt. She said if I returned with only better speeches she would throw me back through the gate.

I walked out with Kel beside me and the sun just above the wall. I was a ranger with healing words I had learned in the terrible hours after the working, and a bow that finally felt like a responsibility instead of a costume. Behind us, our friends began the work of surviving what the city intended to call recovery. Ahead lay roads we did not know. Neither direction was an escape.

Chapter 4
Arrows in the Dark

Character records at chapter entry

After the incursion; departure and separate recovery. Unclassed characters have no assigned ability scores, HP, or AC yet.

Ekrius Ashborne
Tiefling. Ranger 2.
STR 12 DEX 15 CON 13 INT 9 WIS 14 CHA 12; PB +2; Max HP 18; AC 13
Leaves after the incursion, having learned healing magic.

Jarik Fairwind
Human. Not yet classed.
Stays to organize relief.

Sera Veythorn
Half-elf. Not yet classed.
Stays to copy the temple records.

Kel Brasswick
Human. Not yet classed.
Travels to Oren in search of an apprenticeship.

Mera Flint
Mountain dwarf. Fighter 2.
STR 16 DEX 12 CON 15 INT 10 WIS 13 CHA 10; PB +2; Max HP 20; AC 16
Her arm is healing, and she is grieving Bren.

Rian Emberfell
Human. Warlock 1 - The Fiend.
STR 14 DEX 13 CON 14 INT 10 WIS 10 CHA 16; PB +2; Max HP 10; AC 12
His damaged hand and ongoing injuries prevent travel.

Work Beyond the Walls

Hessa hired us on the condition that neither of us described our employment as a quest. She needed a scout and somebody who could repair lanterns without consuming them. Kel asked whether minor consumption was acceptable if the lantern improved afterward. She looked at him until he decided the question had answered itself.

The first weeks were not dramatic. We walked, counted supplies, mended harness, and learned that a horse could object to a person's whole existence without giving reasons. Bruni drove the second wagon and insisted we rotate through the jobs nobody wanted. When I said scouting required being available ahead of the caravan, she said cleaning the cookpot required being available beside the cookpot. She was willing to discuss the schedule but not the metaphysics.

At night Kel wrote to Master Oren, an artificer whose work mark he had seen on the temple's older fittings. Oren ran a public workshop near the coast. He answered after six weeks with questions, then with an offer: bring the broken coupling and a truthful account, and he would test it. He would not promise to cure Rian through a letter. He would not certify a conclusion before seeing the thing. Kel read that sentence twice, then folded it carefully.

I wrote home after every market town. Sera sent counts of the displaced, copies of contract headings, and a drawing of a mark she could not yet identify. Jarik sent a rude song about city officials that made Bruni choke on her tea. Mera sent no letter for two months. When one came it contained five lines: her mother had somewhere to sleep; her arm could carry weight again; she was training; Bren's bag was still empty; I should stop asking other people whether she was eating and ask her directly.

Rian's letters were shortest. He described the weather and his mother's work. He did not describe his hand until I asked. Then he said some days it opened. I could heal a split palm by placing my own over it and speaking words that seemed to rise from soil and breath. Whatever had threaded itself through Rian was not a cut. I had to learn the difference between being able to help and being able to repair.

Kel was accepted as Oren's apprentice the following spring. I delivered him to the coast with the coupling wrapped in cloth, and he stood outside the workshop looking younger than he had since the ritual. Oren was missing two fingers and had no interest in a demonstration. He asked Kel to make tea, clean a bench, and explain the failed test. Kel began with the buyer's assurances. Oren stopped him.

"Your measurement first," he said. "Then their excuse. Otherwise you'll learn to hear promises louder than instruments."

I stayed two days. On the second, Kel's hands shook so badly that Oren moved the hot solder away without comment. They sat with the broken piece between them until Kel could name every fault. I left knowing he would have work, supervision, and somebody difficult to impress. It was a better gift than reassurance.

During the years that followed, I learned the roads beyond the city's immediate hunger. There were good towns. I want that understood. Some officials listened; some innkeepers supplied blankets without calculating a story they could later sell. A bridge keeper near Three-Tree Ford closed his crossing because a child had found a fresh crack beneath the eastern pier. He paid the child a copper and the engineer an inspection fee. Nobody died, and there was no ballad because sensible maintenance rarely survives contact with a rhyme.

Such places mattered. Without them, I might have mistaken my distrust for wisdom. The world did not consist entirely of people waiting to disappoint me. Sometimes the difficulty was recognizing an offered hand before demanding to inspect the sleeve.

I remember those first two days at Oren's workshop particularly clearly. Kel slept in a room above the public bench with two other apprentices. One was a woman old enough to be his mother who had repaired fishing winches before a change in harbor law required a license. The other was a boy with pale eyelashes and a laugh that arrived in the wrong places. Kel disliked both within a day. The woman asked practical questions while he wanted to explain principles. The boy copied his tool arrangement and then misplaced everything in a more original order.

I stayed for their first public examination of the coupling. Oren invited a mason, a lamp keeper, and the harbor recorder. Kel had expected to perform the test himself. Oren asked the

lamp keeper to set it up from Kel's written instructions. By the second step she had found an ambiguous label. By the fourth she had connected the return in the direction Kel had intended to forbid. He interrupted. Oren stopped the test and handed him his own paper. The instructions were part of the thing he had made.

It took the entire afternoon. The limiter failed twice at the recorded surge, and a third time at a lower one. The harbor recorder asked Kel whether he had observed the lower failure before sale. Kel said he had. I watched the woman put her pen down, look at him, and pick it up again. His face had gone grey. He answered every question. When they finished, Oren gave the recorder two copies and kept a third. He told Kel the next task would be repairing the public kitchen's water pump.

Kel said he should not be allowed near anybody's water. Oren asked whether he intended to learn or merely suffer in a way nobody else could use. It was a harsh question, and Kel nearly left. The older apprentice took the pump housing to the bench and said she would inspect every joint. Kel could work beside her or watch her do it. He chose the far side of the bench, angry enough to obey. When I left the next morning, they were disputing the diameter of a pin. It sounded like a beginning he might survive.

After leaving Kel at the workshop, I received a letter from my father about a culvert that had finally been replaced. He described the work without saying who had authorized it. I wrote back asking whether he had been paid for the original survey. He said part. I asked whether his cough was better. He said the weather was good. We developed a correspondence in which each of us supplied the truth nearest the question while avoiding the one directly beneath it. My mother occasionally added a sentence across the bottom: Your father still coughs. Have you bought new socks? Practical people were carrying the emotional accuracy of the household again.

Bruni read none of the letters, but she knew when I received them. I would volunteer for a second watch and become unpleasant about equipment. One night she handed me a harness strap and asked what I was avoiding. I said nothing. She told me I was doing it with considerable energy. Then she made me sit while she repaired the buckle I had insisted required my

supervision. A cold wind came through the pass. Below us, Hessa was laughing with the cook. I had been on the road for months and still believed joining that fire would require permission.

Bruni said her first husband had died during an ordinary winter, not on a dangerous route. She had spent years afterward preparing so carefully for catastrophe that she neglected the pleasant afternoons still arriving. She did not offer this as advice. She asked me to hold the leather straight and told me what his laugh had sounded like. When the buckle was finished, we went down to the fire. Nobody had saved us a special seat. They moved over when we arrived.

The Lights in Lanternwood

My first night crossing of Lanternwood came in late autumn. I had become good enough with the bow that Hessa sometimes trusted me without asking how certain I was, which made me more careful about answering. The forest road had once been lined with guide lamps. Most were gone. Locals used the remaining posts as landmarks and told travelers not to follow any light that appeared between them.

At the last village, a girl called Asha watched us fill barrels. She said her brother heard their mother's voice in the wood the week after the funeral. Her grandmother slapped her shoulder, then apologized to me for the story. I asked the girl whether she had heard it too. She said no; she had heard a bell, and bells did not belong in the tree canopy.

I paid for the water and asked the grandmother where people came out when they did come out. She pointed upstream, away from the maintained road. The missing usually followed voices downhill. The survivors climbed. Bruni nodded once, then rearranged the wagons so the slower teams would not fall behind.

There was a young guard with us called Noll. He had a new sword, a polished charm from his mother, and an understandable desire to prove neither had been wasted. When I explained the lights, he asked whether we intended to be frightened by village stories. Hessa said we intended to deliver flour, and fear was welcome to ride provided it did not require another ration.

We entered after dusk because a landslip had already delayed us and the exposed clearing behind us offered no safe camp. This was not the choice I would have made with an unlimited

supply of daylight. We moved with a hooded lamp at the rear and no open flame ahead. My sight reached through the dark in greys, the road losing color but keeping its shape.

The first light appeared above a ditch. It bobbed once and vanished. Another answered farther in. Noll turned his head as if someone had spoken beside him. He said his mother was calling. Bruni caught his sleeve. He pulled away and I stepped into his path, telling him his mother had not walked ahead of our wagons into a flooded wood.

He struck me across the mouth with the heel of his hand. I remember being more surprised than hurt. Noll was embarrassed afterward. At the time he looked offended that I was preventing him from answering somebody he loved. The light drifted closer. A face seemed to form beneath it, using what I wanted to see as material.

Then I heard Bren laugh. Not words, not an invitation. Just the sound he had made when Mera lifted him onto her shoulders. I knew he was dead. I knew the wood was lying. My foot still moved before the rest of me caught it.

Asha had heard bells. I listened beneath the borrowed laugh and found the faint chime, thin and metallic. It traveled with the light. I put an arrow through the place below it. Something screamed and dropped from the branches with limbs too long for its body.

The other lights went out. That was worse. I could hear weight moving above us and suddenly understood how much of the forest I had never been looking at. Noll stumbled toward the ditch. Bruni threw a blanket over his head and sat on him, a practical response no temple manual had ever suggested.

I moved away from the wagon lamp into deeper shadow. The nearest creature turned toward the place I had been, hesitated, and climbed past me without seeing. Darkness had become cover more complete than I knew how to explain. My heart was hammering; I did not feel chosen. I felt temporarily overlooked and determined to make it count.

I fired, moved, and fired again before the thing recovered. The additional speed came from recognizing the opening before it became an opening anyone else could use. Later, trained scouts would name such habits and tell me I had become a Gloom Stalker. That night I needed no title. I needed the third creature to stop pulling a driver from his seat.

We climbed toward the higher track. I called distances; Bruni drove Noll's wagon while Hessa led its team from the ground. The girl had been right about the slope. The lights followed below us but did not cross the old stone drainage ridge. By morning we were out of the wood, one driver wounded, one horse lost, every traveler alive.

Noll apologized while Bruni washed my lip. I told him the wood had spoken in a voice I knew too. His shoulders loosened. He did not need me to make myself invulnerable in order to learn from me. I wrote Asha's name on the report and sent her grandmother money for a new water barrel. Useful knowledge deserved more than being stolen into a scout's reputation.

In the morning the wounded driver, Lonn, could not close his right hand. His wife would recognize what that meant before he finished explaining it. He could still ride, still lift with the other arm, still be described as alive in the report. He could not hold reins safely on a difficult descent. Hessa transferred him to inventory work. He took it as dismissal. She said he would receive the same wage. He asked for how long. She looked at the road before answering that she could promise the next four markets and would tell him before the fourth what she could promise after that.

Noll offered him his sword charm. Lonn asked whether it could hold a pen. Noll withdrew it, hurt. I took him aside before he made a second offering. He said he had caused the injury. He had not; the creature attacked Lonn after Noll was already beneath Bruni's blanket. I could not persuade him of the distinction while his own helplessness felt so enormous. He wanted a single cause he could confess and a single good action that would set the weight down. I recognized the desire and still handled him badly. I told him guilt was not evidence. He heard that I wanted him quiet.

Asha's village received us at noon. Her grandmother insisted we eat before questioning the children. There were other families whose people had returned from the wood without packs, without horses, or without the ability to hear a particular voice without shaking. A woman spoke to me through the doorway because her husband thought describing the lights invited them closer. I could have argued about cause. Instead I stood outside so he would not have to see me entering his house as another threat.

She said the sounds changed with the season. In spring people heard babies. In autumn, bells. We recorded this as her account, not a settled explanation. A charcoal burner said the upper ridge stayed dry even after three days of rain. Asha showed me where her brother's boot had been found below that ridge. I asked whether she wanted to walk with us to the first post. Her grandmother said no before the girl answered. I waited. Asha looked at the wood and said she would point from the well. That was enough.

We made the route report together at the inn. Not a heroic account, a set of distances between surviving posts, the high ground, the places where wagons could turn. Hessa bought copies from the local scribe and left one with the village council. A merchant asked why we had not simply destroyed the creatures. He wanted the shortest road reopened. Bruni asked whether he had brought anybody qualified to hunt things in a flooded canopy. He said he was asking a reasonable question. She agreed, and repeated hers.

Noll found me afterward with the report. He wanted his name included as the guard who broke formation. I asked whether he wanted the description because it would help the next traveler or because punishment sounded easier than being patient with himself. He was silent for a long time. Finally he said both. We wrote what happened without making his mistake the center of the wood. Then he went to Lonn and offered to take dictation for the inventory. Lonn objected to his handwriting. Noll said he could practice. They spent the next hour discovering a mutual contempt for Hessa's grain abbreviations.

The power I had used in the dark did not answer on command afterward. I tried it behind the inn and walked directly into a crate. Asha witnessed the experiment and asked whether that was the thing that had frightened the monsters. I said the monsters had lacked her advantage of daylight. She promised to keep the crate out of the account if I promised not to tell anyone she had called me a famous ranger. We had both discovered something and were not yet comfortable with the title.

Six weeks after Lanternwood, the council at Asha's village hired a hunting company. The company announced it would clear the forest in three days and accepted payment in advance. Its leader wore a green feather in his hat and called the creatures ordinary carrion imps. I asked

whether he had seen one. He said he had hunted worse. That might have been true. It did not answer my question. Hessa declined the escort contract attached to his expedition and accepted a slower flour route instead.

We returned to find two hunters missing and their leader collecting a second payment for unexpected complications. Asha's grandmother wanted the road open before winter. The charcoal burners could not sell their loads if carts kept avoiding the wood. The leader said the villagers had concealed the danger. They pointed to the copied report he had signed. He folded his hat between his hands and became quiet. I disliked him. I also wanted his two missing people found before disliking him turned into another delay.

Noll volunteered to go with me. Bruni asked whether he was trying to prove something. He said yes, he supposed he was, and would like somebody to tell him if that began interfering with the search. It was a better answer than I had expected. We took a charcoal burner named Tet, a coil of rope, and two lengths of thin board for spreading weight over the bog. Tet said the hunting leader had fired a flare from the low road. The survivors' account claimed the ridge. Sera was not there to sort the difference. I asked Tet to show the scorch mark rather than settle the story by confidence.

The mark was low, on a tree beside a sunken lamp post. A strip of blue cloth hung above it, too high for someone standing on the ground. I heard a bell farther east and felt the wood begin assembling a voice around the sound. This time it was my father's. He was still alive then. That made the imitation more persuasive, not less. I could imagine him arriving with a wagon, calling because he could not find me. I told Noll what I heard before the voice had finished my name. He said he heard nothing yet, then swore as his own began.

Tet heard his dead daughter. His face changed in a way I will not try to describe for beauty. He went toward the nearest trunk with one hand held out. Noll caught his sleeve, gently, and said we needed him to show us the solid ground. It gave Tet a task he could perform while the voice continued. He pointed left. We followed him with our hands linked through the rope. I listened for the small chime beneath the words and used it to judge where not to look.

We found one hunter above a root hollow, holding his leg against his chest. The other lay farther out on a platform of fallen branches. Both were alive. The first told us the creatures had used the calls of the missing to draw the company apart. When he tried to warn the leader, the man fired a flare to prove there was nothing overhead. We could see the broken canopy where the burning material landed. The second hunter had gone to retrieve him after the first attack. Their leader thought both dead and left.

The branches beneath the second man would not hold my weight. I could see that without a measuring line. We passed him the end of a board. He could not reach. Noll wanted to wade. Tet told him the water there had no bottom a standing man could use. We tied a loop to the board, slid it over a branch, and let the rope swing within reach of the hunter's good hand. It took four attempts. During the third, a creature lowered itself behind Noll. He saw it in the dark water before I did, drove the board upward beneath its throat, and shouted for me to move.

I fired from too close to enjoy any advantage of distance. The first arrow went through a fold of loose skin. The second caught where the hooked limb joined the body. It fell against the rope and dragged it downward. The hunter in the branches screamed as his platform shifted. Tet cut the line before the weight pulled the man into the channel. We lost the loop, the board, and the safe angle we had spent so long arranging.

For a few breaths all I could do was hold my ground. Noll stood beside the injured man at the root hollow. Tet was shaking, his knife still open. The thing thrashed in the water, and lights began appearing farther between the trunks. We could take one survivor now and return with better equipment. The second might not survive the interval. Or we could try the remaining board from a different angle and spend the time the approaching lights were offering. No answer made me feel qualified to choose it.

The hunter in the branches called that his belt was loose. He could pull it off and make a loop himself. We had been treating him as cargo because he was injured. I asked whether he could bear weight through his shoulder. He said he would tell me if he could not. We slid the second board, caught the belt, and pulled him across while Noll braced the root with both feet. The

branches failed just after his hip cleared them. The water took his pack. We took his arms and hauled until he was lying on ground none of us intended to leave again.

We came out before dusk. Tet vomited beside the well, then asked somebody to fetch his wife. Noll went with the injured. I sat on the well edge trying to remember whether I had returned my father's last letter. The hunting leader offered us a share of his payment for assisting with the recovery. I told him to pay the villagers back. He refused. Asha's grandmother produced his signed contract, pointed to the completion clause, and suggested he discuss the matter with the council before she discussed it with the next town. It was not my finest negotiation. It was not mine at all.

The road stayed closed that winter. The council funded a high track instead, with wages for the charcoal burners helping cut it. Some people blamed us for failing to remove the creatures. Some thanked us for bringing the hunters home. Tet would not go into the lower wood again. He marked the high track from the ridge where he could work without hearing the water. We used his knowledge on the terms he could bear to give it, and the spring caravans reached the village without taking the old road.

Lessons Nobody Asked For

Three years after the incursion, Jarik found me in a river town and announced that he had become a professional. I asked at what. He said it was hurtful that I required clarification. He wore a teal coat with one expensive button and carried a lute acquired through a transaction he described as mutually educational.

He had been traveling with a retired temple singer called Mistress Vale. She taught him breath, phrasing, and the discipline of listening while another person held the melody. He said the last lesson was unnecessary. Then he said it had taken the longest. The first time I heard him sing after that apprenticeship, a room of arguing carters fell silent without appearing to notice they had done it.

He had also learned that words could carry something beyond sound. When Hessa's newest guard froze on a difficult ford, Jarik spoke quietly behind him, reminding him where to place his

feet. I felt the confidence move across the water like warmth. The guard completed the crossing. Jarik went pale, then pretended he had planned the entire effect.

Sera arrived the next week with ledger copies and a purple sleeve torn at the cuff. She had spent two years apprenticed to a claims investigator who paid badly and demanded reasons for every conclusion. She could now tell when a witness was repeating a phrase supplied by somebody else. She could not, as she made clear when Jarik suggested it, identify guilt from a person's cheekbones. She found motives by asking questions and returning when the answers stopped agreeing.

We took a short delivery together and turned it into a two-day argument about a missing chicken. The innkeeper claimed a boy had stolen it. Sera found feathers near the cookhouse. Jarik charmed the cook into admitting the bird had gone into a pot. I traced the boy's footprints toward a shed and concluded he was hiding. He was; the innkeeper had threatened him. Mera, who had arrived midway through our investigation, paid the woman who actually owned the chicken and asked why five alleged professionals were allowing a hungry child to remain the least important part of the case.

The cook had taken the bird without asking, expecting the innkeeper to settle the debt. The innkeeper had blamed the boy to avoid paying. We collected the debt, fed the child, and discovered our delivery recipient had closed his warehouse for the day while we pursued a poultry conspiracy. Hessa charged the lost time against our wages. Mera said it was cheap tuition.

She had become a fighter in the freight-yard school, then earned the respect of people who taught how to break an opponent's balance instead of simply hitting harder. Her arm ached in damp weather. She wore armor fitted over charcoal leather and a strip of oxblood cloth from Bren's old blanket around one wrist. She could be frighteningly patient when angry. I preferred the shouting.

Kel came out from Oren's workshop the following summer carrying a little brass-legged device he had been forbidden to call a cannon indoors. It could throw a pulse of force when he fed it shaped magic. It also tripped over rugs. He had learned to test it in a marked space with

witnesses, and he asked before demonstrating. That request was more impressive to me than the blast.

Rian stayed home through most of those years. His letters became more candid. He had learned to focus the fire without burning his hand every time. He had also learned it came more easily when he was angry, which he did not consider a useful recommendation. He took instruction from a former pact-bound woman who lived outside the north gate and charged him for lessons in gardening. The magic she explained for free. She told him he needed one part of his life where growth did not answer to a creditor.

We were becoming people with names for our methods. We were also still capable of disputing a restaurant bill for forty minutes because Jarik considered leaving mid-argument a personal defeat. Growth did not make us uniformly pleasant. It made our difficulties more specialized.

Mistress Vale accompanied Jarik when he first found us. She was short, beautifully dressed in a coat patched at the elbows, and capable of reducing him to attentiveness by clearing her throat. At supper he tried to tell a story about winning a roomful of grieving dock workers to song. She said he had not won them. He had waited until they wanted music. Jarik bowed extravagantly and told us that his training consisted largely of being corrected in front of people he hoped to impress.

She asked me to describe Lanternwood. I gave the route and the dangers. She asked what Noll had heard. When I told her, she nodded and said Jarik should understand that a voice could open a person without persuading their reason. He began defending himself before she accused him of anything. She let him finish. Then she said he needed to know the difference between helping a listener stand and making a listener follow. I watched his face. He had been paid for the second kind of success before he knew how to name it.

That night he could not sleep. I found him outside with the voucher list Sera had copied after the incursion. He said some names were his. I said I knew he had arranged bread. He shook his head. Not arranged. Invented. He showed me where a dead man's name appeared beside a living child's entitlement. He had written the relation so neatly that the record looked more convincing

than many truthful ones. At the temple, Kael had used the list as evidence that local households had accepted participation.

I wanted to say he had not known. He had not. I also knew the usefulness of that defense to a person protecting the larger lie behind it. I asked how many names. He said he did not know anymore because other people had begun adding them. The relief line had required more than one clever boy. That was what frightened him: he had made something others could use, and he could no longer find all its edges.

Vale came outside wrapped in a shawl. Jarik tried to fold the list away. She told him she had heard enough to know he was carrying paper in bad weather, not enough to know why. Would he like her to listen? He said not tonight. She sat beside us anyway and complained about a tune somebody had mutilated downstairs. We listened to three bars through the wall. Jarik corrected the fourth under his breath. She smiled without pointing out what she had accomplished. He did not confess to her then. He also did not have to earn her company by becoming entertaining.

When Kel brought the brass-legged device the following summer, he insisted we stand behind a marked rope. Mera stepped over it while commenting on his faith in chalk. The device snapped toward her boot, tracking the movement, then swung its barrel toward the empty wall beside her. Everybody stopped. Kel went white. The mechanism had not discharged; he had disabled the firing channel during setup. The direction of its movement was still wrong. She stepped back without a joke.

He removed the power source in front of us. Then he wrote what had happened and asked her to repeat exactly where she had stood. She was embarrassed and angry at him for making her embarrassed. He did not accept her first answer, which omitted her crossing the rope. Sera told Mera to answer the question. Mera told her to mind her own boots. We stood in the yard like children again, except this time the thing between us could break a wall. Eventually Mera said where her foot had been. Kel adjusted the test, not the story.

The second demonstration worked. He asked before applying the small protective field to each of us. Mera said yes first. Jarik made a speech about having no objection to being protected by a handsome machine. Rian, who had arrived from the city two days earlier, held his damaged

hand inside the glow and watched it carefully. Kel asked whether it hurt. Rian said no. Kel could not answer for a moment. Then he reached for his notebook. Nobody made him explain why his eyes had filled.

The Bridge We Refused

Skyspan lay four days from the coastal road, above a gorge whose depth encouraged people to describe it poetically from a safe distance. We arrived with two wagons and found a line of carts waiting to cross. The engineer on duty said a bearing had shifted, but the bridge was safe for one wagon at a time. He wore muddy boots and looked exhausted. I liked that he had been down to inspect it. I liked his conclusion less.

Mera counted how many laborers had been stationed near the expansion joint. Sera asked when the last loaded wagon had crossed. Jarik spoke to the woman selling tea beside the queue. She said the bridge had made a new noise that morning and the toll keeper's family had left at dawn. That last fact did not prove failure. It suggested a question worth asking before sending people over it.

Kel went with the engineer to examine the bearing. They returned disagreeing. The engineer's instruments showed a stable load path. Kel said the instruments were reading the upper frame while water had removed material beneath the eastern support. The engineer admitted he could not reach it safely without stopping traffic. The merchants behind us began shouting about delays.

There was another route. I had seen a shelf trail on an old quarry survey. It would take two days, require unloading the wagons, and cost us a contract if we missed the market. I knew this before I spoke. The choice did not require a moment of brilliant insight. It required telling Hessa the useful answer was expensive.

She listened, then walked to the lead team and turned it herself. Half the line followed. The rest demanded certainty I could not provide. I told them where we were going and why, and wrote my name where they could find it if I was wrong. I could not order them to come.

On the shelf trail Mera's patience ended. She wanted to return and force the remaining carts off the bridge. Jarik said force would start a fight on the very structure we wanted empty. Sera said if the bearing had hours left, we might have time to move both groups. Kel said nobody could measure the remaining time from where we stood. I wanted a decision everybody would agree was mine and also nobody would blame me for. Those are incompatible ambitions.

We sent Jarik back with the tea seller to speak to the families. We continued unloading. The route beneath the quarry was narrow enough that one panicked animal could take people with it. I cast the spell I had learned after long work keeping frightened groups quiet: a shared hush, a concealment that softened footfalls and made our movement less easy to trace. It did not remove the need for ropes. Magic is very good at encouraging confidence in people who still need ropes.

Bandits waited above the bend. Sera spotted the watcher before he saw the pack line. Mera wanted to take the high path and dislodge them. Kel proposed firing his device at the ledge. I looked at the fractured rock supporting half our convoy and said that would be an exciting contribution to the gorge's geology.

We offered them work. That was Jarik's idea when he returned with the last of the families willing to leave Skyspan. He told the bandits there was silver for carrying loads, food at the next camp, and six irritated people who would prefer not to solve another problem with a burial. Two came down. The third fired at him. Mera caught the man's bow arm when he tried to climb away and broke the weapon across a stone. The fourth ran. Negotiation had worked on half the group, which was a better success rate than we managed at most meetings.

Skyspan fell shortly after sunset. We heard it from the upper trail, a long breaking roar followed by dust rising through the gorge. Three carts had remained. Two people died. One of the survivors found us the next morning and asked why I had not made them leave.

I had an answer. I could explain authority, limited time, and the consequences of starting a fight. None of it belonged in the first thing I said to a man whose wife had died. I told him I was sorry she had not come with us, and let him say what he needed to say.

The engineer survived. He walked the new route with us afterward and helped Kel place temporary supports. He did not pretend we had proven all engineers corrupt or all scouts wise.

He said he should have stopped the traffic to obtain the missing measurement. I said I should have sent someone to speak to the families sooner. We wrote both statements into the report.

The quarry route cost us the market contract exactly as predicted. The receiving merchant had bought replacement goods from another caravan and intended to deduct the difference from Hessa's payment. He listened to the bridge account with grave sympathy, then repeated the amount. Jarik used every agreeable phrase Vale had taught him. The man remained grave, sympathetic, and determined to profit from our survival. There was no hidden wording Sera could expose. The contract permitted the deduction.

Hessa paid it. Her face did not change until the merchant left, and then only around the mouth. We lost our bonuses. The two bandits who had helped carry loads received what we promised them. A driver objected, understandably, that thieves were being paid while honest workers lost wages. Hessa said a person doing honest work under our agreement received the agreed pay. It did not mean the driver's loss was fair. It meant we were not going to repair it by stealing a different worker's wage.

The younger of the two men, Orr, heard the argument. He came to give back half his coins. Mera told him to keep them. He looked at her as though he was waiting for the condition. She said if she wanted a favor she would ask it by name. He kept the money but slept beyond the edge of camp. Trust had not arrived with the first meal, and no amount of congratulating ourselves on generosity could hurry it.

Sera went back over the robbery site with him. He said the group had known about the quarry detour because the toll keeper sold route information. That fitted what we knew too neatly. She asked when the information had been offered, who paid, and what marks appeared on the paper. He remembered the keeper's name, then changed it. She came away with a possible lead and a warning about the story. He had reasons to be useful to us. Those reasons could produce truth or whatever he thought would buy him the next night's safety.

I spent the afternoon with the man whose wife had died. His name was Arren. He had a cut across one cheek and a bundle that contained the hem of her dress. He wanted me to recover the cart from the gorge. I could see it caught against stone, much too far below, its axle broken.

There was no safe way down with the equipment we had. I said so. He accused me of saving my effort for people still able to thank me. I let the words stand because they belonged to his grief, then repeated that I would not send somebody into a fall we could not arrest.

What we could do was record the location and hire quarry climbers when they reached the next village. That would cost money too. Hessa could not advance it. The engineer offered his own fee for the week's inspection work. Arren refused him at first. He called it blood money. The engineer said it was money for climbers and could be refused without becoming cleaner. They stared at each other across the gorge until Arren nodded. We recovered her body three days later. The cart remained where it had fallen.

After the burial, Arren asked for the route report. I gave him a copy. He said he still believed I should have come back sooner. I said I believed that too. He did not forgive me. He did thank the climbers, individually, and learn their names. Those two facts were able to exist together. I was beginning, slowly, to stop demanding that a completed rescue end with everybody agreeing who had been good.

That evening we ate beneath a canvas stretched between two wagons. Jarik played something gentle until Mera asked for the rude song about the magistrate. He looked at her, surprised, then began. She sang the chorus badly and with conviction. For an hour, the gorge was behind us and the road ahead was only tomorrow's work.

Chapter 5
Ghost on the Road

Character records at chapter entry

Years of field experience, before Nessa's apprenticeship.

Ekrius Ashborne
Tiefling. Ranger 6 - Gloom Stalker.
STR 12 DEX 17 CON 13 INT 9 WIS 14 CHA 12; PB +3; Max HP 46; AC 15
An experienced caravan scout who has not yet trained as a rogue.

Jarik Fairwind
Human. Bard 3 - Eloquence.
STR 10 DEX 14 CON 12 INT 11 WIS 13 CHA 16; PB +2; Max HP 21; AC 14
Has trained with Mistress Vale and developed the College of Eloquence specialty.

Sera Veythorn
Half-elf. Rogue 3 - Inquisitive.
STR 9 DEX 16 CON 12 INT 14 WIS 14 CHA 10; PB +2; Max HP 21; AC 15
Has trained as an investigator and remains suspicious of brokers.

Kel Brasswick
Human. Artificer 3 - Artillerist.
STR 10 DEX 12 CON 14 INT 16 WIS 10 CHA 13; PB +2; Max HP 24; AC 16
Has trained with Oren and tested his cannon and safety procedures.

Mera Flint
Mountain dwarf. Fighter 5 - Battle Master.
STR 18 DEX 12 CON 15 INT 10 WIS 13 CHA 10; PB +3; Max HP 44; AC 18
A Battle Master whose old arm injury aches in damp weather.

Rian Emberfell
Human. Warlock 3 - The Fiend.
STR 14 DEX 13 CON 14 INT 10 WIS 10 CHA 16; PB +2; Max HP 24; AC 12
Has learned to control his pact magic; his left hand remains impaired.

Nessa's Kind of Honest

Nessa hired us to carry lamp oil. That was the description on the contract. The wagons contained lamp oil, so it was not a lie in the narrow sense she preferred when negotiating with customs. Beneath the rear platform sat a family whose temple affiliation had become illegal after a council election. There were four people and a dog too old to understand that silence had acquired political value.

I found them because somebody had cut a breathing hole where a support bracket should have been. Nessa watched me examine it and said that if I intended to report the alteration, I should first decide whether I objected to the workmanship or the purpose. She was a halfling with grey beginning at her temples, a blue coat patched at both elbows, and the calm of someone who had already survived another person's certainty.

I asked why she had not told us. She said trustworthy people occasionally became less trustworthy when offered the opportunity to feel righteous. I said she could have let us choose. She nodded and amended the contract, adding the passengers, their risk, and a refusal clause. Then she asked us again.

We took the job. The family had a name, the Varrs, and the old dog was called Captain because he had never obeyed an order. Their eldest daughter held her brother's hand when we opened the panel. Their mother asked where they would go if the border refused them. Nessa showed her three alternatives and said none were easy. It was the first answer the woman appeared to believe.

Two nights later, before we set out, the Varrs' youngest child, Teren, refused to enter the compartment again after we opened it. He was five, thirsty, and past the point where explanation could reach him. His mother lifted him. He kicked the plank hard enough to hurt his heel, then screamed because the heel hurt. Nessa watched the guardhouse chimney while we tried to make our noble undertaking fit through a door not built for a frightened child.

Jarik offered a story. Teren wanted to go home. Kel offered to improve the ventilation. Teren wanted the dog. The dog, Captain, had crawled beneath a wagon and declined every political

development since supper. Mera lay flat on the ground and called him. He stared at her. She offered bread. He stared with greater concentration. Rian finally brought the child's blanket, and the old animal emerged to settle on it with a sigh suggesting we had all been unreasonably slow.

His mother sat down beside the wheel. She said the temple council had given them until dawn to sign a new declaration. Her husband wanted to sign. She had taken the children to Nessa before he could. He had followed, furious that she had decided for the family. Now they were hiding beneath lamp oil and still had not settled whether leaving was the right decision. I had been picturing refugees as people who agreed about the direction they needed to go. The adults in front of me were no more unanimous than we were.

Nessa asked whether they wanted to stop. The father looked at his wife for an answer, then away. He wanted to go back for a box containing his father's burial cloth. He knew we could not take the wagon into town. He wanted someone to say the loss was necessary so he could hate the decision without owning it. Nessa said she would not send anybody back through a checkpoint for the box. She could tell a contact where it was, with no promise of recovery. He swore at her. She waited until he was finished and asked whether he wanted the message sent.

I took Teren to fill the water skin. He asked whether the old house would know where they had gone. I nearly said houses did not know things. He was not asking about buildings. I told him we could write the name down so he would always know where it had been. He asked whether that made it safe to return. No, I said. He nodded with such weary acceptance that I wished he had shouted. We wrote the street name on a scrap he folded into his blanket.

We altered the compartment. Captain went in first, then Teren beside him. His sister kept the water skin. Their parents followed without speaking. It cost us nearly an hour and the quiet interval we had planned to use at the gate. A minor task, getting four willing passengers under a wagon, had become a negotiation involving grief, marriage, a lame dog, and six people offering too many solutions. Nessa amended our departure time. She did not ask whose fault the hour had been.

We crossed that night using an old freight culvert. My quiet spell helped, but the culvert's gate had been replaced and we had the wrong key. Jarik began proposing a story about a late

delivery. Nessa pointed at the guardhouse chimney and told him the night sergeant expected the regular oil delivery to arrive with tobacco for his pipe. We had none. His story would make us memorable and still leave the family inside a box.

She showed me how to open the gate. Patient pressure, careful listening, no heroic flourish. The tool slipped twice. On the third attempt the catch lifted. Later she taught me the signs smugglers used to mark a compromised shelter and the language hidden in the way traders complained about weather. I had spent years reading ground. She taught me how people edited a street while standing in it.

That season changed the way I moved. I learned to make use of a crowded doorway, to withdraw before an opponent could pin me, and to strike when somebody else's attention created an opening. If you are keeping count, this was where my ranger's path acquired its first rogue levels. Nessa called it finally noticing that straight lines were expensive.

Sera disliked her immediately. That was what she said. She also watched the woman's hands whenever a letter arrived, slept near the wagon wheel instead of the fire, and went silent when Nessa mentioned a shuttered house on the coast. I asked whether they had met. Sera said no. Nessa said she would remember. Both answers were true and still failed to describe what was happening.

One night Nessa told us about Tavin. He had been her partner in the work and in the portions of life that did not fit on a contract. They ran a shelter near the western customs road. One winter its escape path was sold to a collector. The guards entered through the only passage designed to get families out. Tavin had stayed to hold a door while others crossed the roof. The search found his coat in the drain and no body.

I thought of Rian at the tree and my mother at the drain, of how similar a description could become before the people inside it vanished into a pattern. Nessa was not telling a parable. She was telling us about a man who drank his tea with too much honey and used to misplace the left boot of every pair he owned. She missed an irritating person. That made the story harder to turn into something useful and easier to remember properly.

Sera left before the tea cooled. I followed her only far enough to find her beside the water trough with both hands pressed against the stone. She said she would speak when she could say something that was not another defense. I left her there. It was the first time I had seen her unable to arrange a sentence she trusted.

The following morning she taught me the shelter marks along the road. I kept asking what each sign meant. She kept asking who had left it. A closed shutter could indicate danger if the household usually opened it, illness if the family was sleeping, or simply rain. She would not let me turn her work into a dictionary. We visited a miller who showed us the difference between his family's drying cloths and the cloth used to warn travelers away. His wife changed the arrangement while we watched because a neighbor had begun copying it for decoration. Living knowledge became less reliable the moment I treated it as permanent.

Trouble at Supper

The tavern at Redbank served stew thick enough to stand a spoon in and watered the ale with what Jarik described as unnecessary ambition. We went in for supper, which became an incident because three off-duty mercenaries were bored and Rian's left hand glowed when the room grew hot. One called him a pet devil. Another asked whether Sera's mother had paid extra for the ears. Mera put down her spoon very carefully.

Jarik tried first. He congratulated the largest man on having so many opinions available without advance notice and offered to buy a round if they would exercise them at another table. The man laughed, then shoved the server when she passed between them. She fell against Rian, spilling broth over the hand he could not reliably unclench.

He cried out. Flame climbed his sleeve. The room saw fire before it saw pain, and half the people stood. A child near the hearth began screaming. Rian looked toward the door as if he expected to be dragged through it. I had never seen him so frightened of a room without a summoning circle in it.

Kel wrapped a damp cloth around the hand. I caught the mercenary's wrist before he could grab Rian. Mera stepped between them and asked him to sit down. He swung at her. She moved

just enough to let the fist pass and drove him into a chair with her shoulder. The chair broke. Jarik said he had not intended to purchase the furniture as part of the round.

The second man drew steel. I was too close to use the bow safely and struck with the grip instead, then slipped past him while he recovered. A quick retreat, a changed angle, the ordinary advantages I had spent a season practicing with Nessa. Sera caught his scabbard beneath a bench and made it difficult for him to turn. Nobody in the room witnessed a magnificent duel. They saw three people discover that bullying exhausted travelers had become a technical problem.

The server, whose name was Lenna, stopped us before we put anyone through a wall. "The watch collects from this place," she said. "If you destroy the room and leave, I'm here when they come back."

Mera loosened her grip. I lowered the bow. Jarik turned to the remaining customers and asked who had seen the men draw first. His voice carried the measured cadence Mistress Vale had beaten into him with exhausting repetition. He did not force an answer into anybody's head. He made it possible to answer without feeling alone.

Four people spoke. Then seven. The innkeeper, finding the room suddenly full of witnesses, told the mercenaries to leave and charged the broken chair to their employer. Mera helped Lenna collect the bowls. Rian sat with his hand under water and apologized until Lenna told him she had not fallen because he existed.

Outside, Mera shook so hard she could not thread the strap on her armor. I offered to help. She told me no, then handed me the strap. We stood behind the kitchen where nobody could applaud or ask questions.

"There was a man once," she said, "who sat down when I told him. I hit him anyway."

I kept my hands on the buckle. She told the rest without looking at me. A collector had come for her father's debt. He had threatened Bren, pressed a knife against the boy's shoulder, then lost it when Mera knocked him down. He surrendered. She believed he would return with others. She struck him with an iron weight until he did not move.

Her father confessed to the killing. He said a grown man would receive a sentence a daughter might not survive. She let him do it. The family told the neighbors he had gone away for work,

and Mera built the rest of her life around protecting a brother who eventually died while she was standing thirty yards away.

"I wasn't defending Bren at the end," she said. "He was behind me. I was angry, and I wanted the fear to stop belonging to us. I can't make the part after he dropped the knife become something else."

I had no reasonable absolution available. I told her I was glad she had stopped in the tavern. She said that did not release her father. I said we should find out where he was. She stared at me for so long I worried I had offered the wrong thing. Then she nodded once, fiercely, as if agreeing to hope had offended her.

At Redbank we spent the next morning repairing what the tavern fight had cost people besides us. The server's wrist had swollen overnight. She could carry a tray but could not turn a stiff tap. The innkeeper offered to move her to unpaid kitchen work while she recovered. Jarik stared at him, then offered to turn the tap himself. The man said customers expected professional service. Jarik said several influential people had praised his ability to pour wine, and even this beer could not be as difficult as they had been.

He worked the entire lunch service. He was magnificent for twelve minutes and exhausted by the end of the hour. A man complained about the foam. Another changed his order after the mug was filled. A woman snapped her fingers at him without looking up. He still managed to flirt with three people and receive two small coins, but by midafternoon the performance had fallen away and he was simply doing the work. The server took the coins. He did not suggest splitting them.

Mera went to the yard to find the mercenaries' captain. I insisted on accompanying her. She asked whether that was support or surveillance. I said I was not certain. She stopped walking. We had come too far to leave that answer beneath a joke. I told her I wanted to be there if somebody attacked her and was frightened of what she might do if nobody did. She looked down at her hands. Then she said she wanted the first thing and understood the second, but did not want me deciding when her anger had become dangerous by looking at her face.

We agreed she would ask before entering the captain's room, and I would wait outside unless called or unless a fight began. It was a small agreement that cost both of us pride. The captain listened, paid the chair charge, and refused to discipline the men without a formal complaint. Mera had Lenna's statement and the names of four witnesses. He called that an unnecessary escalation. She said he could forward the complaint or explain to his employer why she had done it herself. She came out shaking but smiling. No one had to applaud her for leaving a room without breaking it.

That evening she asked Sera to locate her father's sentence. It was the first time she had told the secret while asking for practical help rather than waiting to be judged. Sera wanted his full name and the dates. Mera supplied them, slowly. There was a marriage name in the record he had stopped using when they came down from the mountains. I had known her for years and never heard it. She said names could become another kind of door a family kept shut.

Rian remained at the inn through all of this. The flare had left him unable to tolerate a sleeve against his wrist. Nessa asked whether he wanted company. He said yes, then apologized for saying yes so quickly. She sat beside the window and polished her boots. They did not talk about power. She told him Captain had stolen half a sausage before the Varrs left for the next station, and Rian laughed. Later he said it was the first time in days somebody had spoken to him without checking whether he was a danger or a patient. I had done both and called the attention care.

What the Marsh Keeps

We entered the Swallow with a convoy carrying winter grain, twelve travelers, and a hired company whose captain considered advance preparation an insult to her professional confidence. Her name was Captain Voss. She had earned her rank in a border war, carried scars I had no right to dismiss, and knew less about marsh ground than the children selling reeds beside the ferry.

One child told us the marker poles had moved. Voss said children moved things. The boy said the red twine on his father's eel stakes was now tied to the caravan markers. His father never

put those stakes where a loaded wagon could stand. I asked him to show me from the bank. He pointed to three patches of water whose surface had gone perfectly still.

Kel measured the depth with a weighted line. It descended farther than the chart allowed. Sera found fresh tool marks where a pole had been replanted. Mera watched the reed birds gather on the opposite bank and said something large had cleared the near side. Rian heard the ferry keeper humming a protection hymn with a different last verse, one about leaving payment at the third post. Jarik bought the keeper supper and learned that people who paid were guided around the deep channels. People who did not were told the chart was accurate.

We had enough information to delay. The grain would miss a winter allotment if we did. Voss said she would take her company across whether we followed or not. Hessa, older now and less willing to let a contract become a funeral, told the drivers to unhook the teams while we made a new plan. Voss called it cowardice. Bruni said the oxen were grateful for the distinction.

The grain merchant attempted to move his own wagon. Nobody saw him take the reins until the first wheel entered the false lane. The mud opened beneath it. Something struck from below with enough force to fold the axle, and the rear platform threw two laborers into the water.

The thing rising behind them wore reeds, old rope, and fragments of harness across a back broad as a roof. Its mouth opened sideways. I remember the broken sound the merchant made when he realized the danger had not been an argument designed to inconvenience him. Voss ran forward to pull a laborer out and sank to one knee before Mera caught her belt.

I placed arrows where the ground held. Kel fired a pulse across the water to turn the creature's attention without collapsing the shelf beneath the survivors. Rian's blast struck its flank and went wrong, flaring back up his arm. He kept his feet but lost the next cast. Jarik shouted the safe sequence I called while adding a rhythm people could follow through panic. Sera climbed the tilted wagon and cut the straps holding the grain.

Half the load slid into the channel. The lighter wagon rose enough for the second laborer to crawl clear of it. The creature turned toward the falling sacks. We used that moment to pull everyone onto higher ground. I struck once more, missed, and had to move before its jaw closed

where I had been standing. The retreat was ugly. My boot stayed in the mud. I went on without it.

We got eleven travelers and both laborers out. The merchant's driver, who had gone in after his employer without waiting for us, did not surface. Hessa wrote his name before discussing the cargo. Voss helped carry the injured. She did not apologize until we had found a dry place for them, and when she did, she spoke to the boy whose warning she had ignored.

The grain loss meant two settlements would receive less than promised. We could not label it an uncomplicated rescue and move on. Jarik organized purchases along the next three roads. Mera and Voss carried sacks. Kel repaired the wagon under Bruni's supervision, carefully and without performing bravery for anyone. We reached the settlements late with enough food to meet the minimum allotment and no profit left in the contract.

The ferry keeper's toll arrangement became a separate investigation. Sera found that the keeper had been paying a gang to keep his own family off its victim list. He had still directed other families into danger. We gave the record to a local magistrate who invited the affected households to testify. The keeper's daughter brought us reeds to bind our new marker poles. I thanked her. Her father being guilty did not make her kindness evidence of anything but itself.

After that crossing I began teaching scouts to move when an enemy finished closing, to read the whole ground rather than the direction they wanted to travel. Nessa called my new habits those of a scout, not merely a man with a bow. Another rogue's discipline joined the ranger's work. I accepted the description and bought boots with stronger laces.

The boy from the ferry helped us set the new marsh markers. His name was Dimi. He insisted on the red twine because his father would recognize it from a distance. Sera wanted a different color so nobody confused our route with the gang's. They argued for several minutes before the ferry keeper's daughter, Ves, suggested using two loops instead of one. Neither had asked her. Both looked at the spare twine in her hands, then apologized with different degrees of grace.

We could not leave the new route open at all hours. The ground held at low water and changed after rain. I made a board with the conditions. Dimi read it, frowned, and asked how

somebody arriving in darkness would know when the last rain had fallen upstream. I had not solved that. Kel proposed a level marker near the first pole. Ves said it would be pulled out because the keeper's creditors still used the ferry. We put the level mark on the stone bridge abutment instead, too large to remove without leaving damage. It took us half a day to finish a warning that could be read by somebody who was not already standing beside us.

Voss worked without her uniform coat. At first I thought she was disguising her position. Later she said the coat caught on the reeds. She had written to the dead driver's family herself. When I offered to add my account, she said yes and asked me not to spare her. I wrote what I had observed, including her going into the water to pull out a laborer. She objected to that sentence. It felt like praise she had not earned. I left it because guilt did not entitle her to alter the account any more than pride did.

The grain settlements received us separately. At the first, the council thanked us for preserving the minimum allotment. At the second, a mother asked why the sacks contained less flour than the notice had promised. Jarik began with the attack. She interrupted to ask whether her children could eat the attack. He stopped. The explanation mattered to the accounts and not to the empty shelf in her room. We carried her sacks inside, learned how many people shared them, and found that the minimum had been calculated for a household that no longer existed. Her sister's children had moved in during the winter.

Ress's way of counting came back to Jarik. He asked the settlement to check the actual mouths behind each entitlement. The reeve said the lists were certified. Sera asked certified when. By evening we had found four houses carrying more people than the ledger admitted. We also found a man collecting for a brother who had moved away. He claimed he intended to send the flour onward. His brother sent no request and nobody at the station could confirm the arrangement. We suspended that allocation pending a visit rather than deciding his expression proved him a thief.

The corrected distribution was still short. There was no second hidden reserve, no corrupt official with enough food to complete the chapter pleasingly. Families agreed to pool one evening's meal each week for the households with the least. Several refused. Their own stores

were low, and calling them selfish would not fill anything. Rian gave his travel allowance. Mera asked how he intended to eat. He looked at the pot in front of him and said he had already begun. She made him keep enough for the road. He hated her for a minute and thanked her the next morning.

The dead driver's name was Harl. His daughter wrote to ask whether he had been frightened. Hessa received the letter and handed it to me because I had been closest. I had seen him climb down toward the wagon and heard him shout once before the water took him. I could not tell whether the shout had been fear, warning, or effort. I wrote that he had gone to help his employer and that we had tried to reach him. I did not invent his final thoughts to make the letter kinder. His daughter replied months later with thanks for telling her what we actually knew. I kept that letter longer than some of the medals.

A week before Sera spoke to Nessa, a traveler arrived at the station with the wrong half of a shelter token. The piece was copper, cut through a stamped mill wheel. Our local partners used the other half, and the mismatch could mean an outdated arrangement or a compromised route. Nessa asked the woman to wait in the public yard while we checked. She had a feverish boy with her. Rian wanted them brought inside immediately. Nessa said the front room was available, the refugee rooms were not. He heard a door being closed to a sick child and went rigid.

The woman said she had bought the token. Its seller promised passage north. Sera asked the seller's name. The woman shook her head and looked at the open gate. There were reasons not to trust us, none improved by six people standing over her. We stepped back. The station keeper brought water. Kel checked whether the boy could swallow before talking about the fever. Nobody made the token's truth a condition of lowering the child's temperature. The station could protect access and provide care at the same time; our argument had initially concealed the obvious arrangement.

Her name was Mara. Her boy was Ed. Their household had left the coast after a landlord sold the building with them still paying rent for it. A man at the cart station offered a cheaper route to relatives in the north. He had a map and several tokens. She had paid half, then escaped when

another traveler heard guards approaching the lodging house. Two women remained inside. One had given Ed a blanket. Mara wanted us to know that before she asked us to go back.

Nessa spread the map. Three lines were genuine, one was obsolete, and one ended at a quarry storehouse that had been used for holding laborers. It could be a trap designed to send us there. The women might already have been moved. We could not bring all six of us while leaving the station unprotected, and sending an unknown runner could warn the people holding them. Rian said we were discussing uncertainty while the women waited. Sera told him uncertainty did not become smaller because he resented it. He pushed away from the table hard enough to spill his cup.

Jarik went after him. I heard their voices outside, low at first, then rising. Rian said he knew what was about to happen: we would make a careful plan and arrive late enough to explain the loss. Jarik said if he wanted to be heard he could stop describing everybody else's caution as indifference. Both came back angry. They were still willing to work. That distinction saved us an hour we could have spent demanding better feelings before making a decision.

Nessa kept Mera and Kel at the station with the other workers. Jarik went to the lodging house openly to ask about hiring rooms for performers. He could observe the yard without offering a rescue party as an introduction. Sera and I watched the quarry road. Rian came with us under an agreement that any use of his fire waited until we knew where the women were. He said he understood. Sera asked him to repeat the limit. He did, furious at being asked like an apprentice. She said she would accept the same rule if he needed to hear hers.

We found the women in a cart shed, not the storehouse. Their hands were free. One was packing bowls while a guard waited at the door. The arrangement looked voluntary until the other woman tried to step into the yard and the guard pressed a blade beneath her chin. Rian moved beside me. I caught his sleeve. He did not throw me off, which felt like a large achievement under the circumstances. Sera counted the doors. There were two, and the rear one had been barred from the outside.

We could open the back without a fight if we could draw the guard beyond the front threshold. Jarik arrived with the lodging keeper and a complaint about fleas. It was not the signal

we had arranged. His actual signal came in the verse he sang while apologizing for having brought a musical profession into a respectable yard. The phrase meant the lodging keeper was involved. I nearly missed it because I was irritated by the performance. Sera heard, repeated it quietly, and shifted her position.

The keeper brought a second guard. Our opening had become worse. The women saw us through a split in the planks and made a decision of their own. The woman with the bowls dropped them. The guard turned toward the noise. The other struck him with the bucket hanging beside the door. We pulled the rear bar free as she ran. Her companion caught her sleeve and dragged her back long enough to take the blanket roll. Ed's borrowed blanket was in it. I have never forgotten how an object can look absurdly unimportant from outside the life attached to it.

The second guard drew on Jarik. Rian hit the man's sword hand with eldritch force, away from the shed. The blade flew under a wagon. Jarik fell backward into a trough and continued shouting long enough to make it sound intentional. Sera put the keeper against the wall and took the keys. I held the quarry road while the women ran to our cover. A crossbow fired from the upper window, and its bolt buried in the wheel beside my knee. There had been a third guard we had not seen.

I could not reach him without stepping into his second shot. Rian could. The blast would strike a room whose far wall we had not inspected, and someone might be inside it. He looked at the window, then at me, and waited. The pause was long enough for Sera to throw a shutter closed from below with a hooked pole. The guard's next bolt shattered it. We used the interval to retreat. Nobody received a splendid kill. We left with the women, a prisoner, and one musician who smelled of old horse water.

At the station the women embraced Ed before Mara could explain the blanket. Rian stood back. He had obeyed the limit and still looked miserable. Jarik wrung out his coat beside him and said he would prefer the next rescue to offer a cleaner trough. Rian laughed, then apologized for what he had said about arriving too late. Jarik accepted it without pretending they had solved the argument permanently. Sera checked the keeper's keys and found a small metal tag bearing the broker's cipher. She held it between two fingers for a long time. When she finally asked Nessa to

sit with us, we all understood that she had stopped preparing to speak and reached the moment itself.

The Stories We Tell Differently

Sera told Nessa at the next safehouse. She asked all of us to stay. Nessa agreed without sitting down. The room had one shutter open to the yard and another closed against rain. I remember this because Sera kept looking at the open one, and I could see exactly how easy it would have been for her to leave.

Her mother had been arrested for copying witness testimony that contradicted a city notice. A broker offered to release her if Sera supplied a route used by unregistered travelers. He said it was a customs inquiry. She knew that was not all. She did not know who would be in the house when the guard arrived, and she had avoided asking because not knowing made the bargain easier to survive.

Nessa asked which route. Sera drew it from memory. The woman stared at the pencil line until I could hear the rain through the shutter. Then she said Tavin had changed the roof ladder the week before. Sera could not have known that. It was the detail that had let some of the refugees escape.

"How old?" Nessa asked. Sera told her. "Old enough to know somebody would pay. Not old enough to understand the whole bill. Both can be true. I want you to understand that I'm not confusing them."

Jarik started to speak. Nessa raised a hand without looking at him. She asked where the broker was now. Sera said she did not know, but she knew his cipher and the shape of the payments. She had been looking for him since the night of the ritual, when Maelis's guard mentioned her mother's release.

Nessa said Sera could remain until morning. After that she did not want her near the refugee rooms. It was not permanent exile and it was not reconciliation. It was a boundary set by someone who had not agreed to have her grief become the occasion for another person's relief.

I walked outside with Sera. She said I had been very quiet. I said nothing I could add would change what she had done. She said she had not asked me to improve it. Then she asked whether there was something I had not told the group. I looked at the wet yard and said yes.

She waited. I said I was not ready. Her expression changed, and I deserved the change. "Neither was I," she said. "I just ran out of people I was willing to let keep paying for it."

That night I took the old census from the lining of my coat. I had moved it through three coats by then, a ridiculous amount of care for a document I claimed to want forgotten. I spread it beside Kael's copied diagram and could see the common notation immediately. The truth had not become smaller through travel. I folded both sheets and decided where to begin.

Nessa did not speak to Sera the morning after the confession. She gave me the station assignments and told me Sera could copy route reports on the porch. Refugee names remained inside. I began to suggest that Sera already knew most of the names. Nessa looked at me. The boundary was about her choice of access, not my estimate of what information had already escaped. I stopped trying to improve it.

Sera sat on the porch in her purple jacket with the sleeves rolled up. Jarik brought breakfast and remained standing with it because he could not decide whether sitting would seem disloyal to Nessa. Sera told him to sit before the eggs acquired citizenship. He sat. They ate in silence until he said he had forged the voucher names. She said she knew some of them. He told her the rest. When he finished, she asked whether he wanted his own account added to the inquiry copies. He nodded. Neither forgave the other. Neither had been asked to.

Nessa took me to the old safehouse three days later. The building had become a grain store. A child sat on the step trying to mend a hoop, and a merchant complained that people kept coming to ask about blood that had been scrubbed away years earlier. Nessa paid the child to show us the back passage, with his mother's permission. The boy knew which boards were loose. He knew nothing about Tavin. The house had continued being a house after the worst day in somebody else's life.

She stopped beneath the roof opening. He had held the door there, she said. The drain where his coat was found lay farther down than the first reports indicated. A broker had told her the

body must have washed into the river. Another witness had later claimed there was a second cart leaving the yard. Both accounts had passed through people paid for useful information. She had never found enough to close either possibility. Hope had become work without an agreed ending.

I asked whether she wanted Sera to investigate the second cart. She said she wanted that information and did not yet want Sera in the room when it arrived. I could understand one thing without requiring it to solve the other. We wrote the questions together. On our return I gave Sera the copy Nessa had approved, without the new safehouse contacts. She checked the missing spaces and accepted them. Watching her do so hurt more than watching somebody shout.

At supper Kel asked whether a repaired instrument could ever be trusted without supervision. We all knew he was asking a different question. Mera said instruments did not get offended by inspection. Sera said people did, and it did not necessarily make the inspection unfair. Rian stared at his good hand. I wanted to leave. Instead I told them I had something to say and then failed to begin. Nessa stood, took her bowl, and said nobody was required to watch me rehearse. They could remain if they chose. Three stayed. Two went outside. I had to decide whether to speak without the comfort of a complete audience.

I said I had supplied household information to a clerk when my father was detained. The room went still. I told them enough to name the act, not enough to show its use. Then I reached for the document and found I could not unfold it. Jarik asked whether Kael's plan had used it. I said yes. Kel pushed his chair away from the table so abruptly that the legs scraped. He had confessed to me while I carried the matching record in my coat. He left without his bowl.

The full account would wait until I could stop shaping it around what I hoped they would think of me. That night at least the fact was no longer mine alone. It did not feel like release. It felt like hearing somebody test the door after I had spent years insisting there was no room behind it.

A School Nobody Founded

While we were still working through what I had admitted, a boy arrived at the waystation carrying a bow without a string. He asked whether I was the ghost who knew the roads. I said I

had been called worse and asked what he needed. He wanted work. He said he could see in the dark and did not frighten easily. His pack held two knives, a blanket, and no water skin.

I asked who had trained him. He said he watched people. I asked whether he had watched them fill their water skins. Jarik, behind me, made a noise into his cup. The boy's face closed. I recognized the moment when instruction was becoming humiliation and apologized before he could leave.

We found a water skin. Then I took him along the station fence and asked what he saw. He named two places an enemy could hide. Mera asked where a frightened child would run. Kel asked where the lamp wire had been repaired. Rian asked why the woman at the gate had refused to enter. Sera, from the bench Nessa had allowed her to use outside the refugee rooms, asked which of those answers he had actually observed and which he had assumed.

By evening six young travelers were listening. By the next week somebody had painted ROAD SCHOOL on a board, and Jarik was trying to charge the board an enrollment fee. We did not found an institution. We kept finding people who needed what we knew, and once they had learned it, they began teaching things we did not.

A trapper showed us how to distinguish a true trail marker from one cut recently to imitate age. Iven arrived with her children and taught the students how long it took to move a household when somebody could not walk. Pell, now old enough to make her mother's careful expression in miniature, said evacuation plans written by people without children were mostly fantasies about obedient luggage. We revised the plans.

Rian taught people how to ask what a promise required in return. The first time he did it, his voice failed on the word consent. He looked at me across the yard. I realized he had something waiting too, and that I had treated his silence as a special case because I feared what it would do to us if I stopped.

When the season ended, the students left with routes, contact names, and small records of what they had learned. One asked whether they should put my name on the heading. I said they should put the next correction's date where it could be found. I believed this as advice. I still had trouble applying it to the oldest mistake I carried.

Chapter 6
The Weight of Every Path

Character records at chapter entry

After the marsh and first road-school season.

Ekrius Ashborne
Tiefling. Ranger 7 / Rogue 3 - Gloom Stalker / Scout.
STR 12 DEX 17 CON 13 INT 9 WIS 14 CHA 12; PB +4; Max HP 71; AC 15
Has trained with Nessa and helps organize the road school.

Jarik Fairwind
Human. Bard 6 - Eloquence.
STR 10 DEX 14 CON 12 INT 11 WIS 13 CHA 18; PB +3; Max HP 39; AC 14
An experienced negotiator still learning when to listen.

Sera Veythorn
Half-elf. Rogue 7 - Inquisitive.
STR 9 DEX 18 CON 12 INT 14 WIS 14 CHA 10; PB +3; Max HP 45; AC 16
An Inquisitive investigator working within Nessa's limits on access.

Kel Brasswick
Human. Artificer 5 - Artillerist.
STR 10 DEX 12 CON 14 INT 18 WIS 10 CHA 13; PB +3; Max HP 38; AC 17
Artillerist and workshop practitioner.

Mera Flint
Mountain dwarf. Fighter 7 - Battle Master.
STR 18 DEX 12 CON 16 INT 10 WIS 14 CHA 10; PB +3; Max HP 67; AC 18
Seeks her father's prison record while continuing her martial training.

Rian Emberfell
Human. Warlock 5 - The Fiend.
STR 14 DEX 13 CON 14 INT 10 WIS 10 CHA 18; PB +3; Max HP 38; AC 12
His pact burden grows between journeys.

One Arrow Short

Years made the work familiar without making it safe. We gained routes, lost contracts, learned names, and occasionally spent a winter in the same place long enough to discover whose snoring constituted a municipal concern. Jarik claimed he did not snore. Mera once recorded him with one of Kel's devices and played it outside his door at dawn. He described this as an attack on the arts.

I became more accurate with the bow, stronger through the back, less willing to mistake exhaustion for a badge. The changes were not equally successful. My aim improved before my judgment about rest. I could keep a group concealed through terrain that would once have defeated me and still say yes to an assignment I had no business taking because somebody sounded disappointed.

The ambush outside Dustmarket caught two caravans traveling together. I had approved the formation. The road was broad enough, our scouts had checked the ridge, and the merchant organizing the run promised the second team would follow instructions. He had not mentioned that he intended to send the grain wagons ahead to recover a day's lost trade.

The first crossbow bolt struck the lead ox. The animal stumbled, pulling the wagon across the road. A second bolt hit the guard behind it. I marked the ridge captain, shot the signaler, and turned on the man beside a stacked pile of timber. My arrow missed by less than the width of his hand. He cut the retaining rope.

Logs came down across the road. One struck the tilted wagon and trapped a child beneath its rear frame. Mera ran toward the screaming. Sera climbed the low wall to reach the crossbowmen. Jarik steadied the people beginning to run downhill into the second firing position. Kel put his little cannon behind a wheel and used its force to keep the attackers' heads down. Rian burned through the rope holding a team that would otherwise have dragged its driver beneath the wreckage.

We won the fight. The timber captain escaped. One driver died before I reached him, and the injured child lost a foot after two days of fever. Her name was Esmi. Her mother thanked Mera,

then asked whether the road ahead had stairs. That question stayed with me longer than the missed shot.

For a week I practiced until the fingers of my drawing hand split. Sera watched from a doorway on the third evening, then walked down to move my target. I told her I needed the distance to stay fixed. She said I was trying to make one arrow undo a death so I could forgive myself. I asked her to leave. She did, and did not make it sound like agreeing.

Mera came later carrying Esmi's crutch, which needed a lower grip fitted before the girl could use it. She set it on my practice bench. "You can spend tonight correcting the arrow," she said, "or you can help me correct something she's going to live with."

I helped. We argued about the handle angle, then asked Esmi what she needed. Her answer differed from both our assumptions. When the grip was fitted, she used it to knock Jarik's ankle because he kept telling her how brave she was. He apologized. She said she preferred funny. He considered that an excellent arrangement and began with the magistrate song, editing two verses because her mother was listening.

The work sharpened me. It also made me quieter in ways that were not always useful. I learned to disappear from a camp so completely that people assumed I had gone scouting. Sometimes I was ten feet away beneath a dust-colored cloak, hiding from another request. The skill had tactical value. My friends eventually recognized when I was using it to avoid being a friend.

Esmi did not want to leave the wagon when we reached the next town. People kept stopping to look at her. They leaned in with soft voices, addressed her mother, and discussed what the child would be able to do while she sat within reach of every word. Mera asked the first woman to move. By the fourth she was standing in front of the wagon with her shoulders arranged like a closed gate. Esmi said she could not see the street through her. Mera stepped aside at once, embarrassed by the speed with which protection had become another obstruction.

The prosthetist in the town wanted three visits after the wound finished healing. Esmi's mother, Dane, needed work now. The caravan could carry them farther but not remain for a course of fittings. Jarik found a room above a cooper's shop. Sera checked the terms and found a

clause requiring Dane to sweep the yard before dawn. Dane said she was able to sweep a yard. Sera asked whether she understood the unpaid hours. Dane asked whether Sera understood the alternative. It was not a dishonest contract. It was a costly choice among worse ones.

We paid the first month. We could not promise the second. Dane made us say so in front of her, rather than leaving encouragement in the place where rent would be due. She had worked in a dye house and could identify spoiled mordant by smell. Kel knew a workshop that used the same chemicals for finishing small parts. It was not the work she had expected. She took it after asking about the stairs. This time the question was about herself as well as her daughter. Carrying Esmi had strained her back.

I visited with a small carved horse. Esmi looked at it and asked why everyone thought she needed toys now. I said children generally did. She asked whether I had brought one before the injury. No. She put it beside her pillow anyway, then told me the grip on the crutch still hurt after she used it for a long time. We changed the padding. She decided the horse could supervise. It was a better job than the one I had silently assigned it, which was making me feel as if I had brought something adequate.

On our last day she wanted to cross the yard without help. Her mother said no. Mera said the stones were uneven. I had already started examining a safer line when Esmi struck the gate with the crutch. She knew it was uneven. That was why she needed to practice while somebody was there if she fell. The three of us looked at one another. Dane took a long breath, moved a bucket out of the way, and asked her to begin at the wall. Esmi made half the crossing, sat down furious, rested, and finished. No magic passed through the courtyard. It still felt like witnessing a power we had been too busy to recognize.

The new archer who joined our next convoy knew my Dustmarket report. He wanted to know how I had missed a stationary target. I nearly told him to try making the shot while children screamed. Instead I showed him where the timber captain stood, what I had already fired at, and how the ox had moved the wagon into my line. Then I made him show me where a second scout could have seen the retaining rope before the ambush. We changed the formation. I was still ashamed of the miss. The shame had finally stopped being the only thing I could do with it.

The Hill of Three Roads

The Hill of Three Roads sat above a cluster of farms whose official records called it a commercial junction. The people living there called it the place the children waited for the bread cart. Both descriptions were accurate. Only one explained why the missing travelers mattered immediately.

A guide had been sending merchants down the smoothest road. They vanished beyond an abandoned orchard. The local warden blamed ordinary bandits and asked us to escort one convoy through. That would protect a shipment and leave the pattern intact. Sera asked who had reported the disappearances. The warden produced three statements in the same handwriting, although the witnesses lived two days apart.

Jarik spoke to the bread-cart children. They said the guide returned clean even when the lower road flooded. Mera found that his boots were worn on the inner edge, like the laborers who hauled stone beside the orchard wall. Kel examined a marker and found it had been treated to shed mud. Rian heard a phrase the guide used when offering safety, the same phrase Maelis had used under the tree. None of these observations alone settled the case. Together they gave us a place and time to look.

We went with the next convoy. The guide smiled when he saw me, and I wondered how much of my reputation had become an obstacle to doing quiet work. Jarik solved that by loudly arguing with me about directions until the man decided we were too foolish to threaten his plan. It was not a difficult performance. We had practiced for years.

Inside the orchard we found a holding yard. No rift, no splendid horror. There were ropes, locked sheds, and a ledger assigning frightened travelers values according to what their families might pay. The guide worked for a syndicate that sold the unclaimed to the Circle. It was the kind of arrangement a city could condemn passionately while continuing to buy services from everyone involved.

We could burn the sheds open, but one was stacked with oil and two held people unable to run. We could wait for the guide's superior, but every hour gave the guards time to move

prisoners. Mera examined the far wall and asked Kel whether he could break its old retaining pins without shaking the building beside it. He said yes, if they gave him time and kept anybody from shouting his name while he counted.

I used the growth spell I had learned from a hill farmer whose orchards we had helped defend the previous spring. It thickened existing roots across the guards' access lane, buying time through terrain rather than transforming a ward by miracle. I left narrow channels where our people needed to move. The guide ran toward the wrong one. Sera caught him against the wall and took the keys.

When the pins failed, the far section fell outward. Mera and Rian carried the first prisoners through. Kel's cannon guarded the opening. Jarik stayed inside long enough to talk a terrified man away from the oil he intended to light. I held the front lane until the last litter passed, then called the creatures I had learned to summon from the wild to occupy the guards while we withdrew. I could not keep two demanding spells in my mind at once, so the concealment that had brought us in ended when I called that help. Sera knew the change and sent the group along solid cover instead of relying on magic I was no longer maintaining.

We freed nineteen people. One guard surrendered, and Mera bound him without touching him more than necessary. I saw the effort it cost her. The prisoner said he had only been employed to keep doors shut. She told him he could explain what he thought doors were for at the hearing.

The local warden held the evidence instead of returning it to the nearest Circle office. That was a victory too. He had initially wanted an escort and ended up protecting testimony. We left him names, copies, and enough support from neighboring villages that losing the documents would have become more difficult than keeping them.

The nineteen people from the orchard did not make one grateful procession. Two tried to return to the sheds because their relatives had been moved earlier and they believed the guards would trade information for surrender. A man called Oset wanted to kill the guide. Another wanted the guard who had brought water kept separate from the rest because he had not hit

anyone. The guard said this proved he had helped. A woman with rope burns around her wrists asked why he had not opened the door.

Mera took the guard's weapon and placed him where two people could watch him. She did not let Oset near him. Oset called her a protector of kidnappers. Her jaw moved once. She said the guard would answer questions alive. Later she told me that she had wanted to put him on the ground simply to stop hearing the word only. Only a guard. Only a locked door. Only doing what someone else had ordered. She held her hands out between us, steady, and said wanting had become something she could notice before it became her arm moving.

Sera found the guide's payment list while Kel examined the shed locks. Several local names appeared. We could not tell who had knowingly purchased captives, who had paid ransom, and who had supplied food. The warden wanted to arrest them all before anybody fled. Sera insisted on copying the entries first and separating what each payment claimed to purchase. He said that would give criminals time. She said an accusation could destroy a family before we learned they had bought back their child. He did not like it. He gave her until morning and posted guards at the roads.

A young woman among the freed people recognized a name. It belonged to her uncle. He had paid twice and been told she was moved elsewhere. She had heard him outside the shed once. She began crying while insisting he was not involved. Sera took her statement without making her finish in front of everybody. Jarik brought the uncle when the warden allowed it. He and his niece held each other so tightly that he could not answer any questions for several minutes. Waiting cost us time and probably the chance to surprise one suspect. It also prevented an innocent man being dragged from his home as a buyer of the person he had been trying to save.

Kel opened the lock housings. They had been built in a workshop using Oren's published plans for weatherproof storage. Somebody had reversed the emergency release. Kel became very still. He wanted the identifying marks removed before we passed the locks to the inquiry, afraid the name would damage the workshop. Sera said no. I stood beside him while he wrote how a useful design had been changed. He included the workshop mark. That evening he sent Oren a

copy himself. It was the first time I saw him choose an accurate record before somebody else forced his hand.

The freed families stayed in the station for eleven nights. People argued about blankets, food, sleeping near strangers, and whose turn it was to use the washroom. One accused us of keeping them confined because we advised waiting for safe escort. Nessa gave her the road map, explained the current danger, and made clear she could leave. She left the following morning with two others, reached the next village, and sent back news that the northern path was open. We had been wrong to advise against it for another day. Nessa updated the board. She did not disguise the correction as part of the original plan.

I helped scrub the sleeping room after the last family departed. There were crumbs beneath a bench, a child's sock in a corner, a strip of cloth somebody had tied around a nail to keep it from catching sleeves. I kept noticing signs of people who had become more than the nineteen in our report. The station had been inconvenient while they lived in it. It was too quiet when they left. That was the evening I finally asked the others to sit with the complete census. There was no remaining version of useful work that would make the old paper disappear.

The Things We Didn't Say

The ledger from the orchard contained my census notation. The marks had traveled farther than Kael's temple plan. I had named my act to the others; I had still withheld the document and the full extent of what I knew. I asked the others to meet in the station kitchen after the students had gone to bed. I put my old drawing on the table before I could find a respectable reason to postpone.

I told them about my father's detention, the clerk, and the questions about where families slept. I told them I had recognized my own marks on Kael's map before the ritual and had still not spoken. Sera did not look surprised. Mera looked at the symbol I had used for families with nowhere else to go, then turned the sheet around to read my handwriting properly.

"Bren's house," she said. I told her yes. "Our cellar too?" Yes. She pushed her chair back. I did not ask her to sit. She stood at the sink with her good hand against the edge and said she needed the facts without an explanation of how frightened I had been.

I gave them. I did not know whether the Circle would have obtained the information elsewhere. I knew what I had supplied, why, and when I understood its later use. I had traded information for my father's freedom, then concealed the cost long after I was old enough to recognize it. I could not claim the clerk's deception as an answer to the years afterward.

Jarik laughed once. It was not a happy sound. He pulled the copied volunteer list from his coat and set it beside mine. The missing names had fed nine families. He had added living people too, making the labor roster large enough to qualify for extra allotments. The Circle reused those signatures as consent for the working. He had seen the list on Kael's table and gone silent because he thought exposure would make every hungry family a fraud in the city's records.

Rian sat with both hands flat on the table, one open and one almost closed. "He didn't need everybody's signature," he said. "He needed a representative. I signed that part."

The room changed. Jarik's paper had been a lie about participation. Rian's contract had turned that lie into a binding claim. He had known Kael intended to substitute younger children if the six of us refused. He had agreed to represent the group and told himself he could bear the cost alone. He had said he signed for himself because he meant to be the person who suffered. The contract had not shared his interpretation.

"You spent our consent," Sera said. She spoke so softly that I had to lean forward. "You don't get to call it yours because you hated the alternative."

Rian nodded. He did not argue. He showed us the second line that had appeared at his wrist after we broke the circle. He had accepted an additional personal burden to delay collection against the surviving anchors. That was why his magic hurt more some months than others. He had been paying for time without telling us whose clock it was.

Mera walked out. Kel went after her, then came back because she told him she wanted the yard empty. We heard a stool fall outside, followed by silence. Jarik offered to put a hand on Rian's shoulder and stopped when Rian shook his head.

We did not resolve the evening through an inspiring declaration that we remained a family. We had said family often enough to use it as an exemption from asking permission. Sera proposed written rules. No person could bind another to a bargain. No route closed on one person's conclusion if a second inspection was possible. No evidence passed to an authority without keeping a copy. No one had to forgive on a schedule chosen by the person confessing.

Mera returned while we were arguing over exceptions. She took the pencil and added one: we would not abandon a person in immediate danger to make a point about a different wrong. Then she told me I would not be making route decisions alone for a while. I agreed. She said agreeing was the cheap part.

I slept in the storehouse that night because I could not bear the kitchen and had not been asked to leave the station. In the morning there was tea outside the door. No note. It did not mean forgiveness. It meant somebody had decided I should drink while we worked out what came next.

In the days after the kitchen meeting, our new rules made us awkward. Jarik asked whether he could tell a visiting merchant that we would be available for an escort. Sera said availability was not a promise and he could ask about dates. He went out, returned, and asked whether negotiating a possible rate required everyone present. Mera said she would be pleased to avoid discussing money with a man who called every discount a friendship. He looked hurt. She apologized for the tone and refused to retract the observation. We discovered that rules could prevent one kind of overreach while providing unlimited opportunities for another kind of argument.

Kel would not work alone with me for a week. He did not announce it. He arranged the benches so somebody else would be present, left when I arrived without warning, and brought technical questions to Sera. When I asked, he said he had needed a friend during his confession and received an investigator protecting his own evidence. I remembered telling him to write his account. I had believed it the responsible answer. It had also kept me from admitting why I could not meet his eyes.

I apologized without asking him to understand the clerk. He said he already understood the clerk. That was what made my years of silence so hard to live beside. He could have helped compare the maps sooner. He could have known which questions to ask Oren. I had withheld practical information while we buried the consequences of his faulty part. I sat with the difference between those losses and the shame I had been using as their substitute. When he finished, I asked what access he wanted to my papers. He said all of it, indexed, so he would not need my permission for every page.

Mera asked Rian to show the representation clause to an independent reader. He said the mark itself was the only surviving copy he possessed. She wanted a transcription. He said tracing it made the line burn. For a moment her face hardened, as though pain might be another excuse. Then she asked how they could record it with the least harm. Kel designed a stand that held Rian's wrist without pressure. Sera copied in short intervals while he told us when to stop. We took two days. Nobody made gratitude a condition of helping him.

Jarik's part was quieter. He went through the old voucher list with Ress and marked which names belonged to real people, which to the dead, and which he had invented entirely. He wanted to correct every entry at once. Ress said the living families needed to be warned before somebody used the correction to demand repayment. Several were still receiving relief under the old record. Honesty delivered without preparation could become the city's next collection tool. They drafted notices together and asked an advocate to keep the corrections separate from the households' current claims. It did not make the forged names true. It stopped another set of children paying immediately for Jarik's need to confess.

I spent evenings sorting the old maps. Not to admire the evidence, and not to destroy it. I wrote when each drawing had been made and who had seen it. My father's first survey was not the same as the census I supplied. Kael's plan had changed both. Where I could not establish how a line traveled between offices, I wrote unknown. The word took up less space than the explanations I had been hiding behind. It also left room for somebody else's information.

We still ate together. Sometimes Mera chose the far end of the bench. Sometimes Rian went outside before the meal was over. Once Jarik made a terrible joke about a magistrate's trousers

and Kel laughed so suddenly he dropped his spoon into the soup. Nobody took the laughter as a vote to close the subject. It was simply a pleasant minute during a difficult week. We had nearly forgotten we were allowed those.

Two Messages in the Rain

The messages arrived within the same hour. One came from a refugee caravan trapped near the western ravine. The bank had failed behind them, the water was rising in front, and the driver had counted twenty-six people unable to reach high ground without help. The other came from a village east of the station, where Circle workers were preparing an array at the well. Children had been assigned places around it.

The old version of me would have announced a choice and tried to move quickly enough that nobody could object. The new rules required all of us to discuss the choice. It took six minutes to gather everybody. I remember resenting those six minutes and still being grateful for what happened inside them.

Kel knew the well components. He said the array could be stopped by removing its lower index before ignition, but after that it would require taking the load away from the village through a real discharge path. Sera had the messenger repeat what he actually saw. Jarik asked how the residents had been convinced to attend. Rian went white at the children's assignments. Mera asked how many rescuers could stand on the ravine bank before their weight became another problem.

Tali, then a young scout with more determination than experience, had surveyed the western tracks with Harun the previous month. She said there was a shepherd's shelf above the caravan. It could take people, not wagons. We could send ropes and carriers. Harun was already nearer than any of us. I asked how certain she was. She said she had walked it in dry weather and would not certify it after a storm.

The choice remained ugly after every useful question. We could split. We could send our strongest team to one place and local wardens to the other. We could admit that speed, skill, and distance did not arrange themselves around our wish to remain innocent.

Mera went west with Jarik, Bruni, and two students trained to rig litters. I went east with Sera, Kel, and Rian. Harun received instructions to stop the caravan from attempting the lower ford. If the shelf had failed, Mera would decide what remained possible. I did not give her an order from a map I was not standing on.

At the village, the danger looked smaller than it was. There were candles around a well, a clean banner, and a woman telling parents where to put their children. A little boy asked whether the reward bread would come before or after the song. Rian went straight to him and asked who had chosen his place. The woman recognized the mark at Rian's wrist and began calling guards.

Sera cut the banner rope, dropping cloth across the supervisor's view. Kel reached the lower index and found it enclosed in a new housing. He could not open it quietly. I fired at the bell before the supervisor could ring it, then felt the first power surge lift hair from my neck. We were late enough that precision had become damage control.

The clear solution was to destroy the housing and empty the well's contaminated reservoir. It would leave the village without its water supply. The villagers shouted that winter was coming. Kel looked at me. I looked at the children. There was no hidden option waiting for somebody to become clever enough.

We broke the housing. The reservoir cracked along the foundation. Water rushed through the yard, taking the candles, the lower wall, and the village's promise of a tolerable winter. Rian held a returning thread inside his own damaged magic long enough for Kel to force it into the wet stone away from the crowd. Sera took the supervisor alive. I kept the guards from reaching the children and put an arrow through the forearm of a man who would not put down his blade.

The array failed before it could establish its anchors. We got everybody clear. At dusk I stood in the broken yard while the village head asked what we intended to drink tomorrow. I told him we would bring water. He said that was a beginning, not an answer. He was right.

At the well village, the first threat after the array failed came from a man carrying a stone. He wanted to strike Rian. His boy had been assigned a mark, and now he knew enough to see the same geometry burning inside a stranger's wrist. Rian did not move. I stepped between them while Sera took the stone from the man's hand. She did not accuse him of ingratitude. She told

him his son needed him standing, and that we would explain what had happened without letting him hit anyone.

The boy stood by the broken well with his reward bread turning to pulp in the water. He was nine. His name was Im. He asked whether he had ruined the village by standing in the wrong place. Rian crouched, too quickly, and had to steady himself on the shattered stone. He told Im the adults had chosen the places. Im asked whether Rian had chosen them too. Rian said not these places. Then he said he had once agreed to something he should not have, and that was why he recognized the danger. I watched the effort it cost him to answer without making the child responsible for comforting him.

The village head wanted us kept until replacement water arrived. We could not consent to detention, especially with a supervisor trying to send word to the Circle. We could commit to a schedule. Jarik was west, so Sera did the negotiating and disliked every minute of being asked for guarantees we did not control. Two village residents would travel with the first cart. Kel would leave the pump design and tools under a signed inventory. I would remain until the route to the spring was walked with local witnesses. Rian would go ahead to arrange carriers. The agreement gave the village people to hold accountable without pretending we could order the weather.

The injured guard I had shot was a local man. His forearm bled through the first bandage. I used healing magic to stop the worst of it, then bound him where he could be watched. He asked whether I expected thanks. I said no. He wanted to know whether he would lose use of the hand. I could not tell. He had two fingers I could feel pressing against mine. He was relieved before remembering he hated me. I left him with the healer and wrote exactly why I had fired. Helping him afterward did not cancel the shot, and the shot did not remove my obligation to help him.

At dusk a resident named Hale took me to the spring. Her mother had used it before the village paid for the well. The route ran across a grazing enclosure whose owner charged by the cart. I suggested a detour. She showed me the bog that would make a loaded barrel impossible after the first frost. We went to the owner. He wanted payment in advance for a month. I had enough for six days. Hale offered to repair his lower fence. He wanted the fence repaired anyway

and kept asking for money until she began describing what a public account of refusing water would sound like. He agreed to ten days and the fence. It was an ugly bargain we could use.

By the time we returned, Rian had arranged the first carriers. The man who had taken up the stone was among them. He did not apologize. He asked Rian how to tie a barrel so it would not swing against a damaged hand. Rian showed him with his good one. They worked together for an hour. I made no entry declaring their hostility resolved. It was enough that the first cart left before midnight with water secured and two villagers riding beside the load.

The Names Afterward

The western report reached us after midnight. Harun had found the caravan. Harun and Mera's team secured a line that brought sixteen people to safety. They brought seven more across with litters after the bank began giving way. The last three were washed out when the ground beneath the tail wagon collapsed. One was the driver who had stayed to free his horses. Two were children waiting for a litter after their mother had crossed.

Mera did not write that they had done everything possible. She wrote what they had attempted, what failed, and whose names we needed to carry to the next settlement. Jarik added a note about a woman who had refused to leave without her sons until Bruni made her understand that remaining would not return them. The note was brief. I could hear how difficult it had been to write.

When we reunited, Mera's boots were still wet. She had strained the old injury hauling a litter. Jarik had lost his lute to the current and refused another instrument somebody offered until he knew the owner could afford to give it. He looked ashamed when I asked after the children. I wanted to tell him he had saved twenty-three people. He knew. He also knew the three. Both numbers deserved to remain real.

Jarik told me the western rescue in pieces over the following month. His first account was all distances and equipment, as if he could make the ravine manageable by putting the correct quantities beside it. I let him use the quantities until he wanted the people. What follows is the

account he, Mera, and Bruni eventually gave me, with the places where their memories differed left as they described them.

Harun had tied the first line to a beech root above the shepherd's shelf. The rope reached the lead wagon but not the last. The caravan had moved forward after the bank began failing, packing the wagons close enough that people could climb between them. That had saved them from the first collapse and left the tail load hanging over water. The driver, Olan, kept cutting at the harness of two trapped horses. Harun called for him to leave them. Olan said he heard. He kept cutting.

Mera reached the beech after the first sixteen were across. The shelf was narrower than Tali's dry-weather note suggested. Water poured down a seam in the stone and spread across the place where bearers had to turn. Bruni set one student at the bend to keep newcomers from looking into the ravine. Jarik took the beech position. His voice could reach the wagon over the water. He used a work song with a steady beat so people could put one hand ahead of the other when ordinary instructions vanished in the noise.

The first litter carried a man whose hip had been crushed between wagons. Mera took the lower rope because her weight could keep the litter from swinging. The old break in her arm held until they reached the bend. Then her grip failed. The student caught the side before it tipped. Mera wanted to take the rope again. Bruni told her to tie it to the waist harness and use her legs. Mera swore, obeyed, and hated how much stronger the arrangement was. She had nearly made the injured man depend on the part of herself most likely to fail.

The second litter brought a pregnant woman and her daughter, small enough to fit beside her with her knees drawn up. A boy came after them on the hand line. Jarik asked his name as he reached the tree. Fen. He asked Fen to count the people passing so he would have a task instead of watching his family still on the wagon. Fen counted loudly and then lost his place when the next person fell to her knees. Jarik told him to begin again from the tree. There were useful ways to get a count wrong, and keeping a child facing away from the drop was one of them.

Two boys waited with their mother at the rear wagon. The older had a cough that made holding the hand line difficult. Mera intended to take both on the next litter. The woman, Arel,

refused to leave first. Bruni said somebody had to meet them at the tree. Arel understood the reason and still could not make her hand let go. Jarik came partway down the line and told her exactly who would hold the boys, in which order they would come, and where she would stand. He did not call it a promise because the shelf had begun shedding chips beneath their feet. She came with him.

The harness at the tail wagon broke before the empty litter reached it. One horse went free, struck the wheel, and pulled the wagon sideways. Olan jumped toward the boys. Mera saw him get a hand on the older one's coat. Harun saw only the wagon turn. Jarik heard Arel scream and turned too late to see the first fall. None of them could tell me which body entered the water first. There are reports that become more certain each time they are retold. We refused to make this one among them.

Mera tried to go after them. She had clipped into the safety line and reached the broken edge before Bruni hauled the harness backward. The shelf fell while she was on her knees. Her boots and the place beneath them vanished in the same instant. The harness held. One of the students took the returning weight across his shoulder and dislocated it. Harun and Bruni pulled both back. Jarik kept Arel from running beyond the beech. For several seconds all four rescuers were occupied with keeping other rescuers alive. There was nobody left who could enter the water, and no route by which they could return.

Mera shouted that she could still see the wagon. It appeared once through the spray below, already turning around a rock. Bruni said seeing it did not make it reachable. Mera struck her with her good hand. Jarik told me that part only after Mera asked him to. Bruni did not let go. Later she had a split lip. Later Mera apologized. At the ravine neither later was available. Bruni held the harness until Mera stopped trying to move toward the missing ground.

Arel wanted her sons' blankets. The blankets had gone with them. Jarik gave her his own and she threw it into the mud. He picked it up and waited. The other survivors were shivering, one in shock, one beginning labor too early from the strain. Harun said they had to leave the exposed shelf before dark. Arel would not move. Bruni sat beside her and said she had lost people too, but would not pretend that made this shared enough to explain. She would stay ten breaths. Then

she would help Arel stand because the people on the shelf needed her alive whether she agreed with them or not.

They left markers for the search crews and went to the shelter. The pregnant woman's labor settled after warmth and rest. The student with the dislocated shoulder kept helping until a healer could treat him. Fen began counting people in his sleep. Jarik's lute, strapped to the litter frame, had gone when the shelf broke. He noticed only after somebody asked him to play for the children. That was when he understood how long he had been reaching toward a sound that was no longer beside his hand.

Mera visited Arel when the family moved to the station. The woman refused to see her twice. On the third visit she let her sit outside the door. They said little. Mera came back the next week and repaired the step without being asked to enter. She did not tell the story as an example of anything. I know about the step because Arel wrote to ask whether we could use the same arrangement at the washhouse, where her surviving neighbors were struggling to climb with wet buckets.

On the night we reunited, Rian sat with Jarik until morning. Neither said much. Their old argument about whether the pact had been worth trying had not disappeared. It had acquired a room large enough for another person's grief. I listened from across the fire and did not appoint myself the interpreter of their silence.

We spent the next month repairing the village supply. Kel designed a hand-pumped cistern the residents could inspect without a Circle specialist. Mera worked on the retaining wall. Sera made copies of the supervisor's orders and sent them to the villages named next. Jarik negotiated cartage from merchants who had benefited from our safe routes. Rian carried water until his hand failed, then taught others how to recognize the contract marks.

I drew a route between the village and the spring, walked it with three residents, and revised it twice. On the last inspection, a woman pointed out that I had placed a resting stop where the wind cut straight through the wall. I moved it. Nobody needed to call the correction a transformation. It was simply better work.

My father died of a winter fever two years later. I reached home before the funeral, after missing the final day. My mother told me he had read every letter, including the one where I finally explained the census. He had written a reply and not sent it because he was still deciding how to say what he meant. She gave me the unfinished page.

He had written that he was glad to have come home, that I should not have been asked to purchase it, and that being used did not excuse continuing to hide. The rest of the page held a drawing of the broken culvert he had refused to certify. He had corrected its replacement in red. I kept the letter with the bad maps.

My mother's grief was untidy and practical. She had given away my father's extra coat before I arrived because a neighbor needed one. She had kept his broken compass because she could not yet bear to decide what to do with it. I stood in the room asking whether she wanted me to stay. She said she wanted him alive. Then she apologized, angry at herself for making an impossible answer sound like an accusation. I sat down beside her. We could both survive an answer that did not tell us what to do.

Over the next week she asked about the roads and I asked about the cough I had not taken seriously enough in his letters. She told me when it worsened, who came, what the physician could and could not do. She did not let me turn the final day into a task I had failed by being absent. He had been frightened sometimes. He had also complained about the broth, asked who repaired the new culvert, and insisted the window stay open. Those facts gave him back more fully than the account I had been making around my lateness.

At the funeral Mera came with her mother. Sera brought a clean copy of my father's uncensored surveys. Jarik sang the hymn Ena requested, without improving it. Kel repaired the table leg that had been loose since my childhood. Rian sat near the door and handed water to people who could not speak. None of them needed me to explain why they had come. The room held the people I had harmed and the people who still chose to help carry a thing I could not carry alone.

I asked Ena whether she wanted to come to the station. She said she wanted to visit, not be relocated. Her work, neighbors, and memories were still there. I had nearly treated widowhood

as permission to redraw her life. She saw the realization and squeezed my hand. We made a visiting plan. She corrected the dates around her laundry contracts. I went back to the roads with my father's unfinished letter and the strange comfort of having been told no by somebody who loved me.

The network kept growing. People improved our methods, sent warnings we had not thought to request, and occasionally refused our recommendations for reasons we needed to hear. I learned to read disagreement without assuming abandonment. Mera began trusting my route notes again, provided I signed them with the name of the person who had checked them beside me. She did not say the old debt was paid. She let the next bridge stand on its own supports.

Chapter 7
Maps Written in Blood and Light

Character records at chapter entry

After the two emergencies and subsequent years of network building.

Ekrius Ashborne
Tiefling. Ranger 12 / Rogue 3 - Gloom Stalker / Scout.
STR 12 DEX 18 CON 14 INT 9 WIS 16 CHA 12; PB +5; Max HP 121; AC 16
Shares command decisions after the group's disclosures.

Jarik Fairwind
Human. Bard 10 - Eloquence.
STR 10 DEX 14 CON 14 INT 11 WIS 13 CHA 18; PB +4; Max HP 73; AC 14
Carries a borrowed lute after losing his own in the ravine.

Sera Veythorn
Half-elf. Rogue 9 - Inquisitive.
STR 9 DEX 18 CON 14 INT 14 WIS 14 CHA 10; PB +4; Max HP 66; AC 16
Maintains the group's inquiry records.

Kel Brasswick
Human. Artificer 9 - Artillerist.
STR 10 DEX 12 CON 14 INT 20 WIS 10 CHA 13; PB +4; Max HP 66; AC 17
Leads independent safety tests.

Mera Flint
Mountain dwarf. Fighter 11 - Battle Master.
STR 20 DEX 12 CON 16 INT 10 WIS 14 CHA 10; PB +4; Max HP 103; AC 18
Continues to manage her old arm injury.

Rian Emberfell
Human. Warlock 8 - The Fiend.
STR 14 DEX 13 CON 14 INT 10 WIS 10 CHA 20; PB +3; Max HP 59; AC 12
The burden of his contract remains active.

Inside the Glass Cathedral

The Circle opened its research hall in a converted temple with clear windows, clean floors, and a plaque thanking donors for protecting the vulnerable. Kel stood outside reading the inscription until I asked whether he had found a hidden mark. He said no. He was trying to decide which part of it made him want to put a brick through the glass first.

By then years of tests and repairs had made him an artificer people invited to speak in rooms that once admitted him only through a service door. He wore the same copper goggles, replaced piece by piece, and kept Omi's apron strip in his tool roll. Oren had retired with a reliable pension Kel bullied the workshop board into granting. Neither of them described that achievement as magic. It had required more negotiation than several actual enchantments.

The hall was conducting trials on overflow arrays. Sera obtained invitations through a claims solicitor who had decided the pattern deserved scrutiny. Jarik went in as a musician, which was now a respectable cover because people paid to hear him even when no laws were being broken. Mera joined the work crew inspecting an exterior wall. Rian remained outside with the evacuation team. He said he did not want to be recognized. We did not pretend that was his only reason.

Before the research hall demonstration, a young attendant offered Kel a numbered badge. He turned it over and recognized the maker's mark. It belonged to a woman who had attended Oren's public courses. Her work had always been careful. He asked the attendant whether she was here. She was upstairs, supervising the model. We had been discussing the Circle as a set of enemies, and suddenly one of them had borrowed his tools, argued about lunch, and helped him carry a pump into the rain.

Her name was Ysol. She recognized him before we entered the trial room and embraced him with genuine pleasure. She had heard about the road school. She wanted to know whether Oren's hands troubled him in winter. Kel answered both questions while I watched the room for guards. That was what I did instead of considering how the conversation felt to him. Ysol showed us the

public model and explained the secondary isolation gates. Kel asked where the return went after the second gate. She said the protected buffer. He asked to see that drawing.

It was not in her set. She had requested the missing sheet twice. The senior designer told her it contained proprietary geometry and did not affect her assigned portion. She was paid well, had an apprentice of her own, and believed the project would protect poorer districts. Kel showed her Oren's test seal on the copied coupling report. She read the first page. Her expression changed at the measured surge. She asked where we had obtained the internal specification. Sera said that was exactly the specification we had come to inspect.

Ysol could have called the guard. Instead she asked us to wait, went to the office, and came back without the missing drawing. The door had been locked against her badge. The supervisor said the demonstration was not her concern. It was the wrong answer to a woman whose hands had built half the model. She told us when the side corridor would be empty and asked whether any of the people setting tables would be hurt. Kel said our plan was to prevent that. She made him answer again without using the word plan.

I entered under a concealment more complete than the shared hush of our early journeys. I could move and work without becoming visible, but it would last only a little while and would not make my footsteps nonexistent. Sera opened the side door at an agreed time. I took a rubbing of the model indices while Kel examined the discharge diagrams. Our purpose was to get evidence and prevent another trial from reaching a populated district. It was not to make the building hurt people we disliked.

That distinction became important when we found the live array connected. A demonstration was scheduled for that afternoon. The receiving district was unnamed on the public model. On the engineer's working sheet it appeared as a list of blocks and expected overnight occupancy. I recognized the format. My census mistake had become an efficient professional practice.

We could alter one setting and drive the return surge into the hall. Nobody would route the next test through poor households if the consequences reached the donors' chairs. The thought came easily, and I would be lying if I said it did not satisfy something in me. Then I saw an

assistant setting cups on the gallery tables and a cleaner wiping a mark from the floor. The Circle did not employ only the people responsible for its choices.

We moved the staff before breaking the conduit. A cleaner asked why a workshop inspection required everybody leaving the lower floor. Mera told her there was a discharge risk and she should not have been working beside it without notice. The woman stared, then went back for her bucket. Mera began to object. The bucket held her own brushes. Replacement would come out of her wage. Mera carried it herself and asked which other workers had tools inside. The evacuation became slower, more useful, and less like the dramatic diversion I had imagined.

Kel saw where I was looking. "The return goes into the river basin," he whispered. "The hall's ornamental pool won't take it. If we break the lower conduit, it never reaches ignition. They'll hear us."

They did. The crack brought a guard through the door before I could move the evidence into its case. My concealment held; Kel's did not exist. He raised his hands. Jarik's music stopped upstairs, then began again at a pitch loud enough to become an argument. Sera pulled the fire cord. Mera opened the work gate and began moving staff into the yard.

I shot the lock from the inner cage before it could close around Kel. That ended any hope the damage would be mistaken for ordinary maintenance. We left through the service passage while the trial supervisor shouted for the doors to be secured. Jarik came down with three servers and a woman carrying an absurdly expensive harp, all of them certain the fire alarm required their immediate absence. Mera did not correct their understanding until everyone was outside.

The two guards injured in our escape had been trying to close the service gate. One fell after I shot the lock housing and the broken metal struck his cheek. The other slipped where water from the damaged conduit crossed the tiles. Kel wanted to go back for him. Sera held the exit while I pulled the man behind a column. He cursed us for damaging the hall. I asked whether he could stand. He said his ankle was broken. I bound it enough for the work crew to move him and left without waiting to learn whether he would remember the help or the damage first.

Both guards survived. No staff died. The trial failed without sending a pulse into the receiving blocks. The evidence survived long enough for three independent workshops to

reproduce Kel's findings. The hall's license was suspended, then restored under another name six months later. Winning an inquiry did not automatically dismantle the people able to fund a second letterhead.

But the evidence changed who would listen. A clerk from the coastal council came to our station carrying internal memos and a travel bag she had packed because she did not expect to keep her job. She introduced herself as Adisa Venn and asked for tea before explaining anything. Iven approved of her immediately.

Adisa had found references to absorptive buffers in three budgets. She had also found proposals for several linked arrays around the city where I grew up. The projects were not isolated experiments. They were components waiting to be connected. She asked whether we could show her how the routes worked. Sera said we would show her how to check, which was a better offer.

Ysol testified at the licensing hearing. Her supervisor said she had exceeded her competence by questioning the discharge design. Oren came out of retirement to read her qualifications aloud. He then read the dates of her missing-sheet requests. The room grew uncomfortable in a way that pleased me more than it should have. Ysol did not look pleased. Her employer dismissed her before the license was suspended, and the companies advertising related work all stopped answering her letters. Winning the point had cost her the work she loved.

We offered her a post at the network workshops. She took a temporary one while deciding whether she wanted the Circle's betrayal to determine where she spent the rest of her life. Kel respected the limit. She later opened her own bench in another town and continued sending test results. Her contribution to the final defense began with questions she asked while she still expected her employer to answer honestly. I keep her early letters in the codex, because it is easy to admire somebody once the cost of listening to them has become somebody else's.

The City That Renamed Us

They called the Ash Roads Emberwalk when I came home. The name appeared on fresh signs above repaired streets, while families still gave directions by the old butcher's stall and the

stair that had fallen. My mother said the new name was useful because anybody using it without hesitation was probably looking for an office. She had moved into a smaller house with a door that shut properly and continued taking laundry because retirement, she said, did not wash itself.

Rian walked beside me through the district. His mother had died peacefully the previous spring, with him at her bedside and Jarik playing outside the window because she disliked quiet rooms. He had no immediate household left to protect there, but he paused at every corner. A place can keep asking things of you after the people who first asked are gone.

The tree had grown around its split trunk. Children sat in the roots eating dried apples. One called me Ghost and asked whether I could shoot from there to the mountains. I told him no. Jarik said I had once shot the last biscuit from a table at an impressive distance. Mera asked whether he intended to include the part where it was her biscuit. The children appeared to consider this a much better legend.

Adisa arranged a meeting about the proposed arrays. We brought drawings, resident testimony, workshop tests, and a plan that did not require designated households to absorb overflow. It was more expensive in stone and labor. It was less expensive in bodies. The council asked whether the cost could be reduced.

Kel explained the sequence. Reinforced channels led to empty discharge grounds beyond occupied roads. Independent gates could isolate a failed section. Local operators could inspect the working without proprietary Circle marks. Evacuation lanes remained open. No person served as a permanent component. We had tested parts of it over several years at stations where people gave permission and knew what failure meant.

A magistrate asked whether the population truly understood the sacrifice required to protect the whole. Mera opened Bren's stone bag on the table. She had carried one stone from his scattered collection ever since the night we found it. She set it beside the model and asked the magistrate to explain to it which population he meant.

I stopped her before the room could retreat into outrage over her manners. I told them exactly what my census map had done. I named the clerk. I showed my old marks beside the Circle's

current ones. It was no longer only an accusation against other people. The room became quieter in a different way.

Jarik gave his account of the roster. Daren, older and walking with a cane, confirmed the temple agreement and supplied the original annex. Rian did not display his scars. He read the representation clause aloud and said nobody should be able to convert a frightened person's bad bargain into a permanent public utility. Sera recorded who objected and why.

They did not approve everything. They approved an emergency review and permitted three pilot routes. Adisa called that a foothold, not a settlement. We took it. Work crews began marking discharge land while Circle agents filed objections on behalf of people who had never visited it.

A bolt found me outside the meeting hall. It struck the wall where my shoulder had been before I turned at the sound of a heel scraping stone. A second attacker came from the stair, and Mera drove him back into the doorway. I used the shadow of a column to spoil the first man's aim, drawing on the evasive habits I had practiced until they survived surprise. I could not do it for every attack, and the next bolt cut my side before Sera reached the upper landing.

We took one attacker alive. He knew the name of his paymaster but not the person above that. The magistrate called it a private grievance until Adisa produced the payment voucher from a Circle contractor. By then I had bled on enough official floors to resent the cleaning staff having to solve the visible portion of an inquiry.

The pilot routes continued. So did the objections. Seasons passed. We trained local operators, repaired the mistakes in our own first designs, and built ways to isolate the channels before connecting them. My accuracy at long range improved through disciplined practice with wardens who refused to let reputation count as a measurement. The long shot people later remembered began with years of missing targets safely in an empty field.

The first pilot route failed its public trial. No one died. No one was meant to be connected as an anchor, and the empty discharge ground performed as designed. But a junction seal split, three markers shattered, and water in a nearby animal trough steamed. The watching residents stepped

back. A council observer began writing before Kel reached the broken housing. I wanted to explain the safeguards immediately. Sera told me to let people see the failure first.

Kel ordered the whole route isolated. The observer asked whether the defect invalidated the alternative system. Kel said it invalidated that seal under the recorded conditions. He would know more after inspection. The answer sounded evasive to people used to promises. It was accurate. I stood beside him while he photographed the fracture with one of the workshop's light plates and asked the residents which parts they had seen from their positions. A woman who sold milk said the trough had warmed before the seal split. That was new information. We had watched the housing and missed the first indication beyond it.

Ysol found the cause with two local operators. The seal was not the first failure. A narrowed branch had trapped pressure and warmed the trough through a buried connection missing from the survey. Our route had inherited an old mistake. We could say it was not ours, or we could accept that the people watching did not care which generation had installed the thing that frightened their animals. We marked the connection, replaced the seal, and added independent temperature checks along the branch. The second test took three weeks to arrange because the operators would not proceed until the buried crossings had been walked and marked.

A Circle representative attended the second test. He offered to provide an experienced inspector. Adisa asked whether the inspector's employer would receive authority over the discharge ground in return. He said the proposal involved standard operating privileges. She asked him to name those privileges. The pleasant conversation lasted half an hour longer than he wished. By the end, three residents who had distrusted us were asking the questions themselves. Kel's trial held. It mattered that they had watched us repair it rather than being told we had always been safe.

During that season, Sera found Mera's father. He was alive, working in a prison quarry two provinces away. His petition had been returned twice for lack of the correct witness fee. Mera wanted to leave immediately. We had training booked and only two people qualified to inspect the next route. I heard myself begin to list the obligations. Then I saw Bren's cloth at her wrist

and stopped. She had held other people's emergencies above her own for years. She did not need me to turn her father into another scheduling inconvenience.

She went with her mother. Over several evenings, Mera reluctantly told me about the visit. He had become thinner and deaf in one ear. He called her by a childhood name she had not heard since before the killing. She told him she intended to correct the confession. He said no. He had made his choice. She asked whether his choice required her to keep making it for the rest of his life. He became angry, then tired. Her mother asked for water and made both of them sit down before the argument resumed.

He feared what would happen to her. She feared he would die with the wrong crime attached to his name. There was love in both fears and no agreement. Sera found an advocate willing to request a review without filing Mera's entire confession before safeguards were discussed. The first hearing would take months. Mera returned with her father's written permission to pursue it, two carefully mended cuffs he had made for her, and a temper so sharp Jarik stopped singing when he saw her at the gate. She told him not to start treating her as a funeral. He asked whether a vulgar welcome song was acceptable. She said only if he got the name of the prison wrong.

My own mother attended the successful route test carrying a basket of washing she had refused to leave with a neighbor. She had questions about the closures. Where would a laundress put a handcart if the west lane shut? How would somebody know a gate was isolated rather than broken? Who kept the keys if the trained operator was at a funeral? The engineer beside Kel began with procedure. Ena asked him where his procedure kept the spare key. By sunset we had two new key cabinets and a marking system readable from cart height. She went home delighted to have been useful and irritated that the consultation had lasted through her drying weather.

Every Road We Built

The warning came from a woman selling eggs near the northern gate. She had noticed carts arriving with straw but leaving without the empty crates an honest poultry shipment ought to return. Her daughter followed one to a storehouse and saw men carrying copper frames inside. She told Harun because he had once paid for a broken basket instead of calling the loss trivial.

Sera checked the storehouse lease. Adisa checked its permit. Kel checked the freight weight against the declared cargo. Jarik spoke to the stable boys, who knew which teams had been driven at night and which handlers were being paid not to ask about it. Mera walked the work crew's route and found marks laid beneath fresh gravel. Rian recognized the pattern before we finished assembling the reports.

The Circle was preparing multiple anchors. Some used the old nodes, some the copied occupancy lists, and one sat beneath the temporary housing where families displaced by our village rescue had later settled. The pattern did not require Maelis to control every block. It required enough connected districts that, once the pressure arrived, the city would have no simple way to refuse the apparent protection.

We knew the answer early. Empty the receiving districts, open the independent discharge routes, interrupt the local indices, and hold the outer gates long enough for the linked working to lose its available anchors. Knowing did not tell us where forty thousand people would sleep, who would carry the people unable to walk, or which homes would be destroyed even if no one remained inside them.

We spent three days preparing without announcing that the Circle intended to attack on the fourth. A public warning would have given its workers time to move the indices. Silence left people packing without the explanation they deserved. We chose a partial warning: unsafe ward works, identified blocks, temporary relocation, a published meeting point. Sera insisted we state the uncertainty instead of inventing a tidy inspection story.

People argued. Some refused. One man told me the last time authorities offered to move him, they took his shop and never returned the key. I could not ask him to distinguish us by tone. Mera brought the written guarantee of storage access; Adisa arranged witnesses outside the council; Jarik found neighbors the man trusted. He left after them, carrying the shop sign himself.

I used illusion on a limited group assigned to cross the guarded work lane. It made them look like the authorized crew long enough to get past, not like a whole city's invisible population. Jarik and the wardens moved everyone else through ordinary gates using permits Adisa had

fought to obtain. Bruni sent wagons along the lanes Iven's students had measured with litters and wheelchairs. Rian walked the streets without concealing his hand and told people what he had signed.

Before the first index ignited, I walked the evacuation lanes with Tali. She was carrying three lists and an expression I recognized too well. She had checked the departure count twice. I asked whether she had spoken to the people still inside the buildings. She said the lists came from the housing wardens. I said I had once supplied a very good list. She looked up, annoyed, then understood why I had said it. We knocked on the last doors ourselves.

Behind one we found a man lying on a mattress, waiting for a son working at the river. Behind another we found two sisters who had decided to hide because the relocation notice resembled the one used before their last room was taken. Tali put down her lists and sat on the floor with them. I wanted to hurry her. She asked one sister to show the old notice. We could not return the room they had lost. We could give them Adisa's signed storage receipt and a named person responsible for escorting them back. They left with us after checking the signature against the council mark. The conversation took seventeen minutes. We had budgeted three.

At the meeting point, Jarik had set up a place to record arrivals that did not require people to queue in the route of incoming carts. He credited Ress before anybody asked. A little girl wanted to know whether her cat counted as a household member. The recorder said no. Jarik said the cat should have its own column so it did not interfere with the human total. The girl stopped blocking the desk, the cat acquired a documented identity, and the next six families moved through. I have heard more impressive explanations of administration. Few worked as well.

The first index ignited before dusk. A rift opened above the north wall, and for a moment I saw through it into a landscape that did not belong beside ours. A black bridge crossed a field of fire. Something enormous moved on the far side, not yet able to fit. The ward overhead brightened until the mortar between the stones began to glow.

Then the receiving lines found empty rooms. Their power did not vanish. It searched. Windows broke inward, copper fittings turned red, and the heat followed old connections into

buildings we had not expected it to reach. A small laundry at the bend caught. My mother stood beside it with a bucket she had no intention of putting down.

I wanted to go to her. Mera reached her first. She took the bucket, put it in a child's hands, and led my mother toward the line of evacuees. I watched them turn the corner. My mother looked back once and pointed at the wall as if I were an acolyte failing to attend to his assigned lamp.

I climbed. From the parapet I could see the far ridge where ritual workers held the remote frames. Normal bow range would not reach them reliably. We had measured the ridge during the pilot surveys. I knew which positions lay inside my longest trained reach and which did not. I chose the nearest relay and waited for the worker beside it to step clear. The first arrow struck the frame's exposed pin. Nothing happened. I corrected the angle and shot again. The upper arm collapsed.

Below me Kel and his crew opened the first discharge gate. Light ran toward the empty basin instead of the houses. The new channel held for three breaths, then the western connection began to fracture. He sent a runner with the actual measurement, not an assurance. We would have to release the old warehouse to preserve the road beyond it.

Kel's first warning from the west connection came before the visible fire. He had measured increasing heat where the drawing predicted a stable return. Ysol's operators checked another point, confirmed it, and sent the runner. The warehouse held winter cloth, schoolbooks, and most of the station's stored food. Iven had checked its inventory that morning. She moved the two inventory workers out, then authorized opening the warehouse to the channel. She kept the signed release because she knew an inquiry would eventually demand to know who authorized losing the supplies. Her signature was not an apology for saving the people beside the road. It was a refusal to make some absent subordinate absorb the cost.

Burning those supplies was terrible. Keeping them until the channel took the waiting people would have been worse. Nobody needed me to make the decision sound honorable before doing it.

My quiver hummed with the demanding spell I had learned after years of practicing the rhythm. I shaped it, then fired the shots I could take while it settled. On the next exchange, the magic let me draw and loose again with a speed I could not sustain by muscle alone. I chose relay frames, not distant bodies protected by guesses. Whenever I lost a clear shot I waited or changed targets. The light in my arrows was ordinary reflection from a city on fire.

A runner reached my landing with a message that the eastern gate would not close. The isolation arm was caught on debris, and a chain-creature had followed the heat into the control lane. Kel could keep the discharge open or clear the isolation arm. He could not do both before the returning surge. I could see part of the lane from the lower parapet, but the courtyard wall concealed the gate itself. We had agreed not to strip an outer defense to solve every inward emergency. Now I was the person close enough to do it.

I asked the nearest warden to keep watching the ridge and send Harun the relay timings. He could not make my longest shot. He could observe the frame and tell somebody else when it moved. That mattered. I left him the field glass and went down the stair. A fracture opened across the landing behind me. I had just abandoned the place I knew for a problem I could not see. I would not describe it later as instinct proving correct. I was frightened of losing Kel and chose to go.

The lane was full of steam. A teamster had trapped a wagon against the gate while trying to move a barrel of drinking water toward the evacuees. He was lying beside the rear wheel with blood in his beard. The barrel had split; its iron hoops had caught the isolation arm. Above him, something made of linked dark metal dragged itself along the control wall. It had no eyes I could identify. It turned toward the pulse coming through Kel's instruments.

I fired at the nearest joint. The arrow glanced away. Kel shouted that the faceplate was a cover, not the part holding it together. I wanted a better answer in fewer words. He pointed to a bright gap beneath the hinge. I moved along the wall until I could see it and discovered the creature had been waiting for exactly that approach. A loop snapped around my bow arm. The pressure made my fingers open. The bow hit the wet stones out of reach, and the demanding quiver spell fell from my concentration.

For a moment I could only keep my shoulder from being pulled against the hinge. The heat smelled of my sleeve. I used the short blade at my belt to wedge between two links, more as a spacer than a weapon. It bought the width of a finger. I pulled my arm through, losing skin, and rolled beneath the creature's next swing. There was nothing graceful in it. I was more than thirty years into learning how to live and still occasionally needed the very first lesson Mera had taught us: stop leading a fall with your face.

Kel's protective field passed over me. I had time to retrieve the bow. His little cannon turned, fired, and kicked sideways when the damaged wheel caught a broken hoop. A student named Viri grabbed its rear brace before it fell into the water. The blast drove the creature toward the gate, which was the wrong direction for our mechanism and the only direction available for keeping it off me. Kel shouted for everyone to leave the line between them. Viri dragged the brace clear, and I fired into the hinge he had shown me.

The arrow lodged. It did not break the joint. The creature folded around it, working the shaft deeper as it tried to turn. I could see now that the bright gap carried tension through the whole shape. I shot the lodged arrow from the opposite angle. The impact snapped the shaft and forced the broken head sideways. One loop dropped free. Kel sent a pulse through the opening, and the thing collapsed against the wall with its disconnected lengths striking like whips. We stayed back until they stopped moving.

The teamster was still beneath the wheel. We could lift it with four people, but the isolation arm would close over the place his legs occupied. Kel told me how long until the surge returned. Long enough to move him if the wheel lifted cleanly. Not long enough to promise. I called Viri, the runner, and the nearest operator. We put a board beneath the hub. The runner began pulling on the wrong count and nearly trapped Viri's fingers. We stopped. I made everyone look at me. Then we lifted together.

The man screamed when his leg moved. It was a terrible, useful sound: he was conscious enough to tell us where it caught. Viri pulled the last hoop away. We carried him behind the stone partition while Kel released the isolation arm. It struck the stop with a sound I felt through my teeth. Light hit the closed side a moment later, ran along the discharge channel, and burst into

the empty basin beyond the road. We leaned against the same wall, waiting to see whether our tested design would hold against the real surge.

The wall held. The operator laughed once and began crying. Kel was already checking the gauge. The relief did not erase the returning pressure in the next branch. We had restored one working gate. That was enough to make Rian's release possible, though none of us in the lane knew he had reached Kael yet. Sera's sequence arrived while Kel was resetting the instrument. He read it, asked Viri to confirm the first number, and sent the reply that would let Rian choose.

I could not stay to see the result. The warden's next runner said the ridge relay was turning back into alignment. I went up the service stair with my arm wrapped in a strip torn from the teamster's unused blanket. He was breathing when I left. Later I learned he kept the leg but could no longer drive a heavy wagon. The barrel had been his, donated because his daughter's evacuation group had run out of water. There was no correct part of the public account where I could reduce him to the debris that had jammed a gate.

At the inner index, Rian found Kael. Sera was with him; I learned the conversation from her afterward. The geometer had come to maintain the old personal link when the districts failed to supply enough living anchors. He told Rian the overdue burden could be discharged by naming another volunteer. He held a parchment ready.

Rian asked whether the volunteer would receive the whole truth. Kael said the emergency required decisiveness. Sera reached for the book beneath his arm. He pulled a blade. Mera, arriving from the laundry lane, broke his balance and took the knife without killing him. She held him while Rian read his own old contract against the live index.

There was no clause that made him innocent and no word that could politely end the infernal interest. But the array depended on an indexed physical link, and Kel had finally given us a way to separate that link from a living body without making another person the destination. It required the empty discharge channel and somebody at the manual gate. Kael had designed no such release because a permanent debtor was more useful than a safe component.

Sera sent the sequence to Kel. He sent back two numbers and a warning: the channel would take Rian's power along with the connection, and they could not predict how much of his hand

would recover. Rian chose with that information. Nobody stood over him promising clean restoration.

The gate opened. The old mark flared from wrist to elbow. He screamed, and Sera stayed with him while Mera held the line against the things coming out of the failing ring. Kel's cannon broke its own front brace firing at a chain-creature that reached the mechanism. A student repaired the brace while he worked the gate. He did not notice until afterward, which told me the school had become something larger than our supervision.

The line broke at the index. Rian fell backward into Sera's arms. On the wall, I saw the rift contract, then widen as the force beyond it pushed once more.

My shoulder began to tremble before I missed the relay. I had fired more often than in any training session, and sweat had made the repaired grip slick. A young warden offered another bow. It would have changed the draw and spoiled the ranges I knew. I asked for dry cloth instead. He wrapped the grip while I watched the frame. For several seconds I did nothing else. Below us people were running, and I stood still while somebody tightened a knot. It felt unbearable. It made the next shot possible.

Then the stair tower moved. Not a collapse yet, a low sideways shift that threw dust from the joints. The warden shouted that the parapet would go. I had one clear line to the relay and a stone floor beginning to change beneath my feet. I left the line. We moved down to the next landing as the upper section broke into the lane we had cleared. The shot from below was worse. I waited until Harun's signal showed the last people gone and took it anyway. The first arrow fell short. The chain below the frame was closer. I saw it because the tower had forced me lower, not because danger had suddenly improved my aim. I put the next arrow through the coupling. The frame folded. The giant shape beyond the black bridge struck the narrowing edge and could not pass. The rift closed with a sound like a whole city inhaling.

When the rift closed, I could not hear for a time. The warden was speaking inches from my face. I saw his mouth form a word and thought he was asking about the relay. He was asking whether I could stand. I nodded, then found my knees unwilling to endorse the statement. He sat beside me and waited while stone finished falling outside. I did not know his name. I asked twice

before I could hear the answer. Joren. He had joined the wardens to learn a trade that would pay for his sister's schooling. I had almost turned him into the hand that dried my bow.

We came down through the service stair. At the bottom somebody told us Rian was alive. I asked where, then found I could not make myself walk quickly. My body had spent everything it was willing to lend. Joren offered to carry the bow and let me keep one hand on his shoulder. The city around us smelled of burnt cloth and wet limestone. People were looking upward, expecting another tear. I was too. Victory had arrived before any of us knew how to stop waiting for the next blow.

Who Takes the Watch

Twenty-nine people died across the city that night. Some refused evacuation. Some were caught outside the blocks we had predicted. Four were wardens holding the last crossing. Two were Circle workers left inside their own apparatus. I will not change the number to make the victory prettier. I will also not pretend the tens of thousands who walked out through prepared lanes count for less because the count was not perfect.

Rian lived. He lost most of the fire that had answered him for years and gained some movement in the fingers he thought he would never open again. The healers refused to promise more. The old contract mark remained as a pale seam. Its live connection was gone from the array we had broken. Whether somebody beyond it still considered him a debtor was another question, and we recorded it as one.

Maelis escaped the first search. Adisa traced payments through two replacement companies, and Sera gave the inquiry enough evidence to freeze their city accounts. Kael testified after discovering the council would not purchase his silence with the protections he expected. His testimony did not erase his role. Daren's did not erase his either. There was more than one kind of responsibility in the room, and the hearings needed to distinguish them.

We buried the dead, rebuilt the water system, and replaced the warehouse before winter with supplies purchased through an assessment on the licensed contractors whose work had fed the

disaster. Jarik called that verse four of the magistrate song. Adisa told him she would deny having requested it. Mera sang it at the rebuilding feast, off key and louder than anybody.

The city called the defense unified ward efforts. This time, when the first draft of the report omitted the residents' network, somebody inside the records office sent it back. There were people doing the work who did not need us standing beside them. I did not trust the whole institution on that basis. I trusted a particular clerk, and the clerk trusted another, and we gave them records sturdy enough to survive promotion.

The first hearing lasted nine days and settled less than the public expected. A contractor argued that the old household records were already city property. Adisa asked whether that made the people inside them available for use. His solicitor objected to the language. The magistrate allowed the question. We heard the answer three different ways before he admitted he had never asked a resident what the word buffer meant to them.

The mothers from the well village attended with a record of every water cart delivered and every promised one missed. We had missed two during a snowstorm. Our account explained the weather. Theirs explained the cost: a day with children hauling kettles from the stream. Both were entered. I was glad they had kept their own record, though hearing it read beside the Circle's failures made me feel defensive in a way I did not like. We had done better than the Circle. That comparison did not warm the kettles they carried.

Kael offered names in exchange for a sentence recommendation. Mera wanted none offered. Sera wanted the names checked before agreeing to anything. The advocate explained what the inquiry could actually promise. We did not control the bargain. We could submit evidence of his conduct and ask that his cooperation be distinguished from innocence. Rian wrote his own statement over three mornings because his hand tired. When a clerk offered to summarize it, he asked her to read the summary back. She had removed the sentence saying that he had represented us without permission. He asked for it restored.

Maelis's absence tempted people to turn her into the whole cause. Daren, the contractors, the officials who approved occupancy schedules, and the donors who never asked for a drawing could all describe themselves as deceived. Some had been. Sera made the inquiry ask when each

learned enough to question the work and what happened next. The question implicated me too. I answered again in a public room, this time without the first comfort of friends who already knew why I had been afraid.

Mera's father's hearing was scheduled during the same month. She attended with the advocate and her mother. The case remained open after the first review, but his transfer from the quarry was granted while the testimony was examined. Mera brought us the order with the fold worn nearly through. Jarik began celebrating. She told him the conviction had not been corrected. He said an approved way out of the quarry was still worth buying supper for. She considered that, then asked for the place with the expensive onions. We went. She paid for her own meal because she wanted to, and nobody argued her into being treated.

Rian's recovery required tasks smaller than anything the city had watched him do. He learned to hold a cup without gripping until his fingers hurt. He walked to the market without checking every doorway for a collector. Sometimes he came back before reaching the gate. Kel made him a handle he could adjust himself, and Rian rejected the first version because it looked like a medical instrument. The second was polished dark wood with a ridiculous silver flourish Jarik insisted was essential. Rian used it every morning and complained about the flourish every other one.

I had nights when sleep brought the tower down again. On those mornings I would begin checking the station routes before breakfast. Tali let it pass twice. The third time she asked whether she should assign someone to check my checking so the station could continue indefinitely. I became angry. She stood there, pale but unwilling to withdraw the question. I recognized the courage required to disappoint me and wished I had made it less necessary. We agreed on one inspection and a second person to sign it. Some mornings I still wanted a third. Wanting was becoming a thing I could survive without obeying.

My mother came to the lodge the summer it was finished. The building stood where three roads met, on land purchased openly with contributions from stations and caravan houses. Sera checked the deed. Mera checked the foundation. Kel checked the wiring twice and made somebody else check it again. Jarik checked the acoustics and was asked to leave the dining

room until supper. Rian planted vegetables on the sunny side because he said nobody should retire into a life where every growing thing reminded him of an incursion.

There was a chair at the central table. I avoided it for three days. On the fourth Iven sat in it and refused to move until I admitted it was not an administrative trap. She had helped organize the place because our supplies required someone capable of saying no to all six of us without convening a council.

I began a codex. It contained routes, inspections, contacts, and accounts of decisions that had gone wrong. I put the census map in the first folder, with my own statement beside it. I did not ask the reader to decide whether I was a good man before using the information. I asked them to see what the choice had done and check the next map accordingly.

When the younger wardens arrived, I handed them pages with room left for corrections. Tali asked whether she should return the originals. I said she should bring back what she learned. She asked who would take first watch that evening. I began to answer automatically, then saw the roster in her hand.

Harun was on it. So was Renn, who knew the channels east of the ridge. There were names I had trained and names trained by people I had trained. I asked which watch still needed a person. Tali said none. Then she asked whether I wanted tea, and for once I accepted the question she had actually asked.

Epilogue
The Cartographer's Last Correction

Character records at chapter entry

One year after the city defense.

Ekrius Ashborne
Tiefling. Ranger 17 / Rogue 3 - Gloom Stalker / Scout.
STR 12 DEX 18 CON 14 INT 9 WIS 16 CHA 12; PB +6; Max HP 161; AC 16
Rests after the city defense and has completed his codex.

Jarik Fairwind
Human. Bard 12 - Eloquence.
STR 10 DEX 14 CON 14 INT 11 WIS 13 CHA 20; PB +4; Max HP 87; AC 14
Has a new lute and is preparing for a season of travel.

Sera Veythorn
Half-elf. Rogue 11 - Inquisitive.
STR 9 DEX 20 CON 14 INT 14 WIS 14 CHA 10; PB +4; Max HP 80; AC 17
Prepares for a coastal inquiry; her work toward restitution is unfinished.

Kel Brasswick
Human. Artificer 11 - Artillerist.
STR 10 DEX 12 CON 14 INT 20 WIS 10 CHA 13; PB +4; Max HP 80; AC 17
Returns to teaching and workshop work.

Mera Flint
Mountain dwarf. Fighter 14 - Battle Master.
STR 20 DEX 12 CON 18 INT 10 WIS 16 CHA 10; PB +5; Max HP 144; AC 18
Her father's case is under review; she plans to travel with her mother.

Rian Emberfell
Human. Warlock 10 - The Fiend.
STR 14 DEX 13 CON 14 INT 10 WIS 10 CHA 20; PB +4; Max HP 73; AC 12
His live connection to the array is broken. His magic is diminished, and recovery remains uneven.

The Words on the Stone

A year after the rifts closed, Adisa arrived with an invitation nobody at the lodge wanted to touch. It carried the council seal, enough wax to weatherproof a small boat, and language congratulating the city on its own recovery. I read the first paragraph while Iven stood beside me cutting apples. She asked whether the event required new clothes or merely a fresh tolerance for nonsense.

The council intended to dedicate the Emberwalk Memorial Ward-Conduit. Adisa said the engineering was better than the name. Multiple discharge paths, independent inspection, gates operated by resident crews. The public description, however, praised the district's historic role as a buffer. She had objected. The committee had offered to replace historic with enduring.

"They want your handwriting on it," she said. "That's why I'm here before the ceremony instead of after. You can refuse. They can still build the monument. Or you can make them hear the objection in the room where they want the photograph."

I asked whether the residents had approved the text. She said the committee had consulted a representative. I asked whose representative. Adisa smiled without pleasure and said I could put that question directly to the committee in front of everybody. I decided to attend.

We went together. Rian wore indigo, his left sleeve unfastened because the new movement in his hand came and went. Kel carried no device larger than a pocket watch and looked suspiciously proud of this restraint. Sera brought a notebook. Jarik brought a new lute given by the settlements whose food allotment we had once replaced, with their names carved along the back. Mera brought her mother.

Her father was not at the ceremony. The review of his case had begun after Mera gave a sworn account of the collector's death. She was no longer letting his confession stand alone. He was still in the northern quarry prison, waiting for the approved transfer while his case papers moved through ordinary channels with extraordinary slowness. A magistrate had warned Mera that changing the record could expose her to a charge of her own. She had signed anyway. We were helping with the cost of counsel, not promising an outcome we did not control.

The plaza stood where the old inner wall had separated respectable streets from the people who cleaned them. The crimson tree remained within sight. Strips of cloth hung from its branches, carrying names, dates, small drawings of tools, faces, favorite foods. Bren's strip had a little stone sewn into its corner. Omi's had a pickled onion drawn so badly Kel claimed she would return to complain about it.

Daren stood near the back. He had left his administrative post and spent the year helping residents prepare statements. Some greeted him. Some did not. He did not move closer when he saw us. My mother walked over, spoke to him briefly, and returned without explaining the conversation. It belonged to them.

The chancellor's speech lasted long enough for Jarik to compose three expressions of increasing personal injury. When she finally offered me the stylus, I stepped toward the stone and read the proposed inscription. The word buffer appeared twice. The people it described had names not included anywhere below it.

I asked whether the stylus could amend the surface already cut. The chancellor said of course, assuming I meant my own signature. I drew a line through Ward-Conduit and wrote Ash Roads Line above it. Then I crossed out the sentence about an enduring buffer and replaced it with the names of the residents' inspection body and the requirement that no person serve as a sacrificial component.

Somebody behind me began to object. I turned before the interruption could become the whole event. "Those terms are in the approved operating agreement," I said. "If the monument can't bear them, we should discuss why the district is being asked to."

Adisa had the agreement ready. Sera had three copies. Mera's mother stepped forward and asked where the dead would be named. Other residents began asking too. The ceremony became longer, less orderly, and much more useful than the committee intended. By the end there was an additional panel, a date for the full names, and a public promise with enough witnesses to make forgetting it expensive.

The additional panel required an argument about order. The committee wanted the city officials first, then the contractors, then a collective dedication to residents. Mera's mother asked

whether her son should remain collective while men who had never entered his street received individual lines. The stone cutter, who had been waiting with his tools while everyone discussed his work as though he were a piece of it, cleared his throat. He could cut the resident names today if somebody supplied a checked list. Titles could be added later.

Sera put the list on his bench. She had brought it because she had expected the question. It included the dead from the first working and those from the final defense, with the events distinguished so time would not compress them into a single convenient disaster. She asked him to read the spellings aloud. A woman near the front corrected her husband's second name. Another asked for the name her daughter used rather than the formal one on the death record. The cutter made both changes and read them back.

I stood beside Kel when Omi's name reached the stone. He had kept his hands in his pockets throughout the ceremony. Now he took out the apron strip and held it while the letters were cut. A child asked what it was. Kel said his aunt used to sell pickles. The child asked whether the pickles had been good. He smiled then, unexpectedly, and said they had been argumentative. The child's mother tried to apologize. Kel said it was a proper question and began describing the hot ones. For a few minutes Omi was in the plaza as something besides a casualty.

Bren's name came later because the list followed the old street order. Mera's mother stood close enough to see the dust settle in the letters. Mera did not touch her until she reached out. There was room beside the panel for additions, and a committee member remarked that the empty space might look unfinished. Adisa said it was unfinished. Families were still correcting records. The cutter nodded, covered his tools, and said he would rather leave room than explain which name they intended to omit.

Afterward, a man who had worked on the Circle's transport contracts came to speak to us. He had lost a brother in the final defense. He wanted to know whether the memorial included people employed by the Circle. Sera asked his brother's name. It was already on the list. The man stared at the letters, then began saying he should have recognized what the freight weights meant. Kel stayed with him. Neither one offered the other a clean excuse. When we left, they were talking about the records the man could still obtain from his employer.

The chancellor asked for a photograph before the crowd dispersed. We agreed to stand with the inspection crews and the residents who had supplied the corrections. The arrangement took much longer than the intended portrait. Jarik kept making children laugh at the wrong moment. Mera's mother disliked where the sun fell. Somebody's baby needed feeding, so the photographer waited. I am fond of that picture. I am standing too far to one side and Rian is looking at somebody outside the frame. We look like people attending an event, rather than symbols that happened to acquire faces.

A Place at the Table

We ate that evening in my mother's courtyard. Jarik claimed the chair nearest the kitchen because he believed proximity created entitlement. Iven moved him to the far end to make him useful passing plates. He said his public standing had suffered a series of indignities. Sera asked whether it had ever been standing without assistance.

Mera's mother told a story about Mera learning to swing a hammer and putting it through a neighbor's water barrel. Mera denied the angle of impact, not the event. Kel laughed until my mother described the day his supposedly silent lantern began whistling during a funeral hymn. Rian laughed with his whole body, then had to wipe his eyes. None of us asked whether it was only laughter. The distinction was unnecessary.

I watched them across the table and understood that rest was not an innocence we had recovered. We knew too much about one another to pretend that. We had people to answer to, proceedings unfinished, and injuries that would not vanish because a monument had better wording. We also had stew, ridiculous stories, and a familiar hand setting bread beside a plate before anyone asked.

Sera was leaving for the coast after harvest. Nessa had agreed to meet her about the broker, not forgiven the route she sold. Jarik planned to follow a theater company for one season and promised not to represent this as infiltration unless circumstances required it. Kel had students waiting at the workshop. Mera intended to travel north with her mother to see her father. Rian

had been offered a garden and a room beside the Hearth and had not decided whether remaining there would feel like choosing home or submitting to it.

They were not separating because our story had ended. They had lives that did not require my next emergency to give them direction. I could feel both the loss and the rightness of it. When Jarik asked whether we should make a permanent reunion date, Sera said a date was sensible and permanent was the kind of word that made her inspect the smaller writing.

We chose the first cool week after harvest. If somebody could not come, they would write. If somebody needed help, they would ask without pretending the request was casual. Mera looked directly at me for the last part. I objected that I had improved. She said improvement was why she was willing to keep the seat open.

The first person to leave my mother's courtyard was Mera's mother, who wanted to pack before Mera began offering suggestions. She had been preparing for the northern journey for weeks. Mera tried to remind her about warm stockings. The older woman asked who had dressed whom through the first forty winters of their acquaintance. We watched Mera perform the remarkable feat of looking both formidable and twelve. She carried the empty dishes into the kitchen without answering.

Kel had brought a wooden box for the table. Inside were six small pieces, each shaped differently so a hand could recognize its own in a dark pocket. Mine had a groove like a road meeting a river. Jarik's had an unnecessarily elegant curve. Sera turned hers over to look for a hidden latch. Kel said there was none. Rian asked what they did. Nothing, Kel said. He had made them because he wanted to make something nobody needed to test before giving it to a friend.

For a moment nobody found a joke. Then Jarik asked whether his could be made larger for formal occasions. Mera told him to put it in his pocket before she found it a more intimate storage arrangement. Kel laughed, relieved. I rubbed a thumb over the groove in mine and felt the smooth place where a tool had slipped and been worked back into the design. He had left enough of the irregularity to make each piece different. I did not turn it into a speech. I put it where I could carry it.

Sera stayed beside my mother while the others packed leftovers. Ena asked whether she was frightened of seeing Nessa. Sera said yes. Ena asked whether she wanted advice. Sera hesitated, then said no, not tonight. My mother nodded and gave her another apple to peel. I watched the exchange from the doorway with an affection so fierce it made my throat hurt. It was the kind of care I had often offered only after explaining why the person should accept it. Ena had asked and remained beside her after the answer.

Rian and I walked to the gate together. He had decided to try the garden room for a season. If it felt wrong, he would leave. He said the decision seemed offensively small after everything that had gone into making it possible. I told him my first serious retirement task was answering a letter from Jarik. He smiled. Then he asked whether I thought some part of the old pact might still follow him. I said yes, it might, and we would keep the records accessible if he needed them. He said that was what he had wanted to hear. Not a promise it was gone. A promise that uncertainty would not make us stop answering the door.

On the way back to the lodge, Tali rode beside the wagon without asking me to examine her route. She told me about a disagreement with Harun over the lower station's winter stores. I started to suggest a solution. She raised one finger and said she was telling me because it was funny, not assigning me a dispute. I shut my mouth. The story was funny. Harun had labeled two sacks of beans as emergency oats and then argued the beans were the emergency. I laughed until my wrist began to ache. The road held beneath us, and for once I let it be a road.

Later, back at the lodge, I sat in the chair by the maps. A storm was moving along the ridge. The east-road roster had names on every watch. I read Tali's new survey and found she had marked a shepherd's shelter, the owner's name, and a warning about his dog. I put the kettle on. That is the evening I began telling you this story.

One Road Still Open

The next morning brought clear weather and a woman at the door carrying an oilskin packet. Nessa stood behind her. I had never seen the halfling hesitate on a threshold, but she did then, with one hand against the jamb and the other holding a folded letter as if it might cut her.

The visitor was a courier from a station beyond Lanternwood. She had delivered messages for us before. Her name was Renn, the woman who knew the drainage channels near the shepherd's shelter. She said the packet had been waiting in a locked dispatch box on a road the current survey marked closed. The box contained an old station seal, a maintenance record, and a request for six named travelers.

I invited them inside. Nessa placed the letter on the table. The handwriting was Tavin's. She showed me a note she had carried for years, folded almost through at the creases. The same uneven crossbar, the same cramped turn at the end of a word. Handwriting could be imitated. I said so. She said she knew, and touched the older note with a care that made it clear she did not need my skepticism to teach her the danger.

The new letter described the roof ladder changed before the raid, including a detail Nessa had never told our group. It asked her not to send anyone through the western approach. At the bottom sat tomorrow's date. Above it, Tavin had written that he was sorry about the left boot.

Renn said she had opened the box herself at noon yesterday. She had not seen the sender. The maintenance record beneath the letter bore the seal of a survey office older than the Circle's first charter. Its map showed a road continuing through the blank northern edge where every later copy stopped.

Sera came down the path while we were still reading. She had intended to say goodbye before taking the coastal cart. Nessa watched her enter, then held out the inner wrapping. Along its edge ran a string of small marks. Sera stopped before touching it.

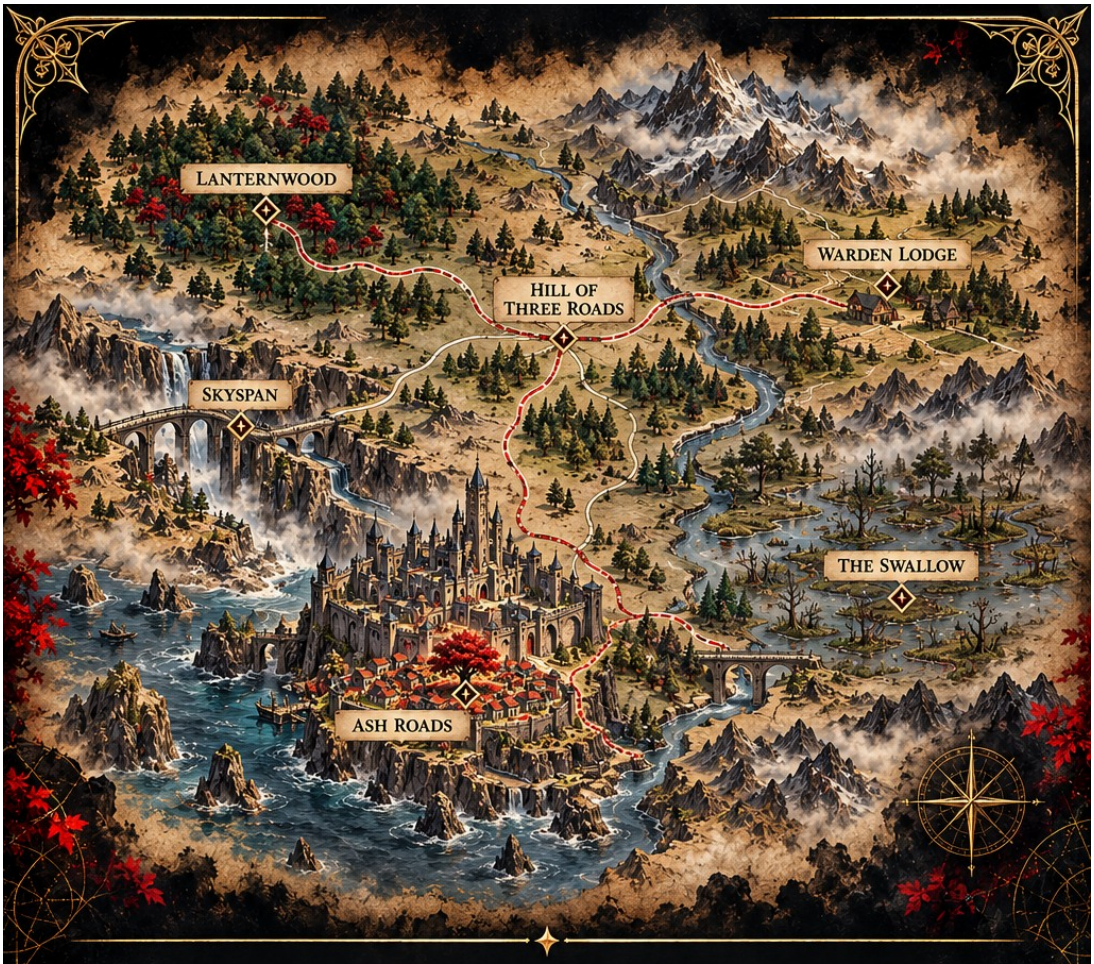
"The broker used that cipher," she said. "Not the Circle one. The one he used when he wanted a payment to look like a different kind of debt."

Outside, a wagon rattled toward the junction. It carried Mera and her mother, with Jarik perched beside the driver explaining something the driver was under no obligation to believe. Kel was coming from the workshop side with a bag of supplies he claimed he had forgotten. Rian had stopped in the garden to inspect the beans. They had all found separate reasons to leave late. For once, I had no intention of making a joke about the inconvenience.

Nessa looked at Sera. The room held the old safehouse between them, the missing man, the bargain that had taken so much. "I don't know whether this is him," she said. "I know somebody expects me to follow. I need someone who understands how they set the price."

Sera took the wrapping. She did not look at me for a decision. She asked Renn which road she had walked, what the dispatch box looked like, and whether anyone had been following when she left. Then she pulled out a chair and spread a fresh sheet beside my finished account.

The others were still outside. The old band had not agreed to anything. On the blank edge of the map, a road waited for a name, and for the first time in years the person holding the pencil was not me.



SOME MAPS HIDE THE TRUTH.

Ekrius knows the Ash Roads by heart. The city barely admits they exist. When a powerful circle promises protection to his forgotten district, his closest friend accepts the bargain. Ekrius sees something else in their plans: a neighborhood built to burn.

With the wards beginning to fracture and every warning dismissed, a young scout must choose between the people demanding his obedience and the streets that taught him to survive.

What happens when saving your home means breaking the circle meant to protect it?