

# The Last Orchard



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# **The Last Orchard**

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# Chapter 1

## The Pollen

The townhouse stood close to the rose allotments, where straight beds lay under winter netting and the palace walls cut the sky into rectangular slices. Basalt foundations showed through patches of limewash; imperial iron frames had been bolted to older stone at door-height and window-height, forming bars and braces and hooks for inspection tags. In still weather the smoke from the neighbourhood chimneys sank and spread along the street, gathered under the level where a man might look from a first-floor window. Under the Silence Wards, even a loose shutter made less noise than it ought.

Silas Greyth waited until the last bell of the late watch, when the curfew patrols tended to change their line. He kept the front room unlit. A rose pruning knife lay on the table beside a small tin of grease; he had rubbed the hinge pins that morning, and the door opened without a squeal. The kitchen stove was cold. He had not used it for days. Smoke drew attention in Sector Four, and he had learned to treat attention as something he could measure.

He crossed the room with his cane held a handwidth ahead of his left foot. The metal ferrule on the cane tapped once against the flagstone by the stairwell. A faint vibration reached his wrist, steady and repetitive, the kind that came from ward conduits set under the street, not from the old river under the city. He listened until the vibration matched the count he knew.

In the cupboard beneath the stairs, a lantern sat with its wick trimmed short. He took it down, turned the hood until only a narrow slit remained, and shielded the flame with his body as he lit it. Light showed

along the cupboard door edge, then narrowed into a thin line. He kept the hood at that slit as he opened the cellar door.

The cellar steps were steep and narrow. Cool damp air came up from below, mineral and close. The stone walls had been set long before the Empire arrived, laid in pale limestone blocks over basalt, with mortar that crumbled under a nail. A small vent at street level let a hard line of air through, more for the sake of regulation than comfort; imperial codes required airflow and visibility for basements. Silas had learned which angles allowed a patrol to see a lantern flare through the vent grates.

He descended with his shoulder turned to keep the lantern's slit aimed down. One hand gripped the rail; the other kept the cane close, ferrule scraping lightly at each step edge. The sound stayed within the cellar. The lantern gave enough light to show his boot toes and the first shelf of jars.

A clay pot sat on the floor near the back wall, wrapped in old rags. A board had been slid under it to protect the stone from damp. The board had darkened in a rough circle. The sapling rose from the centre of the pot, thin-stemmed, with a cluster of leaves no larger than Silas's hand spread. Its bark carried a faint sheen that did not match the lantern's yellow. The leaves lay still.

Setting the lantern on a brick, he angled the slit so it fell across the pot's rim but not towards the vent. He knelt with care; his knees protested on the stone, and he shifted his weight onto his right hip. The cane lay within reach. Two fingers went to the pot's soil near the rim.

The cellar air stayed damp, yet the soil at the pot's edge felt dry and slightly crusted. It broke under the pad of his finger. He moved inward, closer to the stem; the earth there clung, darker, damp. At the edges, the surface had pulled back from the pot wall by the thickness of a fingernail.

He breathed once through his nose, then through his mouth, slow. Water remained in a stoppered jar on the bottom shelf, but he did not reach for it. Water kept a man alive; it also kept the sapling from folding

its leaves and conserving. Blood was a different payment. Blood helped when the soil did not.

When he stood, he turned and took a small knife from a jar of tools. The blade had been honed thin. He brought it to his left thumb, to the pad where callus had built from years of pruning and grafting. The knife paused. The pad was already tender from yesterday's cut. Rotating his thumb, he chose a different spot.

The blade bit. Pain came sharp and clean. His hand jerked once, then steadied. He held the thumb over the pot. A drop formed and fell into the dry ring of soil, darkening it in a small spot. His hand began to shake, the tremor that had worsened over the years of pollen and the winter of poor food.

To steady the flow, he pressed his wrist to the pot's rim. The rim felt cool, slightly gritty. Blood fell in a line, not a steady stream, more drops than he would have liked to give. He moved his thumb, tracing the dry ring, letting the blood sink where the soil had pulled back.

A low vibration ran through the pot and into his wrist. It had been present since the first time he brought the sapling down here, but now it shifted, faster, more insistent. The board beneath the pot rasped faintly against the stone, a friction sound that stopped when he lifted his wrist.

He watched the soil take in the blood. The dry edge darkened and stopped crumbling under his finger. The tightness at the back of his throat eased, then the vibration quickened again and held. Stronger growth meant stronger strain, and the cellar had limits.

He withdrew his hand and held his thumb up. Blood still beaded. A strip of cloth lay folded on the shelf, clean and pale. It had once been a kitchen towel, boiled and dried, kept for these moments. He wrapped the strip around the thumb pad and tied it with his teeth. The knot tightened. The cloth soaked through almost at once.

He had three such strips left, and then only rags. In the allotments the Empire provided him with coarse grey wool for his coat and new

gloves each season, on the grounds that rose thorns carried infection. No allowance was made for the cellar.

Silas set the knife aside and shifted his weight onto the cane to stand. He moved to the foundation stone behind the pot, where a mortar line ran at floor level. A hairline crack had traced its way across two limestone blocks. Yesterday it had been thin enough to catch on the edge of his nail. Today the nail sank in. He held the lantern close, keeping its slit aimed down.

The crack had widened by the thickness of two grains of sand. A ridge of grit lay along it where mortar had crumbled. He touched the grit and rubbed it between finger and thumb. It turned to powder.

He traced the crack's path to where it passed behind the pot. The sapling's roots were not visible, but their pressure had a direction. The load-bearing stones had carried centuries of river damp and frost. They had not been built to carry a living anchor that fed on blood.

He turned back to the pot and stared at it, lips pressed together. A thought came, plain and functional: move it, shift it away from the foundation line, perhaps nearer the hatch.

He crouched and slid his hands beneath the pot's rim. The clay felt cold, damp where the rags touched it. He gripped and lifted.

The pot rose a finger's breadth, no more. Weight pulled it back down. His arms shook, and the cane clattered to the stone when his balance shifted. Bracing his heel against the board, he tried to force it higher.

The vibration shifted under his hands. The board skated a fraction on the stone, and the pot settled with a dull thud. The rags slipped. He stopped with his hands still on the rim, breath short.

He had carried fruit trees as a young Keeper, bare-root stock wrapped in wet burlap, a full apprentice at each side. This pot should have been manageable even with age. It was not.

He withdrew his hands and flexed his fingers. Knuckles swelled under skin stained with earth. The sapling's vibration continued, steady and faster than before. His mouth tasted metallic.

Boot rhythm reached him through the vent line.

He froze, one knee on the stone, hands lifted slightly away from the pot so he would not knock it. The boot rhythm was measured: heel strike, toe, then a slight pause that might mean a man stopping to look at a doorway. The rhythm passed, then returned, as if the patrol line had turned at the corner.

Silas did not raise the lantern. He kept his shoulders still and did not turn towards the vent. He counted breaths instead, slow, eyes fixed on the pot rim.

The boot rhythm faded. In its place he heard the faintest scrape of iron against stone from the street grates, then nothing he could name with certainty.

Keeping the ferrule from striking, he took up the cane and stood.

Under his breath, close to the sapling's leaves, he began a soil-oath in the old guild form. He had spoken it in orchards at spring rites, with apprentices repeating the phrases, palms pressed to damp ground.

"By root and loam." he murmured.

The words stopped. The next line required a promise made before the land and before the local crown; the old kingship terms drew penalties in imperial ears. Worse than that, his jaw held tight. He wore imperial wages on his back. He carried roses to the palace and bowed to engineers.

He swallowed and said nothing more. His wrapped thumb throbbed.

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He had lost count of breaths before the dizziness eased.

The lantern flame had fallen to a low wick. He adjusted the hood slit until the light narrowed again; the vent line remained in shadow. The sapling's leaves had not shifted position, but their surface showed faint specks of pollen near the buds, pale against green.

Silas's thumb wrap had soaked through at the centre. He tightened the knot and watched for fresh blood. The cloth held. He did not like how close the fibres lay to the leaf tips. Pollen clung to everything.

He knew the pollen's function. He knew its cost.

He held his left palm open beneath a leaf bud and touched the bud with his right finger, gentle, careful. A small cluster of powder came away. He rubbed it into his palm until it formed a faint smear. The smell was sap and something sharper, a note he associated with torn leaf ribs.

His breath caught once. He kept the palm close to his face and paused.

In the years since the conquest he had used pollen to blunt what his body carried. It did not give him dreams. It did not show him the past. It gave him present guidance and present forgetting, both at once. He had told himself he needed it to endure the days among imperial gardeners and inspection lines. He had never admitted how readily he reached for it in the cellar.

He lifted his palm and inhaled.

The first effect came as pressure behind his eyes, then at his ears. A sense of direction followed, not thought and not memory: his throat tightened when he turned towards the back wall; the tightness eased when he turned towards the left corner near the foundation. He did not see a map. He did not hear words. His body reacted as if it had been trained to follow a current.

A second cue came in his sinuses, a coldness on one side that shifted when he moved his head. Moving water lay somewhere beyond the stone, low and steady.

He held still until the dizziness settled into something he could stand within. Then he stepped to the wall that had eased his throat tightness. He kept the lantern close to his chest, hood slit aimed down. He pressed his ear against the limestone block.

The stone was cold. He could hear his own breath against it, a rasp. Beneath that came a deeper sound, steady and continuous, with no pauses. It was not a rat. It was not a pipe.

Old drain line, he thought without saying it. The city had been built over water routes that the Empire had never properly mapped. He had known some of them as a Keeper; the orchard guild kept practical knowledge in field books and in bodies.

He pulled back from the wall and listened without the stone pressed to his ear. The sound faded into the general cellar damp. The sense of direction had brought him to it.

His tongue felt thick. He swallowed and tasted sap. The lantern's flame wavered. He watched it and realised he had not watched it for a while.

Heat touched his palm. He looked down and saw the lantern hood's edge close enough that the metal had warmed. He shifted his grip too late; a sharp sting ran across his skin.

He hissed once through his teeth, low. He turned the lantern down and closed the hood fully. The flame shrank and went out.

The cellar went dark. He could see nothing but a faint grey line at the vent, where street lamps and pylon light showed through iron grating.

He sat on the cellar step with care, lowering himself until his hip found the stone edge. The cane lay across his knees, ferrule angled away to avoid tapping. He kept his burnt palm open, fingers spread, until the sting eased into a dull pain.

Water stood in the stoppered jar on the shelf; he knew its position by habit. He did not reach for it. A sip would help the dryness at the back of

his throat and the scrape in his mouth from pollen. A sip would also lower what remained for the sapling.

He sat and waited out the dizziness.

The vibration from the sapling continued in the floor, faint through the step. It had become a constant feature of his nights. Now it altered again. The frequency increased until a jar on the shelf gave a small rattle, glass against wood. The rattle stopped, then began again a heartbeat later, more precise, as if the vibration had found a threshold.

Silas's fingers tightened on the cane.

He had known growth spurts in fruit trees when a graft took or when the frost broke early and sap rose too fast. In those cases, the tree used water and sun. This sapling used blood.

He listened for street noise. None came through the vent at that moment. No voices. No boots. The pylon line, if it existed outside, could not be seen from the cellar step. The only sound was the faint jar rattle and the deep drain line when he concentrated.

He could leave. Going upstairs to bed would make the cellar into something he did not deal with tonight. Once, when the sapling had first shown its vibration, he had tried that.

He did not move.

Leaving it unattended carried a different risk. A sapling could be seized. A sapling could be ruined. If he were not present, he could not pay what it demanded in the moment it demanded it.

His throat tickled. He coughed once, then again, the cough harsh in the small space. Blood-tinged mucus came up. He spat into the cloth of his sleeve and wiped his mouth. He folded the sleeve inward and kept his hands on the cane.

He did not count how much blood had come up. He did not measure it. Measurement belonged to imperial methods. He lived by limits he could feel.

He remained on the step until the dizziness eased enough that he trusted his legs.

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The crack in the clay pot came without warning he could hear. A sharp sound snapped through the cellar, distinct from the vibration, and Silas's body reacted before his thoughts organised. He stood too fast; pain shot through his knee.

He moved on the cane to the pot. In the faint grey light from the vent, he saw a line in the pot's outer glaze, a fresh split running from rim down towards the base. Damp soil bulged at the seam and began to seep. It left a dark track on the pot and dripped onto the stone.

He muttered a quiet oath, words clipped and low.

He fetched rags and boards from the shelf by touch, working in the half-light. The rags came from old rose cloths and worn shirt sleeves. The boards were offcuts from the allotment trellis work. He slid a board against the pot's base and wedged another between pot and wall, trying to relieve pressure against the foundation.

The vibration shifted under his hands. The wedge skated a fraction, stone scratching under its edge, and the rags bunched before sliding on damp soil. He held the board in place for three breaths, then the vibration tightened again and the bracing slipped.

Strength had become a limited tool. He had not wanted to admit it.

Behind the pot, the foundation crack shed grit. The sound was small, yet in the quiet cellar it carried. Grit pattered onto the board beneath the pot, then onto the stone. The floorboards above had gaps; a pause at the vent could catch that patter. A thin line of dust traced along the crack.

His stomach tightened. He leaned still and listened past his own breathing.

A deeper sound joined the cellar's vibrations: a distant grinding that came through the street stones, rhythmic and repeating, as if a wheel turned against a fixed edge. The grinding tone shifted once, a brief rise, then settled back.

Silas set the cane ferrule against the floor and felt for vibration through his wrist. The pattern matched what he had heard near ward lines in other streets: conduits reacting, adjusting resonance. It did not mean men were at his door yet. It meant the lattice had noticed something.

He moved to the vent line and crouched, keeping his head below the lowest grate edge. Through the iron slats he could see a street inspection pylon's lamp across the way. It had been steady white earlier in the evening. Now it flickered, white to pale blue, then back. The blue was not the deep blue of a forge flame; it was weak and unstable.

The flicker repeated.

He pulled back from the vent and set his back against the wall. His hand went to the lantern by habit, then stopped. Light would make the space easier to read. Light would also show at the grate if the patrol line returned and a man looked down.

He kept the lantern dark and set it on the step.

He listened for footsteps.

None came immediately. The only steady external rhythm was the faint grind from the ward line. When he leaned towards the vent and looked again, the lamp's flicker had steadied into a repeating pulse.

The pulse held to a pattern.

He turned from the vent to the pot, where soil continued to seep at the crack. A patch of pitch might hold, or wire, but both would take time and material. If the pot failed completely, he could lose the sapling within a night.

His gaze stayed on the sapling's stem.

He could kill it.

The thought came in plain words, not as temptation and not as argument. A snapped stem would end the vibration. It would end the pylon's attention. It would spare his cellar wall, perhaps his house, perhaps his body.

He reached his hand out, the burnt palm facing down, fingers curled as if to grip.

His hand stopped a finger's breadth from the stem. He could see the outline of leaves against the vent's grey. He could smell sap faintly, sharper at the buds.

His fingers opened. They did not close around the stem.

He withdrew his hand and held it against his chest until his breathing slowed.

He had obeyed the Empire in hundreds of small ways. He had trimmed roses at their command. He had nodded at engineers' orders. He had given quiet answers to inspectors who wanted to know whether he had seen forbidden gatherings.

He did not kill the sapling.

He stood and crossed the cellar on unsteady legs. The concealed hatch lay under the last shelf, covered by a fitted board and a scatter of empty jars. Moving the jars by touch, he slid the board aside. The hatch handle bit into his fingers as he lifted.

Cold air came up from the crawlspace beneath, wet and close. It carried the smell of metallic water and stagnant brick. It matched standing pools and iron leach, old service corridors the Empire had sealed or forgotten. He held his face near the opening and took a cautious breath.

No sharp chemical note came. No fresh sewage. Only damp and metal.

A route.

He lowered the hatch halfway and replaced the jars in a rough line that would look ordinary in a quick inspection. He left the hatch unlatched beneath the board.

When he turned back to the sapling, his stomach lurched, and he pressed his palm to his mouth. The pollen's dizziness could account for some of it. The rest belonged to the pylon pulse and the grinding tone.

Men would come.

He did not say Iron-Eaters, because names drew attention and made his jaw lock. He did not say General, because he had never been close enough to the palace command to use that title with familiarity. He knew only the pattern of occupation: a pylon pulsed, then men arrived with questions and tools.

He moved to the pot and knelt beside it in the half-light.

The soil seeped onto the stone, forming a damp crescent. The crack in the pot's glaze widened by a hair. He placed his wrapped thumb near the soil and did not touch it.

He stayed close to the sapling because leaving would not stop what had begun. The pylon pulse continued outside. The grinding tone repeated beneath the street.

His breath came shallow. He kept his hand near the stem without gripping it, and he waited in the cellar where the sapling's vibration met the stone and did not lessen.

# Chapter 2

## The Iron-Eaters

The palace offices along the inner court carried a particular smell on winter mornings: wet wool from guards standing a full watch in the colonnade, and the iron note of water drawn too often through pipes lined with rust. Under the Silence Wards the usual noises of a working compound came muted. Footsteps still sounded, but the harder edges of heel on stone did not carry. In the narrow interval between two bells, General Valerius Odran could hear his own glove leather when he flexed his fingers.

He sat at a table set beneath a framed plan of the palace foundations. The plan had been redrawn twice since the occupation began, each revision more rectilinear than the last. Straight lines made counting possible. He kept a brass compass at the table's edge, and beside it an iron measuring chain coiled in loops the same size, laid so each link lay flat and did not cross another.

A clerk stood to his left with a slate and chalk. At the door an officer waited, cap tucked under his arm. The man's coat had the squared seams of the engineering corps and a strip of pale cloth around the wrist where the Ward lattice had left a burn in early trials.

Valerius did not tell the man to begin. He watched the clerk's chalk hand for steadiness first, then looked up.

"Report," he said.

The officer's eyes went briefly to the plan on the wall, then back.

"Sector Four sensor arrays began to flag intermittent fluctuation during the last watch; at first bell after dawn the pulse stabilised into a

repeat,” he said. “Not the usual drift from conduit adjustment. The pylon lamp at the north lane moved from steady white to unstable pale blue and then set into a pulse. The pulse count held across three cycles. We traced it through the conduit readings. The strongest return comes from beneath the gardeners’ allotment line near the palace wall.”

Valerius kept his face still. The gardeners’ allotments were a matter of routine, and routine was supposed to be his own province. The rose beds, laid out in straight ranks, had been meant as a statement: the palace could compel bloom out of a conquered soil. His mind moved to the men who worked those beds, to their small privileges and larger humiliations.

“An insurgent device?” he asked. “A charge?”

The officer hesitated, then shook his head.

“We checked for the signatures we’ve seen with fuse cord and powder,” he said. “This is not that. The pulse is not a single surge. There is an irregular counter-frequency riding under it. It does not repeat on a strict measure, but it keeps returning. It reads like living variance.”

“Living,” Valerius repeated.

The clerk’s chalk paused; when it moved again, the line came out uneven.

Valerius turned the brass compass with a single finger. The needle did not waver. Even under the wards, the earth’s magnetism remained a constant; it was an older law than the city’s guilds.

“If it is living variance,” he said, “it has survived ten years of suppression. That suggests either a flaw in the lattice or a deliberate concealment by one of our own workers.”

“Prefect Sorn is prepared to deploy,” the officer said quickly. “Iron-Eater unit and cordon team.”

Valerius’s gloved hand settled on the iron measuring chain. The links were cold even in a warmed room.

“Deploy him,” Valerius said. “Iron rods. Mouthpieces. Transport cages.”

The officer’s shoulders eased by a fraction at the clarity of the instruction.

“Capture is the priority,” Valerius added. “Do not destroy the source unless it cannot be bound. The Empire cannot afford another blind accident in a city built on old stone and uncharted drains.”

The officer nodded.

“To the palace?” he asked.

Valerius looked at the plan of the foundations again, at the block marked with the oldest masonry.

“Intact,” he said. “To the sub-basement. Use the service stairs. Keep the route off the public courts. I want it within a containment circle before it is tested. If this is a living system, it will have conditions. Those conditions can be measured.”

The clerk wrote.

The chalk dust fell quickly and settled close to the slate.

The officer began to speak again and stopped. Valerius watched him.

“Say it,” Valerius said.

“The allotments,” the officer said. “The gardeners’ houses run along the back of the beds. If this is a concealed source, it will be close to the men who tend the palace roses.”

Valerius’s mouth tightened. He did not need the reminder. He had tolerated certain local men because they made the rose beds look as if the city consented. He had kept one old gardener in particular on the payroll as a warning to others: collaboration bought survival, but only survival.

“Prefect Sorn will handle the district,” Valerius said. “His people will sweep for irregularities. If the source is a man’s concealment, the man

will be brought in with it.”

He stood. His knees did not creak; he had kept his body under discipline since the cadet years. The discipline had not prevented what happened on the slope that had slid beneath a training cohort in his youth, but it had kept him alive through it.

When he moved, the clerk and officer moved back a half-step to clear his path.

“General,” the clerk said, “the feast arrangements,”

“They proceed,” Valerius said without pausing. “The conquest anniversary will proceed on schedule. The kitchens will run. The public courts will be lit. Use the movement to cover the additional patrol shifts and the transport teams. Crowds faced the lit courts; service corridors drew no eyes.”

He did not add that he wanted the city to see abundance in the palace at the same time as it saw tightened control in the streets. A hunger made men reckless. Recklessness bred the kind of improvisation that cracked ward lines.

He walked from the office along a corridor lined with iron frames bolted into older stone. Inspection tags hung from hooks at regular intervals; each tag carried a stamped number and a date. Valerius checked them by habit as he passed. Order had to remain visible.

At the end of the corridor an arch led into the rose arcade. It ran along the inner wall, protected from most wind and laid with a strip of gravel to keep boots from churning mud. Winter netting hung over the beds, pale and worn. Under the netting the roses had been cut back, each stem reduced to a measured height above the graft point.

Valerius did not bend. He did not touch. He looked.

On the third bed, near the wall where heat from the palace foundations kept frost from settling as thick, several stems showed a darkened patch near the base. The bark looked softened. Rot, despite

careful tending.

He turned his head slightly. A gardener at the far end of the arcade was tying back netting with twine. The man's coat was plain grey wool, the imperial issue that marked him as permitted to work near the palace. The gardener kept his eyes down and moved in a way that took little space.

Valerius stepped closer to the rotting stems. The patch spread around the circumference of the bark and lifted at the edge. It could have been a fungus. It could have been damage from poor drainage. It could have been something older than either of those, a local condition the orchard guild once addressed through rites and soil-oaths.

"Rot," Valerius said.

The gardener at the far end did not look up. The silence under the wards made the word carry no further than a few spans.

Valerius looked at the stem again and then at the gravel path. Under the gravel, an older layer of soil remained. The Empire had set iron and stone over much of Oakhaven, but the river-city had its own foundations, basalt and limestone that drank and released water along their own routes.

Uncontrolled soil-law bred decay. He did not need a priest to tell him that. He had seen it in trenches where men died because the ground gave way under their feet. He had seen it on the slope where cadets had marched too close together.

His jaw tightened. He stopped walking without intending to.

A gloved hand closed around the iron balustrade that ran along the arcade's inner edge. The leather creased at the knuckles. For a moment he felt the old motion in his body: a shift beneath boots, a drop that did not have time to become a thought. His throat tightened in response. The sensation did not come as a picture or a memory. It came as a brief, precise readiness to fall.

Valerius released the balustrade. His fingers left a faint smear of glove oil on the iron.

He turned back towards the office corridor. The officer and clerk would be waiting for final signatures. Sorn would be waiting for authorisation to use a transport cage within palace bounds.

At the arch, Valerius paused and looked back once more at the rotting rose stems.

“Continue,” he said, low.

He returned to the office and signed the deployment order with a hand that did not shake.

He added a second note in the margin.

“Second patrol ring. Courtyard and approaches. No gaps.”

The clerk read the note aloud and wrote it to the slate.

Valerius watched the chalk dust fall and settle.

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Prefect Hadrik Sorn arrived in Sector Four with a cordon team that moved in a tight formation. Their oilcloth coats shed the damp that lay in the air. Their iron gorgets caught what little light reached the street under the wards. The mouths of side alleys had been fitted with grates years ago; the Empire had added more grates and more straight iron frames, turning old crooked routes into choke-points.

Sorn stopped near an inspection pylon and looked up at its lamp. The lamp showed a steady pulse now, pale and regular. The pulses came at regular intervals with little illumination.

He took a bundle of iron rods from the man behind him. The rods were the length of a forearm, each tipped with a blunted point. He set the first rod against the street stones and laid his palm on it. The iron carried

cold into his skin. He lowered his head and listened, not with an ear pressed to ground but with the mouthpiece held near his lips, ready.

A vibration ran through the stone. He felt it through the rod and through the oilcloth of his glove. It had a steady element, a baseline that matched the ward conduits running under the street. Over that baseline a second pattern came and went, irregular but persistent.

“Mark that,” Sorn said.

A technician beside him wrote on a strip of paper and pinned it to a board. The pin was iron, hammered into the wood.

Sorn moved the rod a span to the left and set it again. The vibration shifted. He moved it again, then again, and a direction began to emerge through the differences.

“Extend curfew,” he said without looking up. “Immediate. Sector Four perimeter to seal. Papers and food permits at all pylon lines. House-to-house.”

A soldier repeated the order down the line. The words travelled further than footsteps in this part of the city; the wards reduced the sharpness of sound but not speech.

Civilians had already gathered at the pylon line. The curfew extension did not permit them to disperse. Instead it pressed them into a tighter mass between iron frames and inspection posts. A woman with a sack of turnips held it against her chest as if a hand might reach in and take one. A man with a child on his hip stared at the lamp without blinking.

Sorn walked past them as if they were part of the street furniture. He did not allow his gaze to stick. He needed the cordon set before the source could be moved.

A soldier struck the first civilian when the line hesitated. The baton hit shoulder, then forearm. The sound was dull. The man folded in on himself, not fully falling, then straightened again with his face turned away.

“Faster,” the soldier said.

A baton strike landed; the line moved faster. Sorn turned away.

He set the iron rod down again, closer to the rose allotments. The vibration grew stronger in the irregular layer.

“Rose side,” he said. “Tighten cordon. Close all lanes except the inspected three. No one crosses without check.”

An Iron-Eater at his right shoulder reached into a satchel and withdrew iron pins. The pins were narrow spikes with flattened heads. The man knelt and drove the first pin into a crack between paving stones. The pin sank with two blows of a small mallet.

When the pin seated, the vibration altered. The baseline remained, but the irregular layer weakened at the point of contact.

Sorn watched the technician’s face.

“Record the drop,” he said.

The technician nodded.

The Iron-Eater pulled the pin out with a twist. The vibration returned.

“Again,” Sorn said.

They moved in a methodical spiral, setting iron, taking a measure, then shifting a few spans when the drop did not hold. The pattern did not rely on intuition. It relied on weakening the irregular layer by iron contact and watching how the response changed.

Civilians pressed against iron frames at the ends of lanes, waiting for inspection. A young man tried to slip through a gap between two soldiers and was caught by the collar. A baton struck his ribs. He retched and dropped to one knee. The soldier dragged him up and shoved him back into the line.

Sorn walked past and spoke into his mouthpiece, testing a tone. The tone did not carry far under the wards. It remained close, a vibration more than a sound. The vibration altered slightly through the rod.

“Not an explosive,” he said to the technician. “Not a powder charge. It holds too long and returns after iron contact. It is feeding.”

“Feeding?” the technician repeated.

Sorn did not answer. He did not care what the man called it. The General cared. The General wanted it intact.

He turned his head to the two Iron-Eaters at his left.

“When you find the source, do not kill it unless you must,” Sorn said. “Bind it. Carry it. If it is attached to a man, carry the man too. If it is attached to ground, cut ground with it. Use the cage.”

One of the Iron-Eaters nodded once.

“A living source can throw itself against iron,” Sorn added. “Keep distance until the rods are set. Do not let your fingers touch it.”

He did not mention the ear scars under his hair. The scars came from early work in a different city, a place where living anomalies had shrieked through conduits until men bled from their ears. Silence was safer. Silence was controllable.

The pylon lamp at the end of the street showed its steady pulse. Sorn watched it for three cycles, then turned back to the stones.

The spiral brought them closer to the gardeners' houses near the allotments. The smell here changed. Less of the river's metallic water and more of composted leaf matter. Netting hung over the rose beds, and the earth beneath it looked too neat.

Sorn stopped beside a narrow townhouse with basalt foundations and pale limestone blocks visible under patched mortar. Imperial iron frames had been bolted to the door and window surrounds. A small inspection tag hung from a hook near the lintel.

The tag's number matched a record in Sorn's folder.

He opened the folder and read the line with his finger.

"Silas Greyth," he said. "Palace gardener. Old. Tolerated. House permitted under allotment assignment."

The technician leaned in to see.

"A collaborator," the technician murmured.

Sorn looked up at the house. The shutters were closed. No smoke rose from the chimney. Under the wards the air stayed still enough that smoke would settle low; in this street there was none.

"Assign two," Sorn said. "This one. Now."

Two Iron-Eaters stepped forward. They carried a rod bundle and a small cage frame strapped to a handcart. The cage was iron-barred, hinged at one side, with leather straps folded over the top to prevent a bound object from pushing bars apart.

Sorn watched them go to the door. He did not accompany them. He had other lanes to seal.

Behind him the civilian line shifted again. A woman with a scarf pulled too tight around her head stumbled and was struck on the shoulder. She did not cry out. The sound would not have carried far.

Sorn kept walking. The pylon lamp kept pulsing.

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Reni Kestrel ran along a service alley with a stolen loaf tucked under her coat and a small coil of fuse cord wound around her wrist. The cord felt stiff from damp. It had been cut from a longer length and kept braided into her sleeve until she pulled it free this morning when the sweep began.

The alley ran between two straight-walled barracks that the Empire had built over older stone. Iron grates covered drainage mouths at regular intervals. Each grate had bolts with heads filed to a uniform shape. The Empire liked uniformity even in the dark corners.

Behind her, noise gathered in irregular bursts. A shouted order. A baton strike on stone. A child's brief cry cut short. Under the wards, the edges of the sounds came muted, but the pattern was clear enough. The sweep was compressing the district.

Reni turned her head once and then stopped looking back. Looking back cost time and made her breath shallow.

At the end of the alley, she met a wider street where an inspection pylon stood. Its lamp pulsed pale blue. A line of civilians had been forced to stand between iron frames. Some held papers in their hands. Some held nothing and kept their hands visible anyway.

Reni slowed and joined the line's edge as if she belonged. She kept her shoulders narrow and her head down. She counted exits without moving her eyes: the alley she'd come from, a narrow gap between two frames, a side lane guarded by a soldier with a mouthpiece at his throat.

A soldier stepped sideways and shoved her with the end of his baton.

"Out," he said.

Reni staggered a half-step and caught herself. The loaf under her coat pressed against her ribs.

"Line's for papers," the soldier said. "Go the other way."

"There isn't another way," Reni said before she could stop herself.

The soldier's baton lifted. His face remained blank.

"Papers only," he said. "Clear the frame."

Reni closed her jaw. The wards made the street too quiet for arguments. Arguments drew attention.

She backed away, hands half lifted as if to show compliance, and let the line swallow the space where she'd tried to stand.

A covered tray passed at the street's edge. A palace runner moved with quick steps, head down, linen cap pulled low. The runner's apron was stained with broth and ash. Her forearms showed bruises in the gaps between sleeve and glove.

Reni's eyes caught on the tray for the wrong reason at first: the smell. Warm broth under curfew meant a kitchen route, and a kitchen route meant a way into the palace if the day turned strange enough.

The runner's gaze flicked up. For a moment their eyes met.

The runner did not speak. She shifted the tray slightly and let its edge angle toward the ground near two iron plates set into the pavement. Between the plates a narrow drainage cut ran, covered by a thin strip of metal that did not quite meet the other side.

Reni's first thought was trap. People set traps under curfew because a trap meant a soldier might take someone else instead of you.

The runner's face remained still. No signal beyond the angle of the tray and a brief, deliberate look.

Reni hesitated. The soldier at the line's edge turned his head. Another soldier walked along the frames with a baton held loose, ready.

She weighed the chance of a trap against the certainty of the baton. Her shoulder still ached from last week's shove at a pylon line. She moved for the cut.

She crossed the street in three quick steps and dropped into a crouch by the iron plates. The gap between them was just wide enough for fingers to hook under. She lifted the thin strip of metal, felt it scrape, and slipped it aside.

The runner stepped forward, tray held higher now as if to pass in front of a soldier.

A baton struck her shoulder.

“Watch yourself,” the soldier said.

The tray tipped. Broth sloshed under the cloth cover. The runner’s hands tightened around the tray’s edges and held it level again. She did not speak. Her jaw did not move. She took the hit and kept standing in the soldier’s line of sight.

Reni did not have time to look at the runner again.

She slid into the drainage cut.

Cold foul water met her hands first, then her knees. The channel ran beneath the iron plates and into darkness. Her boots scraped on brick. She kept the loaf tucked high under her coat with one arm while the other pulled her forward.

The smell was stagnant brick and metallic water. It was not fresh sewage. It was old water that had run through iron and stone for too long.

Reni crawled until the channel widened enough for her to turn her head. Above, the street noise became a low blur. A baton struck again. Someone grunted. The pylon lamp pulsed on.

She kept moving.

After a short distance the channel rose. A grate above had been bent at one corner long ago. Reni pushed it up with her shoulder and lifted herself through.

She emerged behind a row of narrow houses with small gardens and netted beds. The rose allotments lay beyond a low wall. The palace wall cut the sky into rectangular slices above it.

Reni stood in the shadow of the houses and wiped her wet hands on her coat. The fuse cord at her wrist had soaked through and stuck to her skin.

She listened.

The sweep noise was further away here, but it existed. Boot rhythm on stone. A shouted command. The pylon pulse's faint ward hum.

If she stayed outside, she would be seen when patrols tightened. The allotment neighbourhood had fewer civilians in the open. Fewer civilians meant a stranger was noticed.

She moved along the back of the houses and found a window with an iron frame. The shutter had not been latched properly. Perhaps the occupant had left in a hurry. Perhaps the occupant believed the imperial tags and frames were enough.

Reni tested the shutter with two fingers. It opened without a squeal.

She climbed in.

Inside, the air carried damp wool and stale ash. The front room was unlit even though it was day. A table stood near the wall with a small tin and a knife laid out as if someone had been interrupted mid-task.

Reni did not touch anything. Touching left prints. Prints made questions easier.

She crossed the room with her weight on the balls of her feet and paused by the stairwell. She listened again.

A faint sound came up through the floorboards. Not boot rhythm. Not the grinding of ward conduits she'd heard near inspection pylons. A low hum, steady, close.

She crouched and put her palm against the floor. The hum had a vibration she could feel in the wood.

Reni's mouth tightened.

Machinery in these houses was rare. The Empire kept machinery in barracks and palace underworks, not in workers' homes. A hum under a floor usually meant a hidden engine, a stolen device, a charge set to blow.

Or something worth money.

Reni stood and went to the cellar door.

The hinge did not squeal. Someone had greased it.

She opened it and listened down the stairwell.

The hum strengthened.

Reni took the loaf from under her coat and set it on the table. She kept the fuse cord on her wrist.

Then she went down.

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The cellar steps were steep. Reni kept one hand on the rail and the other free. Her eyes adjusted slowly. Light came through a street-level vent in a faint grey line. It did not reach the far wall.

Halfway down, the smell changed. Damp clay and loam, closer than the stale ash upstairs. There was also the iron note of water, the kind that left a taste in the back of the mouth.

At the bottom step, Reni paused.

The hum came from the back of the cellar.

A clay pot sat on a board near the wall, wrapped in rags. Dark soil had seeped down its side and onto the stone floor. The pot's glaze showed a crack running from rim toward base.

From the centre of the pot, a sapling rose. Its stem was thin, bark carrying a faint sheen that did not match the grey light. Leaves spread in a small cluster. Even in the dim, the green read as too present.

Reni took a step closer.

She had seen plants grown in hidden corners of the district: herbs in tin cans, onions cut and replanted, a few illegal fruit pits tended in basins. They were all cautious things, kept alive by stolen water and patience.

This sapling did not look cautious. The hum under it ran through the stone.

Value, Reni thought. Not sanctity. Not omen. Value in the way a rare tool had value, in the way a bar of soap had value when a man's hands were cracked and bleeding.

A movement at the cellar step made her turn.

An old man stood there with a cane. He was thin and stooped, hair cut short. His wool coat had a patch at the elbow. His hands were stained with earth that did not fully wash out.

His eyes fixed on Reni. Blood showed in the white of them.

"Get out," he said.

Reni's gaze flicked to the cane. The ferrule was metal. A strike from it would hurt. The old man's grip looked firm.

"You don't own the street," Reni said.

"I own this house," the man replied. His voice had the formal weight of someone used to speaking to authority without giving it anything. "Leave."

Reni shifted her weight and angled herself so she could see the cellar steps and the back wall at once. She counted exits. One: the steps. Two: the back corner where the wall met the floor and the stones looked different, older.

She nodded once at the sapling.

"What is that?" she asked.

The man moved the cane a fraction, barring her line to the pot.

"Nothing you can carry," he said.

Reni heard the choice in the word nothing. A lie that did not bother to sound convincing.

“I can carry plenty,” she said. She held up her wrist so the fuse cord showed. “And I can make people carry things they don’t want.”

The man’s mouth tightened.

Reni took a step toward the pot.

The man’s cane lifted and the ferrule tapped stone once, close. He set the tip down between her and the board, blocking her path.

“Do not,” he said. His voice went clipped. His breathing stayed measured.

Reni stopped. She looked at him again and saw the small details: the swelling at his knuckles, the way he kept his hands visible even in his own cellar, the stiff care in his posture as if a wrong movement might make pain flare.

“You’re a palace gardener,” Reni said, not as a guess. She had seen men like him in the allotments beyond the wall, moving between rose beds with new gloves while the district went hungry.

The old man did not answer.

Reni pointed at the sapling.

“That could be traded,” she said. “Food. Papers. A way out. Or it could be used. Living things break when you push them hard enough. They break other things too.”

The old man’s eyes flicked to the pot’s crack and back.

“It is living,” he said. “Not loot.”

Reni gave a short laugh that held no humour.

“Living doesn’t stop it being useful,” she said. “Nothing in this city gets to be useless.”

The old man’s jaw moved. He looked as if he were swallowing a taste he did not like.

“You do not understand,” he said.

“Then explain,” Reni said, and stepped closer again.

The hum under the pot grew stronger. It had already been present, but now the vibration pressed up through the soles of her boots.

The shelves along the wall held jars and tools. One jar trembled, glass against wood.

The old man glanced at the shelf.

“Quiet,” he said.

Reni’s mouth opened.

A jar slipped.

It fell from the shelf, struck the stone floor, and shattered.

The crash rang in the cellar. Glass skittered. A metal lid rolled and stopped against the board beneath the pot.

Both of them froze.

Reni kept her eyes on the cellar steps now. Above, the house remained silent for the space of a breath.

Boots crossed the porch boards overhead; the cadence matched Iron-Eater drill.

Then two hard knocks landed on the front door, evenly spaced. The latch rattled.

Reni’s throat went dry.

The old man did not move. His cane remained lifted a fraction, useless now against the knocks.

Footsteps sounded on the street outside, damped but present. The inspection pylon pulse in the distance stayed steady.

“Iron-Eaters,” Reni said quietly.

The old man’s eyes flicked to her face. He did not ask how she knew. Everyone in Sector Four learned the patterns.

Above, a voice called.

“Open. Inspection.”

Reni turned back to the pot. The sapling’s leaves remained still. The hum continued.

“You did this,” the old man said, and the accusation landed without heat. It had the tired flatness of someone who had already blamed himself for other things.

Reni’s jaw tightened.

“I didn’t set their pylons,” she said.

The old man’s cane lowered slightly. He looked past her at the pot and then at the back corner where the stones differed.

A third knock landed, harder. The latch rattled again.

The old man inhaled. The breath sounded controlled.

“Listen,” he said.

Reni watched his mouth. She expected him to tell her to hide, to flee, to sacrifice something that was not his.

Instead he said, “There is a hatch.”

He shifted his cane point to the far shelf where jars had been set.

“Under the last board,” he said. “Older underworks. A crawlspace. It runs wet and low, but it runs.”

Reni looked at the shelf. The jars did not look disturbed beyond the one shattered on the floor.

“Why are you telling me?” she asked.

“Because your presence removes any chance of harmless privacy,” the old man said. His voice remained formal even now, as if he spoke a guild phrase and could not stop. “If I throw you out, you will make noise. If you run upstairs, you will be caught. If you stay here and keep quiet, there is a

chance they do not come down.”

Reni’s eyes narrowed.

“A chance,” she echoed.

He looked at her then, properly.

“A chance,” he repeated. “Not a promise.”

Another sound came from above: the latch rattling.

Reni stepped closer to the pot again without thinking. She wanted to know what she would be risking her skin for.

The old man’s left hand came into view. A strip of cloth wrapped his thumb. The cloth had soaked through at the centre and dried at the edges. Fresh red marked the knot.

Reni’s gaze dropped to the pot’s soil. At the rim, a ring of earth looked darker than the rest.

Blood.

Her mouth tightened.

“You fed it,” she said.

The old man’s eyes did not leave hers.

“Yes,” he said.

Reni looked at the sapling again. The hum made more sense now. Not machinery. Not a charge. A living thing tied to a man’s body.

A thing soldiers would pay for; a thing worth papers. Her mouth tightened again at where her thoughts went.

Upstairs, a voice called again.

“Open now.”

The old man shifted his weight on the cane.

“You will help me keep it from being seized,” he said.

Reni almost laughed.

“Why would I help you keep your secret?” she said.

“Because if they take it,” the old man replied, “they will not leave you standing. They will take you too, and they will decide what you are useful for. They will put you under iron and ask you where you came from. You will not like the answer you give.”

Reni’s fingers tightened on the fuse cord at her wrist.

“What is it?” she asked again, quieter.

The old man’s jaw moved. He did not look at the sapling when he answered.

“It is a sapling,” he said. “A thing the Empire should not have in a cage.”

Reni heard the missing word: World-Tree. She had heard it said as a curse when old women argued at water lines, and as a story when children tried to make hunger feel less final.

She did not say the words aloud.

The latch rattled again, harder. Footsteps shifted on the porch.

The old man took a breath. Reni watched the rise of his shoulders, the careful control.

“I will go up,” he said.

Reni stared at him.

“They’ll kill you,” she said.

His mouth twitched.

“They will not,” he said. “Not yet. I am useful.”

He swallowed after the last word. His jaw tightened, then eased.

He moved toward the steps. The cane ferrule tapped once, then he caught it and lifted it before it struck again.

Reni stepped into his path.

“Wait,” she said.

He stopped.

“What if they come down?” she asked.

“Then you use the hatch,” he said. “You take it with you if you can. If you cannot, you take yourself.”

Reni’s eyes flicked to the pot. The crack had widened since she first saw it. Damp soil continued to seep.

She swallowed.

“And you?” she asked.

The old man’s eyes held hers for a breath.

“I will do what I have done for ten years,” he said. “I will stand in front of an imperial man and make my mouth say what keeps me alive long enough to move.”

Upstairs, the latch gave a final sharp rattle.

The old man turned. He climbed the steps.

Reni stood in the cellar with the hum under her boots, shattered glass at her feet, and the concealed hatch waiting under jars that looked ordinary until you knew to look.

She did not move until she heard the front door open.

# Chapter 3

## The Root and the Rod

Silas had waited until the knocks resolved into a pattern he recognised.

Under the Silence Wards, sound did not travel far; it came through the door as measured impacts, and the latch rattled as it lifted instead of ringing. Unlit air sat close in the front room. His shoulders held to the narrow posture that pulled less at his side. The stove was cold. On the table sat a tin of grease and the rose pruning knife he had not put away after dawn; beside them, a coarse loaf that had not been there at first light.

A second knock landed, and a voice called from the porch.

"Open. Inspection."

Metal met stone as he set his cane's ferrule on the flagstone by the stairwell. A faint vibration came up from the conduits under the street; the wards suppressed everything else. He went to the door without lighting a lamp, turned the key, and lifted the latch.

Two Iron-Eaters stood close, oilcloth coats damp at the hems. Behind them, two soldiers waited with batons at their belts. The Iron-Eater nearest the step held a rod bundle in one hand; the iron bars were strapped together with cord, ends wrapped in cloth to keep them from striking.

Silas kept his eyes lowered to the level of a gorget.

"Good morning," he said. He kept his voice formal, careful. "Gardener Greyth, palace allotments."

"Inside," the nearer Iron-Eater said.

Silas stepped back, hands visible, then dipped his head in the bow that had become habit.

The Iron-Eaters did not enter at once. The soldier on the right turned his head towards the street. Another set of boots approached, heavier, and stopped at the edge of the porch.

Prefect Hadrik Sorn came into view.

He wore the dull iron gorget and the mouthpiece at his throat. His coat showed old creases along the sleeves. The scar tissue around his ears remained visible where his hair lay close.

Sorn did not speak to Silas first. He looked at the lintel and the inspection tag hanging on its hook, then at Silas's face.

"Greyth," he said.

Silas bowed again and reached into his coat. Slowly, fingers working through the inner pocket, he drew out the palace gardener credential: a folded paper, stamped and signed, edges worn from handling. He held it open in both hands so Sorn could read without touching Silas's skin.

Sorn did not take it. He read it where it was.

"You are assigned to the rose allotments," Sorn said.

"Yes, Prefect," Silas replied.

Sorn stepped inside without waiting for invitation. The soldiers followed. The Iron-Eaters came last and shut the door behind them.

Sorn looked down at the floor by the threshold, then along the skirting, then to the stairwell.

"Any devices?" he asked.

"None," Silas said.

Sorn's hand went to the rod bundle an Iron-Eater carried. He took one rod and placed its end against the floorboards near the stairwell. Iron clicked on wood.

Silas watched the gloved hand, not the face.

A span to the left, the rod went down again. Sorn angled his head, listening through the iron. There was no flourish to the movement. It belonged to a man who measured things for a living.

The front room remained dark enough that the soldiers' faces blurred at the edges. Buttons and iron frames caught daylight leaking through shutter seams.

"House is cold," one soldier said.

"Smoke draws attention," Silas answered.

"So does silence," the soldier replied.

Silas kept his eyes down and his jaw still.

Sorn lifted the rod and moved it again, now closer to the cellar door. The door sat beside the stairwell, plain wood set into the wall. Greased hinges would not matter if a man decided to open it.

Silas spoke before Sorn could.

"There is nothing below but storage," he said. "Rose canes, trellis wire, compost sacks. I keep them down from rats. You may look in any room." He shifted, angling his body so the line to the cellar door was less direct. "You will find only gardening supplies."

Sorn did not look at him. The rod tapped the wood once, then again, each contact spaced by a counted beat.

The vibration Silas had lived beside for ten years ran in his bones as an expected count. The other vibration, the one in the cellar, had never settled into a pattern that could be trusted.

Sorn lifted the rod and turned towards the back room.

"Search," he said.

The soldiers checked the kitchen and the cupboard, then returned with little more than a jar and a handful of cloth.

"No stove use," one soldier said.

"He is old," an Iron-Eater said.

Sorn's gaze moved over Silas, taking in his thin frame, stoop, and cane.

"You keep your place neat," Sorn said.

"It is required," Silas replied.

One soldier stood by the table and touched the tin of grease with two fingers.

"Greasing hinges," he said.

Silas did not correct him.

The soldier's gaze dropped.

"Your boot," he said.

Silas's stomach tightened. He knew the damp soil was there; he had seen it by the cellar step when he climbed to meet the knocks. It had seeped down the pot in the night and clung to stone and leather.

The soldier pointed at the heel where mud sat dark against worn leather.

"You been in the beds?" the soldier asked.

Silas kept his breathing even. His wrapped thumb gave a slow pulse of pain.

"Rose beds," he said. "The netting caught rain. The soil is damp where the wall stays warm."

His mouth dried. Wool dust coated his tongue. He tried to swallow and could not.

Sorn turned his head and looked at the boot.

"Your roses are under netting," he said.

"Yes," Silas replied. "Condensation. It drips along the wall."

Sorn's eyes stayed on the heel for two pulses at the wrist.

"Hall," Sorn said.

Silas moved when ordered. He took one step into the hallway, cane ferrule controlled so it did not strike hard. The corridor was narrow, walls close enough that his shoulder brushed plaster if he turned too quickly.

Sorn followed. The soldiers remained in the front room.

Sorn closed the hallway door partway. Not fully. A gap remained.

"You know why we are here," Sorn said.

"The pylons," Silas answered.

"The pylons record," Sorn replied. "They do not invent."

Silas held his gaze to the level of Sorn's gorget.

"I have seen faults in the line by the allotments," Silas said.

Sorn's hand moved. The rod came up, not as a weapon meant to kill, but as a tool used with a different purpose.

The first strike landed low, into Silas's ribs, just under the coat. Pain cut through his side and forced his breath out. He kept his mouth closed.

Sorn struck again, a fraction higher. The iron edge caught him through wool and skin.

Silas's cane slipped, ferrule skidding on the flagstone. He caught it and braced it against the wall, forearm tight against his ribs.

"Answer," Sorn said. "What fault. Where."

Silas pulled air back into his lungs and spoke on the exhale.

"Pylon at the end of the lane," he said. "Its lamp flickers at dawn. It has done so since last thaw."

Sorn's rod rose and came down again, this time at Silas's mouth. The iron did not break bone, but it split the skin along the lower lip. Warm blood spread. Silas tasted iron.

He pressed his tongue against the cut and kept his voice steady.

"You are lying," Sorn said.

"No," Silas replied.

Sorn watched him without speaking. With sound suppressed under the wards, Silas could hear the soldiers' boots in the front room: each shift of weight, each scrape against wood.

Sorn struck once more, controlled and precise. The rod caught Silas's shoulder. His knees dipped.

He let himself take the wall instead of the floor. Breath came out in a rough line he could not stop, but he did not cry out.

"Again," Sorn said.

Silas lifted his head.

"I tend roses," he said. "I carry compost and wire. I do not carry devices."

Sorn moved closer. The rod tip touched the floorboard by the hallway threshold, then traced a small circle. Sorn's head tilted. His eyes narrowed.

Silas heard it too then, under the baseline: a faint hum, steady enough to be noticed if a man listened for it. It came up through stone and wood, through the bones of the house.

Sorn stayed still for a count of two.

Silas kept his face set. Blood ran into the corner of his mouth and down his chin.

Sorn lifted the rod and turned his head towards the front window.

The shutters were closed, but one edge did not meet the frame perfectly. A sliver of street showed through.

Silas spoke into the pause.

"Prefect," he said, voice low. "If you look, you will see the pylon flicker. It draws attention. Men talk. It is a fault in the ward line."

Sorn moved to the shutter seam and looked through. The view gave only a narrow piece of street and the inspection pylon at the lane's end.

The lamp held steady for a count of three, then shifted to a pale blue and returned to white. The pulse came after, regular and thin.

Sorn's jaw tightened.

"A known fault," Silas said. "The allotment stones shift in winter. The old drains settle. The ward line is laid over older work."

Sorn kept watching through another pulse cycle. Pale blue returned, then white.

"You report faults," Sorn said.

Silas did not answer.

Sorn stepped back from the shutter.

"You will report now," he said.

"Yes, Prefect," Silas replied.

Sorn opened the hallway door fully and stepped into the front room again. He spoke to the soldiers.

"Nothing here that will serve you," he said.

The soldier by the table watched Silas, then looked away.

Sorn took back his rod from the floor and returned it to the Iron-Eater's bundle.

He stood by the door.

"Leave one," he said.

One soldier shifted.

"Here?" the man asked.

"Here," Sorn replied. "Outside. Watch the windows. Watch the door. If he leaves, follow at a distance. If he opens to someone else, take names."

The soldier's eyes flicked to Silas.

"You are not confined," Sorn said to Silas. "You are observed. Do not mistake one for the other."

"No, Prefect," Silas replied.

Sorn opened the front door. The Iron-Eaters and one soldier stepped out. The remaining soldier lingered on the porch.

Sorn paused at the threshold and looked back once.

"If the pylon records again," he said, "the next search will go where it needs to go."

He shut the door without waiting for answer.

Silas stood in the front room with blood on his chin and damp soil on his heel. His hands trembled as he slid the bolt; the metal rasped once. A shallow inhale caught at his ribs before he forced it even.

He wiped his mouth with the inside of his sleeve and tasted wool dirt.

Below the floorboards, the cellar held the pot.

\*\*\*

Reni kept her back to the wall by the cellar steps.

A dim line of light from the street vent cut across the limestone and stopped at the shelf. The jar that had shattered lay where it had fallen, glass spread in an arc. The metal lid had rolled beneath the board under the pot and remained there. She had not moved it, and she kept her hands away from anything she did not need.

Above her, a voice spoke low, then stopped. Footsteps shifted on wood.

The first impact came through the floorboards as a dull strike. Not a fist on wood. Iron on cloth made that sound.

Reni's fingers tightened around the pot rim.

She had promised herself she would not be caught in another house under another sweep. She should have left before soldiers went further than knocks, but the pot sat in the middle of the cellar with its crack and seep, and the sapling stood above it with a green that did not belong under wards.

A second impact followed the first, then a third.

The sapling's vibration changed.

The hum that had been steady under her boots sharpened into a quicker pattern. The board under the pot rasped against stone.

Reni leaned closer, eyes narrowed.

At the base of the pot, where the glaze crack ran down towards the bottom, a seam had opened further. Damp soil had already pushed through in the night. Now something else appeared.

A pale root tip pressed out of the seam.

It pressed straight into the stone grit gathered under the board, a narrow point widening as it forced its way through.

Reni's mouth went dry.

Another impact sounded above.

The vibration spiked again. The root tip thickened by a fraction. Soil shifted outward, darkening where moisture spread.

Reni kept one hand on the pot rim and moved the other to the board's edge. She did not touch the root.

The pot shifted.

Not enough to see from across the room, but enough that her fingers felt the change. The board moved a finger's breadth to the left, scraping across stone.

Reni stared at the gap between the board and the old stain on the floor.

Force, she thought. Growth could push. Pressure could shift weight.

Another impact sounded above, and Reni felt it in her teeth.

A hairline crack in the foundation behind the pot widened. Dust dropped from the seam and settled on the rags.

Cold air came through the crack. It carried the stale iron note of water.

Under it, faint but present, a mechanical grind reached her. Not boots. Not human movement. The same low cycle she had heard near inspection pylons when men drove pins into pavement.

Reni lifted her head.

Ward conduits ran under streets. The Empire had laid them in straight lines when it could, but old stone made it difficult. The conduits ran close to houses and drains, close to people who pretended not to listen.

The crack shed another pinch of grit.

Reni moved.

She hooked both hands under the pot rim where the rags had slipped away from the clay and pulled.

The pot did not move.

Her wrists strained. The rim bit into her palms. The weight pressed down into her fingers until her knuckles whitened.

She pulled again.

The pot shifted a fraction and then settled back with a dull sound. The board rasped once.

Reni's breath came short.

She had carried sacks of flour from barracks stores when she was smaller than she was now. She had dragged a friend through a market crush by the coat collar.

This weight did not match clay and damp soil and a thin sapling.

The hum sharpened once more, then steadied.

Dust continued to settle. The board did not move.

No other sound reached her.

Her gaze went to the shelf where the tools were kept.

The rose pruning knife lay on the table upstairs, but there were blades down here: a narrow knife for cutting wire, a hatchet head without a handle, a grafting blade dulled by years.

She reached for the knife used for wire.

The metal was cold. She lifted it and held it close to her body.

The sapling's leaves remained still in the dim light. The root tip at the pot base continued pressing into grit.

Reni brought the blade up.

She did not swing. She did not touch the stem. She held the knife between her and the sapling, unsure how close to bring it.

The vibration changed.

The hum did not stop, but its rhythm shifted into a quicker pulse. It ran through the pot rim and into her fingertips even when she eased her grip. The root tip thickened again.

Reni lowered the blade.

She had expected cutting would make the thing smaller and easier to carry. The quicker pulse told her what it did instead.

Above, Silas's voice came through the floorboards in a muted line.

"I tend roses," he said.

Reni's jaw tightened.

She could not hear every word, but she could hear the steadiness. She had heard that same steadiness at inspection pylons, in soft answers over shaking hands.

The impacts resumed, then stopped.

Reni kept her eyes on the pot and watched the root tip.

It stayed in place.

The foundation crack behind the pot remained wider than before. Dust lay in a new line along the floor. Cold air continued to seep through. The mechanical grind faded, then returned in a low cycle.

The fissures were fresh, and there was no way to clean away a crack.

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Silas descended without a lantern.

He did not trust flame near the vent now. He did not trust anything that made a man look twice at his house. Before he shut himself in, he paused at the cellar door with his hand on the wood and listened for the porch boards.

He locked the cellar door behind him with care, bolt sliding into place without a hard scrape. It was an old movement, practised over years of keeping two lives in one house.

Damp clay and iron-tainted water filled the cellar air.

Reni stood by the steps, knife in hand. Her shoulders were set. Her face held the sharpness of someone who had not slept properly in months.

Silas touched his split lip with the edge of his tongue and tasted blood again. He wiped his chin on his sleeve.

Reni's gaze went to his mouth, then to the bruise darkening under his coat collar.

"You let them do that," she said.

Silas did not answer at once. He took two steps into the cellar, cane ferrule controlled so it did not strike stone too hard. Pain flared at his ribs. He kept his breathing even.

"Did you want me to shout?" he asked.

"I wanted you to fight," Reni said. "Or run. Anything."

Silas stopped by the pot.

"If I shouted," he said, "they would have come down here."

Reni's eyes narrowed.

"They still might," she said.

"If they saw fear," Silas replied, "they would have looked for the reason. If they heard me cry out, they would have decided I was hiding more than a sore rib. They would have opened the cellar door with iron in their hands." He swallowed, and the movement pulled at the split lip. "Then this would be in a cage by midday."

Reni looked at the pot.

The crack had widened. Damp soil marked the rim and the rags.

"And what is it doing now?" she demanded.

She stepped closer and pointed at the foundation behind the pot.

The crack in the limestone had widened to a seam. Dust lay thick on the floor.

"That wasn't there," she said.

Silas knelt as far as pain in his ribs allowed and leaned towards the pot base. The root tip showed through the seam, pale against the dark soil.

Reni's knife hand tightened.

Silas raised his hand, palm open.

"Do not," he said.

"Answer," Reni replied.

Silas's thumb throbbed under its cloth wrap. He touched the bandage with his other hand and felt dampness where blood had seeped through earlier.

"It answers blood," he said.

Reni's eyes flicked to his wrapped thumb.

"I saw," she said.

"And under stress," Silas continued, "it answers pain."

Reni gave a short sound.

"So you being beaten feeds it," she said.

Silas did not correct her words.

"It responds," he said.

Reni stared at the root tip.

"It's tied to you," she said.

Silas did not answer. His ribs hurt too much for long speech.

He shifted his cane and set the ferrule against the stone near the crack.

He listened through his wrist.

The known ward vibration remained present, countable at a distance. Under it, the hum from the sapling ran faster than it had in the night. And under both, a faint grind came and went, a mechanical cycle he associated with conduit adjustments.

Silas lifted the ferrule and moved it a span, then another.

The vibration strengthened closer to the crack.

He sat back on his heel.

"It is too near a line," he said.

Reni tilted her head.

"A ward line?" she asked.

Silas pressed his palm to the stone and felt cold air at the seam.

"Conduit work runs under this street," he said. "They laid iron and stone where they could. They did not move the old drains, they only covered them. If roots push into the wrong place, the pylons will record again."

Reni's eyes moved to the shelf where the hatch lay concealed.

"Then we move," she said.

Silas looked at the cellar around him.

Reni took his pause as refusal.

"You can't stay," she said. "They'll come back."

Silas opened his mouth, then closed it.

A sound came from above.

Footsteps on the porch boards: one set, a pause, then a scrape.

Reni went still.

Silas lifted his cane and held it close to his body to keep it from tapping.

The steps moved off the porch, then returned. Cloth brushed the door.

Reni spoke low.

"He's still there," she said.

Silas nodded once.

A soldier remained outside, watching the door.

Silas moved to the far shelf.

The jars sat in a line. One space remained empty where the shattered jar had been. Glass still lay on the floor, catching the vent light.

He slid the jars aside, keeping them from clinking. His hands shook, so he moved slower.

Reni watched him.

"That hatch," she said.

Silas lifted the fitted board.

Cold wet air rose from the opening, metallic-water smell and stagnant brick.

He held the board aside and looked down.

The crawlspace below was a narrow cut through older stonework. Brick and limestone met at uneven angles. Water sat in a shallow run along one side.

Silas did not climb down. Pain in his ribs stopped him from leaning forward.

"It runs," he said. "It did yesterday."

"Does it go clean?" Reni asked.

Silas shook his head.

"I do not know," he said. "The line behind this wall carries water. The overlay in the pollen marked it. But I have not crawled it."

Reni's eyes narrowed.

"So it might be a dead end," she said.

"It might," Silas replied.

"And it might be full of rats," Reni said.

"It might," Silas said again.

Reni looked back at the pot.

"And this?" she asked.

Silas followed her gaze.

The pot sat where it had sat for months, and yet it did not look fixed to the floor any longer. The board's position had shifted. The root tip had entered grit. The foundation crack had widened.

"This is worse," he said.

Reni exhaled through her nose.

"Fine," she said. "We go."

Reni stepped closer and spoke in a lower voice.

"One condition," she said.

Silas looked at her.

"If you collapse," she said, "you let me drag you. I don't care if it hurts your pride. I don't care if you hate me for it. You don't get to lie down and make it my problem after."

Silas held her gaze.

He did not answer.

Reni waited for two counted beats.

"That's a no," she said.

Silas's silence remained.

Reni's mouth tightened.

"You're going to make this difficult," she said.

Silas looked at the pot.

"It is already difficult," he said.

He moved to the pot and gripped beneath the rim where the rags had slipped, avoiding the wet soil that seeped from the crack.

Reni stepped in on the other side and mirrored his grip.

"On three," she said.

Silas did not count aloud. He nodded once.

They lifted.

The pot rose a finger's breadth and then dragged back against their hands. The weight pressed down, forcing their wrists to take the strain.

Reni swore under her breath.

Silas's ribs flared with pain. His breath cut short.

The board skated a fraction across the stone.

They set the pot down again without letting it drop.

Reni leaned forward and stared at the stain on the floor where the pot had sat.

"It moved," she said.

Silas looked at the new position of the board. He touched his cane ferrule to the stone beside it and felt the vibration sharpen.

"Again," Reni said.

Silas shifted his grip, set his cane aside within reach, and braced his shoulder against the pot.

Reni placed both hands under the rim and lifted as he pushed.

The board scraped forward another finger's breadth.

The sound cut through the cellar.

They both stopped.

Above, there was no response from inside the house.

Silas swallowed blood and looked at the hatch, open in the stone.

Reni kept her hands on the rim, breath held.

"We do it in small shifts," she said.

Silas set his palm on the pot rim again, felt damp soil under his skin, and pushed.

The board scraped forward one more fraction towards the shelf where the hatch gaped.

The movement committed them to transit. The house behind them was no longer a hiding place.

# Chapter 4

## The Severance

A narrow strip of grey showed at the cellar vent where street light met the iron grating outside. It made the limestone look colder than it was, and it gave the shattered glass on the floor a hard edge.

Silas stayed low beside the pot, his ribs refusing a full breath. His cane lay within reach, ferrule on stone, ready for the next count. The sapling's thin leaves barely moved in the weak air, but the hum in the pot travelled into his wrists when he rested a hand on the rim.

Reni crouched opposite him, heels down, coat pulled tight at the throat. The wire-cutting knife was no longer raised; it sat in her hand, steady.

Above them, a board creaked. The sound did not carry far under the Silence Wards, yet it carried what weight allowed: a shift, a boot heel dragging once, then a pause.

Reni's gaze flicked to the steps.

"He's still here," she said.

Silas nodded without lifting his head. The split in his lower lip had dried into a crust that pulled when he spoke. He wiped at it once with the inside of his sleeve and left the blood smear there.

"He was ordered," he said.

"Ordered to watch a house," Reni replied. Her voice stayed low, but the words came sharp. "A house with a cellar."

Silas did not correct her. He kept his attention on the pot's crack and the pale root tip pressed into grit beneath the board. The root had

thickened since the beating ended; not much, but enough to change the shape of the soil where it pushed.

Reni shifted her weight.

“They didn’t kill you,” she said. “They never do. That’s what you’re for. You cooperate, and they keep you.”

Silas’s thumb throbbed under its cloth wrap, damp at the knot. He lifted it to his mouth and tightened the tie with his teeth, then set his hand back down.

“Yes,” he said.

Reni’s eyes narrowed as if she had expected denial and found it missing.

“You admit it,” she said.

“I have lived here ten years under their tags,” Silas answered. “I have taken their wages and their gloves and their orders.” He kept his voice even. “If that is not cooperation, then the word has no meaning.”

Above, a cough sounded. The noise had a wet edge. It moved across the porch boards and stopped.

Reni’s mouth tightened.

“You say it like it’s nothing,” she said.

Silas touched the cane ferrule with two fingers and felt the baseline vibration from the street conduits. The count held. He did not take comfort from it.

“It is not nothing,” he said.

Reni leaned closer, the knife still in her fist.

“How did you get to keep this,” she asked, “if you’re so useful?”

Silas looked at her, then looked away. Her face held youth in the set of her jaw and the thinness under the eyes. Her hands had burns that came from heat and haste.

He had seen hands like that before. Smaller, then; careful fingers stained by fruit tannin and sap, quick with grafting twine.

The memory did not bring warmth. It brought a dryness in his mouth.

Reni waited.

Silas spoke without building a defence.

“I gave them the Registry,” he said.

Reni blinked once.

“The what?”

“The Orchard Registry,” Silas said. “The book of sites and names. Where the older trees were kept and who kept them, and who was sworn under which soil-oath. Apprentices. Their families.”

Reni’s breath left her nose in a thin line.

“You gave them a list,” she said.

Silas held her gaze.

“Yes.”

A floorboard shifted above, then settled. The soldier’s weight moved along the porch, then stopped.

Reni turned her head towards the steps and stayed still until the movement stopped.

Then she looked back at Silas.

“Why,” she said. It was not a plea. It was a demand.

Silas’s ribs tightened. He pressed a palm against them through his coat, then took it away.

“I believed paper could be traded,” he said. “I believed names could be given and then taken back. I believed a man who spoke in measures might honour a bargain if the bargain served his order.”

Reni's eyes sharpened.

"You traded your own," she said.

Silas did not try to soften it.

"I traded the Registry for apprentice lives," he said.

Reni's lips parted, then closed. She looked past him, at the cellar wall where the foundation crack had widened into a seam. Dust still lay where it fell.

"What did you get," she asked, voice low.

Silas kept his back straight despite the pain.

"Nothing that could be held," he said.

Reni's fingers tightened on the knife.

"You got something," she said. "You're here."

Silas nodded once.

"They took the apprentices anyway," he said. "Some were marched to the wagons the next morning. Some were taken from their beds later, after the first curfew lines were built. I did not see all of it. I did not have the right to."

He glanced up at the ceiling boards, then back to the pot.

"And they left me," he said. "They left me because they required an old man in plain clothes to tend their roses. They required a visible example. A man who had once spoken the soil-oaths now speaking their titles."

Reni's gaze returned to him.

"So you're punished," she said.

"I am used," Silas replied.

Reni stared at his mouth, where the split had reopened with his speech.

“That’s worse,” she said.

Silas did not argue. He lowered his eyes to the pot.

Reni kept her face set, and her voice stayed hard.

“You could have died with them,” she said.

“Yes,” Silas answered.

“You didn’t,” Reni said. “So what were you then. A coward.”

Silas let the word land.

“Yes,” he said.

Reni gave a short sound, sharp in her throat.

“You agree too easily,” she said.

Silas pressed his thumb against the pot rim, careful of the wet soil.

“I have had years to learn my name in other mouths,” he said.

Reni’s jaw worked.

“Coward,” she said again, quieter. “A coward who kept a tree in a cellar.”

Silas’s throat tightened. He did not reach for pollen.

“Cowardice kept it hidden,” he said. “Cowardice made me listen at vents and count conduits and keep my lamps hooded. Cowardice made me bleed in small measures rather than draw attention with water runs and smoke.”

Reni’s eyes flicked to the stoppered jar on the shelf.

“You didn’t even give it water,” she said.

Silas’s mouth tightened.

“I gave it what I had,” he said. “When water was scarce, blood was present. When pain was present, it answered.”

Reni’s knife hand shifted.

“And that’s why you let him beat you,” she said.

Silas did not deny the chain of cause.

“It kept the search above,” he said.

Reni’s shoulders rose and fell.

“This thing,” she said. “It’s what they’re here for now. You think you can carry it out in a pot and they’ll just,” She stopped, listening.

A crate scraped above on the porch. The sound travelled through the stairwell, blunt and slow, then stopped as weight settled on the boards.

Reni’s eyes met Silas’s.

“He’s not leaving,” she said.

Silas watched the cellar door, plain wood set into plaster. Grease on hinges would not change what an ordered man might do.

“No,” Silas said.

Reni leaned closer to the sapling, not touching the leaves.

“Then you should have left years ago,” she said.

Silas looked at the pot seam where the pale root had forced its way out.

“It could not go years ago,” he said.

Reni’s brow furrowed.

“It’s a plant,” she said. “You put it in a sack and you run.”

Silas’s hand tightened on the cane.

“It is a sapling bound to soil-law,” he replied. “It cannot be carried as a trophy. It cannot be cut into keepsakes and expect to remain alive. It requires an anchor if it is to root without tearing everything it meets.”

Reni gave a short laugh without humour.

“Soil-law,” she said. “Anchor. Seat. You recite terms.”

Silas looked at her face, then at the pot.

“It is not superstition,” he said. “The roots press for conditions. When those conditions are absent, they press into what is available. Stone joints. Mortar seams. Conduit beds. They force their way into the straight lines the Empire laid, and the straight lines will record it.”

Reni’s gaze went to the foundation crack.

“That,” she said.

“Yes,” Silas answered.

Reni’s breath came faster.

“Fine,” she said. “Then we take it away from their lines. Out of the city. The rebels in the hills,”

Silas cut her off with a small shake of his head.

“There is no hill stronghold that can make a seat where none exists,” he said. “The palace courtyard sits over the King’s Stone. The Seat of Soil. The Ward lattice runs through it.”

Reni’s eyes sharpened again.

“King,” she said. “Stone. You don’t even have a king.”

Silas kept his voice level.

“The Empire paved over the Stone,” he said. “They did not remove it. It was too deep, and they preferred to build straight above. The old bond was cancelled in speech and law; the stone remains.”

Reni’s mouth tightened.

“And you want to plant it in the palace,” she said.

“I want to plant it where the lattice crosses,” Silas replied.

Reni leaned back, a small movement that made her seem younger.

“So you can die there,” she said.

Silas did not answer the first meaning. He answered the second.

“It will root there,” he said.

Reni’s eyes narrowed.

“You don’t know that,” she said.

Silas moved his cane, slow, and set the ferrule on the cellar floor between them.

Reni watched the ferrule.

“What are you doing,” she asked.

“Listening,” Silas said.

He tapped once. The sound was muted by stone and ward, but the vibration travelled into his wrist. He waited and tapped again, spacing the contact by a count he had used since the first conduits were laid.

Reni’s gaze moved from his hand to his face.

“You and your counts,” she said.

Silas tapped a third time, then lifted the cane and placed the ferrule a span to the left. He tapped again.

The baseline vibration from the ward conduits held everywhere in the house, but it altered by degree, and he could feel the difference where older stone met newer iron.

He moved the ferrule another span, nearer the north wall of the cellar.

The vibration sharpened.

Silas breathed out through his nose.

“It points,” he said.

Reni’s expression tightened.

“Points where,” she said.

Silas set the cane against the floor and kept his palm on the shaft to steady the tremor.

“North,” he said. “Through the wall. Toward the palace foundations. Toward the courtyard.”

Reni stared at him.

“That could be anything,” she said.

Silas lifted his bandaged thumb.

“The sapling answers blood,” he said. “It answers pain. It answers the lines laid over the older work. The King’s Stone is under the paving. The lattice crosses it. That is where the root pressure will find purchase without breaking half the sector.”

Reni’s lips pulled back.

“You talk as if you care about the sector,” she said.

Silas’s eyes stayed on the pot.

“I care about what remains of it,” he said.

Reni’s gaze dropped to the sapling leaves. Her hand did not reach. The knife remained in her fist, but the blade pointed down.

Above, a boot moved again, then stopped. A breathy cough followed. The soldier had chosen his place and was staying with it.

Reni shifted closer to the pot.

“If we’re doing this,” she said, “we do it now.”

Silas nodded once.

Reni glanced at his cane.

“You’re not carrying it,” she said.

Silas’s ribs tightened again.

“No,” he said.

Reni set the knife on the shelf behind her, out of the way, and took the loose rags that wrapped the pot.

“Cloth under the rim,” she said. “So we don’t drop it.”

Silas watched her hands. Her movements were quick but controlled. She did not waste motion.

He shifted closer on his knees, ignoring the sting in his ribs.

They wedged cloth beneath the rim where the glaze crack had shed soil. The cloth came away dark.

Reni looked at Silas.

“On three,” she said.

Silas did not count aloud. He nodded.

Their hands set under the rim with cloth between skin and clay. Their bodies leaned in.

They lifted.

The pot rose a hand’s breadth. The weight pulled down at once. The clay edge pressed into Silas’s fingers even through the cloth. His arms shook.

The pot slid back toward the board.

Reni hissed through her teeth.

“Don’t,” she said, and it was unclear if she meant don’t drop it or don’t fail.

They lowered it without letting it fall.

The board rasped against the stone as the pot settled.

Silas kept his hands on the rim for one beat after the weight returned, then let go.

Reni stared at the pot.

“Again,” she said.

Silas’s throat tightened.

“Again,” he agreed.

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Reni tore a longer strip of cloth from the rag wrap and doubled it, making a thicker pad. She pushed it under the rim on her side, then did the same on Silas’s.

“Grip,” she said.

Silas adjusted his hands. The cloth made his fingers clumsy, but it spared the worst of the clay edge.

Above, nothing moved for a few counts. That made Silas uneasy. The soldier could be listening.

Reni did not wait.

“Now,” she said.

They lifted again.

The pot rose the same hand’s breadth, then slid back toward the board as the load shifted inside it. The root tip at the seam scraped against grit.

Silas’s breath caught at his ribs. He lowered his side first, and Reni followed, keeping the pot level.

The pot settled. Soil trembled along the crack.

Reni leaned in close, eyes narrowed.

“It’s moving,” she said.

Silas followed her gaze.

A bulge pressed against the pot wall from inside. It made the clay curve out by a small measure, enough to change the line of the crack.

The pressure was not slow. It increased in pulses that matched the hum.

Silas placed his palm on the pot wall near the bulge. He felt vibration through the clay.

Reni reached out and stopped herself short of touching the same place.

“That’s a root,” she said.

Silas nodded.

The pot shifted on the board by a fraction. The board moved with it, scraping a short line across the stone.

Reni’s head turned sharply.

“It’s going to the wall,” she said.

The north wall.

The pot and board shifted again, the scrape line lengthening. A faint scuff trail showed where the board had dragged grit toward the north side.

Reni grabbed the pot rim.

“No,” she said under her breath.

She braced her boots on the stone and tried to rotate the pot away from the pull, turning it as she would turn a barrel.

It would not turn.

Root friction jammed the tip into grit at the seam; the pot base ground against the board; the weight pressed through wood into stone. Reni’s boot slid a little on the wet floor, and she caught herself before the rim tipped.

Reni’s jaw clenched.

“It won’t turn,” she said.

Silas set his cane ferrule on the floor beside the board and tapped once.

He moved the ferrule a span nearer the north wall and tapped again, then once more. The vibration sharpened with each move.

“It aligns,” he said.

Reni looked at him.

“With what,” she demanded.

Silas lifted his chin towards the cellar wall. He could not see the palace from here, but he knew the line of streets above, the alignment of the rose beds, the placement of the palace wall that cut the sky.

“Toward the palace,” he said.

Reni’s shoulders rose and fell.

“So it drags us there,” she said.

“It pushes,” Silas replied. “The root pressure seeks purchase along the strongest line.”

Reni’s mouth twisted.

“And you call that proof,” she said.

Silas watched the board shift again, a finger’s breadth this time. The scrape line cut toward the north wall.

“It is constraint,” he said.

Reni stared at the seam in the pot.

“You’re trapped by a plant,” she said.

Silas did not answer. His thumb throbbed. His ribs burned.

Above, the soldier coughed again, louder. The cough ended in a spit that struck wood.

Then boots moved closer to the front door.

Silas and Reni froze.

A pause followed. Silas held his breath to stop it catching in his ribs.

The latch did not lift. No iron struck wood.

The boots shifted away a fraction, then returned.

The soldier stood by the threshold. He might be reading the house with his ears, deciding whether a sound belonged to rats or men.

Reni's eyes met Silas's.

"We can't keep scraping," she mouthed without voice.

Silas nodded once.

Reni pointed at the open hatch under the shelf.

"Sled," she whispered. "We make it slide. One scrape instead of ten."

Silas glanced at the shelves. The boards were old, fitted to the stone. They held jars and tools. He could give up one board. He could not give up time.

He reached for the lowest shelf plank, the one that held sacks of compost in summer. It was supported by two stone brackets. He slid the jars aside first, slow, then lifted the plank free.

Reni took trellis wire from the pile of garden supplies and twisted it around the plank's front edge as a crude loop. She pulled a length of cloth through the loop to make a rope, knotting it hard.

Silas watched her hands.

"You've done this," he said.

Reni did not look up.

"I've dragged more than bread," she replied.

The soldier's boots moved again above, then stopped.

Silas and Reni worked without speaking.

Reni slid the plank beside the pot. It was low enough to sit on the stone without tipping. She placed the cloth rope toward the hatch.

“On it,” she said.

Silas set his cane aside and put both hands under the pot rim.

Reni mirrored him.

They did not lift high. They shifted.

The pot moved onto the plank by degrees. The clay base grated on wood.

Then the plank scraped across the stone as the weight settled.

The sound was loud in the confined cellar. It was not sharp, but it carried.

Silas and Reni froze at once.

Silas’s hand stayed on the rim. His fingers cramped, threatening to release.

Above, no shout came. No heavy step struck the stair.

One beat passed. Then another.

Reni’s breath moved in a thin line through her nose.

Silas waited for a baton strike on the cellar door.

None came.

Reni’s eyes flicked to the steps, then to the hatch.

“Move,” she whispered.

Silas nodded. His throat felt raw.

They dragged the plank a fraction to test it. The plank moved, but slower than Reni had wanted. The cloth rope held. The pot stayed upright.

Reni’s jaw tightened.

“It’s mobile,” she said. “But it’s slow.”

Silas took his cane and set it in his left hand. With his right, he gripped the rope.

His fingers cramped at once, pain shooting along the knuckles. The tremor made the rope slide in his grip.

Reni saw it.

“You’re going to drop it,” she said.

Silas forced his hand closed again.

“No,” he said.

Reni’s mouth pulled into a hard line.

“You’re going to die in the first tunnel,” she replied.

Silas did not deny that either.

He pulled once, short.

The plank slid toward the open hatch.

The pot shifted with it. The bulge in the pot wall pressed again; the sapling’s hum sharpened under their hands.

Above, the soldier moved something on the porch. The scrape came through the porch boards, deliberate, then stopped with a dull set as weight went down.

Silas tightened his grip on the rope despite the cramp.

“Now,” he said.

Reni moved to the hatch and dropped to her knees.

“Then get in,” she answered.

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Silas lowered himself into the hatch first.

He turned sideways to fit his shoulders through. The opening was cut for a man to crawl, not to descend with dignity. He set his cane into the space ahead of him, ferrule probing for a foothold.

Cold wet air rose from below. It carried the metallic smell of old water and brick.

The first contact of the cane ferrule struck stone, then slid into shallow water. The water made no splash that reached the cellar; it absorbed sound in the tight space.

Silas placed his boot on the stone edge and tested the weight. His ribs protested. He kept his mouth shut.

Reni crouched above him, one hand on the hatch edge.

“Don’t get stuck,” she said.

Silas did not answer. He eased his second boot down, then lowered his weight.

The space closed around him at once. The ceiling was low enough that his back brushed it. His coat dragged in damp.

He winced, the muscle under his ribs tightening.

Reni leaned in.

“Can you move,” she asked.

Silas shifted his knees forward in the water and made space.

“Yes,” he said.

Reni reached for the rope and pushed the plank sled towards the hatch.

The pot reached the frame and caught.

Clay ground against stone.

The sound was sharper than the earlier scrape, a hard rub that threatened to turn into a crack.

Reni swore under her breath.

“Angle it,” she whispered.

Silas reached up from below and put his hand against the plank’s underside.

“Lift the front,” he said.

Reni gripped the rim of the pot through cloth and lifted a fraction, not enough to take the weight but enough to tilt it.

Silas pushed from below.

The clay rubbed again, then slid.

The pot cleared the frame by a hand’s breadth and caught once more.

Reni tightened her jaw.

“If it breaks,” she began.

“It will break if we keep grinding,” Silas said.

Reni’s eyes flicked to the steps above. She held still.

No boot came down. No latch moved.

She looked back down.

“Then push,” she whispered.

Silas set his cane aside in the water and used both hands on the plank.

“On three,” he said.

Reni did not wait for the count. She lifted and shoved at once.

The plank slid forward.

The pot cleared the frame.

Silas caught the plank edge before it tipped and steadied it with his forearm, teeth clenched.

Reni's breath came out hard.

They kept their speech to what was needed.

Above, something scraped again on the porch. A heavier drag followed, then a dull thud against wood. The soldier was settling himself to wait outside.

Reni looked down at Silas.

"He's going to sit there," she said.

Silas stared up through the hatch.

The cellar shelves framed the opening: jars, tools, the stoppered water jar he had refused for months, the thin blades he had kept honed for rose canes and blood. The old board stain on the floor where the pot had sat marked the centre of his hiding.

He had known he would leave it. He had prepared the hatch for that reason.

Still, his eyes took in each object. His breath snagged on his ribs, and he tasted the split in his lip where it had opened again.

Reni hissed.

"Don't," she said.

Silas did not speak.

He reached for his cane and closed his hand on it.

Reni yanked the rope.

The plank lurched forward.

Silas's knee slipped on wet stone. He pitched forward, catching himself with a hand against the crawspace wall. Pain flared along his ribs and stole his breath.

“Careful,” he hissed.

Reni’s voice came down, clipped.

“Move,” she replied.

Silas forced air back into his lungs and shifted his weight.

He heard his own breath in the tight space, rough and controlled.

Reni’s face appeared in the hatch opening. Her expression held anger, but it stayed behind her teeth.

“Do you want them to find you sitting in your own cellar,” she asked.

Silas swallowed.

“No,” he said.

Reni’s eyes flicked once to the shelves again, then away.

“Then go,” she said.

Silas pulled the rope forward, inch by inch.

The plank sled scraped along the wet stone below, softer than it had scraped in the cellar. The pot stayed upright, but the bulge in its side pressed again. The root pressure did not pause.

Reni slid into the hatch after the pot, boots first, landing in shallow water with a small splash.

She crouched behind the plank, one hand on the rope, the other on the pot rim.

The crawlspace ran forward in a low line. Brick met limestone in uneven seams. Water sat in a channel along one side, moving slow enough to be heard as a faint run.

Silas turned his head and listened.

Moving water lay ahead and to the left, as it had in the pollen overlay. He did not need to take more pollen to know that. He had pressed his ear to the limestone block and heard the steady flow.

He moved towards that sound.

Reni stayed close. Her shoulders brushed the wall when the crawlspace narrowed. She did not complain. She watched the ceiling, the joints, the points where iron bolts had been driven later to enforce straight lines.

They crawled in measured bursts, keeping their bodies close to the stone.

Silas pulled and Reni pushed, and the sled slid over slick patches before catching at small rises where mortar had bulged.

Reni shifted her grip.

“Left,” she whispered.

Silas adjusted without argument.

They reached a narrow vent cut into the wall. It was set with iron bars. A rectangle of street light fell through, pale and thin.

Through the bars, Silas saw the underside of the street grating and the soles of boots passing above.

The boots moved in a steady patrol rhythm, heel then toe, even spacing.

Silas stopped at once and pressed his body flat against the wall to make less profile.

Reni froze behind him, her face turned up towards the light.

The plank sled remained still. The pot’s hum continued, but it was less noticeable under the damp stone.

Boots passed.

A second set followed, heavier.

Then a pause while someone stopped near the pylon line.

Silas did not move.

Reni's hand tightened on the rope. Her eyes stayed on the gap between boots.

After a few counts, the boots moved on.

The street light rectangle shifted as they passed the vent.

Reni exhaled through her nose.

"That's the rhythm," she whispered.

Silas nodded once.

"It will repeat," he said.

Reni looked at him.

"And the ones who don't repeat," she answered.

Silas did not offer comfort. He pulled again.

The crawlspace widened by degrees, the ceiling lifting enough for Silas to raise his head without scraping his scalp.

The smell changed. The metallic water note grew stronger. A sharper scent of waste sat beneath it, old and settled.

The water channel joined another flow.

They reached a junction where brickwork opened into a wider sewer run. The space was not tall enough to stand, but it allowed crouching without folding into the floor.

A ledge ran along one side, slick with damp.

Silas pulled the sled onto the ledge, the plank scraping once against brick. The pot rocked, then steadied.

Reni caught it with both hands.

Silas's grip on the rope failed for a beat. His fingers opened despite his will. He forced them closed again, feeling the cramp bite.

Reni looked at his hands.

“You can’t do this alone,” she said.

Silas swallowed, tasting blood where his split lip had opened again.

“No,” he replied.

Reni’s expression did not soften. It became more fixed.

“Then you do what I say when I pull,” she answered.

Silas looked at the sewer run ahead, at the darker line where water moved away from the ledge.

He set his cane ferrule on the brick ledge and tapped once, not to find direction now, but to keep his count.

Reni crouched beside the pot, one hand still on the rim.

Behind them, the hatch route narrowed back towards the cellar that had been a hiding place and now held a soldier with time.

Silas did not look back.

He shifted his weight, took the rope, and pulled the sled forward along the ledge. Water moved in the channel below, and the echo changed as the brickwork widened. The air cooled as the street vents fell behind.

The pot moved with it.

# Chapter 5

## The Under-City

At the wider junction the brickwork widened enough for a man to crouch without folding his spine into the water channel. A ledge ran beside the current, its surface slick with residue that turned under the fingers, neither soot nor clay; Silas kept his palm off it when he could and used the cane to test what took his weight.

The plank sled sat across the ledge with its trellis-wire loop pulled tight, the cloth rope darkened by damp where Reni's hands had gripped and re-gripped. The pot remained upright. The crack in the glaze had not stopped widening, and soil had smeared along the plank from the last scrape through the hatch frame. The sapling's leaves stood out in the dark, each edge sharp against the grey.

Reni crouched at the water's edge and tipped her head to listen.

Silas watched her rather than the water; she knew the tunnels in the way he knew the beds, by choices made under threat. Her breathing held a quick rhythm that did not match exhaustion alone.

She ran her fingers just above the surface without touching.

"The main run's that one," she said, pointing with two fingers down the widest channel. The flow there made a deeper sound and carried more debris; strips of rag and a broken reed-grate bobbed and went under.

Silas followed her gesture. The larger run went straight for a stretch, then disappeared into darkness.

"Straight lines," he said.

Reni gave a short look.

“Straight lines get grates,” she replied. “Grates mean guards.”

She shifted, peering at the narrower side run that fed into the junction from a slant. The brickwork there was older; the mortar showed hand-packed seams rather than the pale, regular joints the Empire favoured.

“That one,” she said. “North.”

Silas’s mouth dried.

“You cannot know north down here,” he said.

Reni tapped the wall with her knuckles.

“Palace side,” she corrected. “The slope is wrong for river-out. And it stinks less of kitchens.”

Silas heard the faint truth in it. The under-city ran by fall and by where the workers dumped their leavings. He had been in these corridors years ago when the orchard guild still maintained the palace’s older root runs; there had been a time when the service ways were used openly for clearing blockages and laying willow-wattle to stop collapse.

Reni placed her hand on the cloth rope and tugged once, testing the sled.

“It’ll be slower,” she said. “Narrow means slow.”

Silas did not answer.

“Fewer grates,” she added, and her tone made it clear the trade was done.

The cane ferrule touched the brick ledge and tapped once, then again, spacing the strikes by the count he used for ward vibration. The baseline ran through everything: a repeating low grind that could be felt more than heard. Here, at the wider junction, it spread and softened.

He moved the ferrule a span nearer the mouth of the side run and tapped again.

The vibration sharpened. It stayed the same volume, but it concentrated into a more regular pulse.

Reni watched his hand.

“What,” she said.

“Conduits,” Silas replied. He tapped again, then set the ferrule at the edge where brick met a strip of iron bolting. The grind tightened under his palm. “Not here. Closer to the straight streets.”

Reni’s jaw worked once.

“So we keep off them,” she said.

“We try,” he answered.

He took the rope with his right hand. A tremor ran down his forearm when he tightened his grip. His left hand held the cane. The cane had been a tool for listening and a tool for walking; now it was a third point of weight that might stop him going into the water.

Reni moved behind the sled and set both hands on the pot rim, using the cloth pads they had wedged beneath it. She kept her fingers away from the cracked seam where soil had smeared.

“Pull,” she said.

Silas pulled.

The plank scraped, a low rasp that dulled against wet brick. The sound still carried along the water run.

They moved into the narrower side channel.

The ledge narrowed to a boot-width within a few spans. The water ran closer to the wall here, leaving less stone between them and the channel. The brick face had missing patches where older repairs had broken away; a hand pressed there found grit and wet mortar.

Reni shifted her weight so her boots stayed nearer the wall than the water. She did not speak. Her attention went upward, to the places where the ceiling rose into shallow arches, and to the darker rectangles where street grates might be.

Silas kept his eyes on the ledge. He placed the cane ferrule, tested, moved, then pulled. His ribs protested when he leaned forward. He controlled his breath to stop it catching.

The plank edge struck a raised seam in the brick. The sled tilted a fraction.

Reni caught the pot with both hands.

“Easy,” she said.

Silas adjusted the rope angle, lowering his pulling hand so the plank would drag flatter rather than lift at the front. The trellis-wire loop held. The cloth rope pressed into his fingers through damp, leaving shallow indentations.

They made another span.

A section of the ledge crumbled under Silas’s cane ferrule. The ferrule punched through a soft patch and struck empty space. His weight shifted before he could stop it.

He tightened his grip on the rope, then forced it loose, choosing the cane first. He pulled the ferrule back, found a firmer patch, and set it down again with more care.

Reni’s eyes flicked toward the broken edge.

“It’s giving way,” she said.

“It was built for runoff,” Silas replied. “Not for this.”

Reni’s mouth tightened at the word built. She moved the sled another half-span by pushing at the pot rim rather than the plank edge, keeping the load centred.

The pot's weight pressed through the plank into stone. It did not register as clay and soil alone.

Silas felt the hum through the rope, faint but constant, a vibration that sat on top of the ward baseline.

The sapling's leaves curled inward by about ten degrees, and their lift fell to roughly three quarters of what he had seen in the cellar. The change was not dramatic; it was the sort of shift a Keeper learned to notice because it came before the wilt.

Silas stopped pulling.

Reni's head snapped round.

"What," she said.

Silas put the cane down and reached toward the sapling. He did not touch the leaves. He placed two fingers on the stem just above the soil line.

The stem felt warm.

He drew his hand back and rubbed his fingers together. A slight tack remained.

"Internal movement," he said.

Reni stared at him.

"It's a plant," she said. "Plants go cold down here."

Silas looked at the leaves again. The curl held.

"It is working," he said. "Even here."

Reni's gaze flicked to the pot crack.

"And dying while it works," she said.

Silas did not answer. He took the rope again.

They moved another few spans.

Above, through a grate that cut a narrow rectangle into the ceiling, footsteps passed. The sound came down altered by iron and distance; still, the rhythm was clear enough to count.

Reni stopped at once. She reached back, caught the cloth rope with one hand, and pulled it close to the wall so the plank edge would not scrape again.

“Dark,” she whispered.

There was little light to begin with. Still, they shifted to where the wall cast deeper shadow, pressing their bodies closer in. Silas crouched, his ribs tightening against his coat. Reni held the pot steady with one hand and kept her other hand near the fuse cord on her wrist.

The boots overhead paused.

Silas kept his mouth shut. He swallowed once and tasted old blood from his split lip.

The boots moved on.

Reni held still for two more counts after the sound faded.

“Go,” she said.

They resumed.

A slick patch of stone turned under Silas’s ferrule. The cane slid sideways. His boot slid a fraction. His weight went toward the water.

He kept his mouth shut.

Reni moved fast. She did not grab his arm.

Her hand snapped to the rope, and she hauled it toward herself, bracing her body so the sled would not follow him into the channel. The plank jerked. The pot rocked once, then steadied under her palm.

Silas caught himself by throwing his left hand against the wall. The brick edge scraped his skin. His cane clattered once as the ferrule struck and regained purchase.

For a beat his face went hot. He kept his eyes down.

Reni's breathing came hard through her nose.

"You nearly took it," she said, meaning the pot.

Silas lifted the cane and set it down again with more care.

"Yes," he said.

Reni stared at him, jaw set.

He gave her none.

His throat worked. His belly loosened at the way the pot had stayed upright, and he swallowed it down. He kept his mouth shut and pulled again.

The side run bent and widened into another junction. Here the masonry changed. Brickwork gave way to basalt blocks set with older lime mortar. A section of the wall showed chisel marks in a pattern he had seen in the orchard conduits near the palace wall: angled grooves cut to guide seepage away from roots.

The mechanical grind increased.

Silas set the cane ferrule against the basalt and listened.

The ward baseline sharpened, and beneath it there was a faint irregular pulse that did not match the sapling's hum.

Reni watched his face.

"Don't tell me that's good," she said.

Silas lifted his eyes to the ceiling. The arch above had iron bolts driven through stone at regular spans.

"Closer," he said.

"To what," Reni demanded.

"Dead zones," Silas replied. He heard his own voice steady and did not trust it. "Where the lattice runs thick. Where the old roots rot in

place.”

Reni’s mouth twisted.

“We came down here to avoid them,” she said.

“We came down here to avoid guards,” Silas answered.

Reni took the rope from his hand for a moment and pulled the sled into the junction’s shadow.

“Then we keep moving,” she said.

Silas’s fingers cramped as he took the rope back.

They moved into the darker run beyond the basalt junction.

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The air changed within a few spans.

It lost dampness first. The usual sewer wet sat at the back of the throat, mixed with rot and rust. Here there was less of it. The cold did not come as a draft; it stayed constant, without the small shifts that moving water caused.

Silas counted his breaths without meaning to. Over ten heartbeats, he pulled in eight shallow breaths.

His ribs tightened as his breathing shortened. Each inhale felt shallower. He pressed his thumbnail until it blanched; the colour returned after three counts.

Reni kept her hand on the pot rim and watched him with quick glances.

“Dead,” she said.

“Dead zone,” Silas corrected.

“Same thing,” she replied.

The sapling's hum dropped.

It did not stop entirely; Silas could still feel a faint vibration through the rope when he pulled. The sound in his ears faded until the ward baseline dominated. The leaves slackened. Their petioles sagged down by about twenty degrees, and the blades looked less full.

Silas stopped again and reached toward the stem.

Reni made a small sound of irritation.

"Don't fuss," she said.

Silas placed two fingers on the stem. The warmth was reduced. The tack of sap was less.

He drew his hand back.

"Slowed," he said.

Reni's eyes narrowed.

"So it dies if we take the safer way," she said.

Silas's mouth dried.

"It survives on payment," he said.

Reni stared at his thumb bandage.

"You mean you," she said.

Silas did not answer.

He pulled again.

His legs weakened without warning. It did not feel like fatigue. The strength went out, sudden.

He dropped to one knee on the ledge.

The cane took some of his weight. He clamped both hands on it to stop himself falling forward. His knee struck stone. Pain spread up his leg, sharp enough to cut through the dead-zone dullness.

Reni swore.

“Get up,” she said.

Silas tried. He shifted his weight to his good foot, pushed, and found nothing in the muscles that should have lifted him.

His breath shortened further.

Reni grabbed at his coat, fingers bunching wool.

“Up,” she repeated.

Silas’s body resisted her pull. Not by choice. He could not make it answer.

Reni’s face tightened. She hauled once more, then stopped, jaw clenched, her hand hovering.

“Fine,” she said. “Fine. Stay there.”

She moved the sled.

She dragged the rope forward in two hard pulls. The plank scraped louder than it had in the side run; sound carried farther here and the echo returned sharper. The pot rocked once and steadied under her hand. She pushed it into a slightly wider section of ledge, then let go and returned.

Silas kept his hands on the cane. His shoulders hunched. He stared at the stone in front of him.

Reni reached under his arms and gripped his shoulders.

“Don’t you dare die,” she said.

Silas tried to speak. The attempt ended in a retch.

He turned his head toward the channel edge and vomited.

It was thin bile, more sour than anything he had eaten. It splattered on the stone and ran in a slow line toward the water.

His mouth filled with bitterness. He swallowed once, then gagged again without producing more.

Reni made a sound that was not pity.

“That’s useful,” she said.

Silas wiped his mouth with his sleeve. The wool came away damp. He kept his eyes down.

He tried to pull his shoulders away from her hands.

“Leave me,” he said, the words strained.

Reni’s grip tightened.

“No,” she answered.

Silas attempted to rise again. His knee slipped. His cane ferrule slid on wet stone. The weakness returned him to the same point.

Reni shifted her grip.

“Listen,” she said, close to his ear. “If they take you, they’ll pull iron over you and ask questions until you give them what they want. I’m not dragging you so you can hand it to them.”

Silas’s throat worked.

“I will not,” he managed.

Reni gave a short laugh.

“You already did that once,” she said.

Silas did not reply. The words landed and stayed.

Reni pulled him backward by the shoulders.

His boots scraped. His knee dragged. The movement brought a brief spike of pain that made him gasp, then left a dull ache.

She dragged him to where the ledge cut into a shallow alcove, a recess in the masonry built for maintenance men to step aside when water ran high. The vibration in the stone lessened there by a small degree. Silas noticed because his teeth stopped trembling against each other.

Reni shoved his back against the recess wall.

“Sit,” she said.

Silas sat.

His hands shook. He gripped the cane shaft, pressing it between his palms to try to stop the tremor. The shaking continued, visible at the knuckles.

Reni turned away from him and crouched by the pot.

The sapling’s leaves drooped further. The cloth pads under the rim were dark with damp and soil.

Reni took a strip of cloth from the pads. It was not clean. She tore it once with her teeth and wrapped it around the stem and lower leaves in a loose guard, tying it off so the leaf edges would not scrape stone when the pot shifted.

She did it quickly, without looking at Silas.

Silas watched her hands.

“You should not handle it so rough,” he said.

Reni’s head snapped up.

“I’m not touching it,” she replied. She lifted her hands to show cloth between skin and plant. “I’m keeping it from scraping. You can thank me later.”

Silas’s mouth tightened. He looked away.

Reni leaned close to the pot and listened.

The hum remained low.

She glanced back at Silas.

“You good,” she said.

Silas’s breath came short.

“No,” he said.

Reni’s lips pressed together.

“Then we wait until you’re less useless,” she said.

Silas swallowed bile and blood.

He forced his breathing into a slower count. He kept his eyes on the ledge edge where water moved.

After several counts, he could move his fingers without losing control entirely. The tremor did not stop.

Reni stood.

“We can’t stay,” she said.

Silas nodded once.

He took the rope again.

His hand shook as he wrapped it.

Reni did not offer to take it from him.

They moved out of the alcove.

\*\*\*

A strip of rag that had been snagged along the wall tugged free and slid downstream faster than before.

The water rose.

It did not arrive as a sudden flood. The level crept up over a short span, enough that the lower ledge grew slicker, then wet to the ankle. The current’s sound deepened. Debris that had been caught along the wall began to float.

Reni noticed first. She stepped back from the edge and looked along the run.

“It’s coming up,” she said.

Silas followed her gaze. He saw the wet line climbing the brick.

“Surge,” he said.

“From where,” Reni snapped.

Silas lifted a hand, then dropped it.

“Upstream,” he said. “Somebody opened a sluice. Or a blockage broke. Or a gate shifted.”

Reni stared at him.

“So the city is falling apart above, and we get the runoff,” she said.

Silas did not answer.

The lower ledge became unusable within a few spans. The plank sled’s edge began to catch water, and the wet made the rope slide in Silas’s grip.

Reni pointed upward.

“Higher ledge,” she said.

A maintenance shelf ran above, narrower and cut closer to the ceiling. It had been built for work crews to move along when the channel ran high. It also ran nearer to street covers; the ceiling held several iron plates set into stone.

Silas’s ribs protested as he crouched and tried to lift his side of the sled.

Reni gripped the pot rim through the cloth pads and hauled.

They shifted the plank up onto the higher shelf by degrees. The pot rocked. Reni held it stable. Silas’s hands shook as he dragged the rear edge over the lip.

Once the sled sat on the higher shelf, the channel below took more of the sound of their movement. The scrape echoed along the brick tunnel.

Reni’s face tightened.

“We’re exposed,” she said.

Silas kept his eyes on the iron plates.

“Covers,” he said.

Reni moved forward in a crouch, pulling the rope low to keep the plank from tipping. She kept her head angled, listening.

A heavier cadence sounded above.

It came through one of the iron covers, not as clear as boots on a floor, but as transmitted vibration that made the cover’s edge ring faintly.

Reni stopped.

Silas froze with the rope in his hand.

Reni lifted one finger.

Silas understood the signal without being told.

The cadence above had the same even spacing he had heard in the Iron-Eater unit’s approach to his house. Not the quicker, uneven rhythm of a street patrol. Not the drag and shuffle of a tired soldier. It had weight, and it had discipline.

Reni whispered, “Iron-Eaters.”

Silas’s jaw clenched.

He tried to straighten to move faster. He could not straighten his spine all the way. His legs shook under him. The dead-zone weakness had eased enough for motion but not enough for speed.

Reni saw it.

Her jaw clenched.

“You’re not doing this now,” she hissed.

Silas reached for the cane.

Reni caught the rope and yanked.

The plank scraped hard along the shelf.

The sound echoed.

Silas flinched. He could not stop it.

Reni pulled again.

The pot rocked and steadied.

They gained several spans in quick, noisy movement.

Above, the cadence paused.

An iron cover shifted.

A thin line of light appeared at the seam where the cover lifted a fraction.

Reni froze.

She grabbed Silas by the shoulder and forced him down behind a stone lip that jutted from the wall where a support arch met the shelf.

Silas's ribs hit stone. He pressed his teeth together and kept his mouth shut.

Reni pressed his head lower with her forearm.

"Down," she whispered.

Silas's mouth opened. No words came.

The light line widened a finger's breadth.

A faint scrape came from above, metal on stone.

Silas kept his breath shallow. His throat tightened until swallowing hurt.

The cover settled again.

The light line vanished.

Reni held him down for several counts after the cover stopped moving.

Then she released him.

Silas stayed crouched. His hand went to his throat once, then dropped.

Reni kept her eyes on the cover, jaw set.

“They heard us,” she said.

“Maybe,” Silas replied.

Reni’s eyes snapped to him.

“Don’t do that,” she said. “Move.”

Silas took the rope again.

His hand shook as he pulled.

They moved past the cover and into a broader corridor that cut off from the channel.

The corridor’s floor was damp but not submerged. The walls showed old service markings: faded paint and etched signs. Some were imperial, straight-lined and numbered. Others were older, made by a hand with a different training.

Silas’s gaze caught on one.

A mark shaped like a forked root, set beside a short line that indicated a junction and a rise. It was an orchard maintenance sign, used when crews needed to find water channels without breaking paving above. The fork’s inner cut held a shallow V-groove, nail-deep, the depth he used to check by touch when he sharpened and re-cut these marks.

Reni noticed him staring.

“What,” she said.

“Old routes,” Silas replied.

Reni stepped closer, eyes narrowing at the mark.

“You mean palace routes,” she said.

Silas nodded once.

“It runs under the rose beds,” he said. “It used to.”

Reni’s face tightened.

“Used to,” she repeated.

Silas did not correct her.

They dragged the sled into the corridor. The scrape changed; stone and brick gave a different echo than the channel shelf.

Reni rounded on him.

“Plan,” she said. “Now.”

Silas kept pulling.

“North,” he said.

Reni stepped in front of him, forcing him to stop.

“Don’t say north,” she snapped. “Say left at the third junction, crawl through the gap, climb the ladder. Say something I can use.”

Silas’s mouth tightened.

“It is not a prayer,” he said.

“It sounds like one,” Reni replied.

Silas’s hand clenched on the rope. The tremor made it vibrate.

“I do not know every turn,” he said.

Reni stared.

Silas forced himself to continue.

“I know the direction,” he said. “And I know the anchor.”

“The King’s Stone,” Reni said, voice sharp.

“Yes,” Silas replied.

Reni’s shoulders rose and fell.

“You brought me into this with a story,” she said.

Silas did not answer. He could not offer her certainty he did not have.

Reni's lips pulled back.

"If we die in a sewer because you can't read your own tunnels..." she began.

Silas cut in.

"They are not mine," he said.

Reni's eyes hardened.

"And the Registry wasn't yours either," she said.

Silas's jaw clenched. He looked away from her face.

"Move," Reni said.

Silas pulled.

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The corridor ran for several spans and then ended.

An imperial grate filled the passage: thick iron bars set into a stone frame, with a locking mechanism housed on the far side. The lock plate was smooth and fitted tight. There was no access to it from where they stood.

Reni reached for the bars and stopped short, holding her hands a finger's breadth away.

"Locked from the other side," she said.

Silas set the cane ferrule to the stone at the base of the frame. The vibration there was sharper than it had been in the channel, close to the ward baseline and the mechanical grind.

Reni leaned close to the gap beneath the bars.

A smell came through.

It was animal and harsh, mixed with something oily. There was residue on the lower iron, darkened where something had rubbed through.

Reni's face tightened.

"That's living," she said.

Silas did not ask how she knew. He could smell it too.

He raised the cane and set the ferrule against one of the bars.

The iron was cold.

He held still and listened through his palm.

A faint scraping came from beyond, irregular in timing. Then a low rough sound followed, not steady. It stopped, then returned.

Silas lowered the cane.

"There is something there," he said.

Reni's eyes did not leave the bars.

"And we're stuck on this side with it," she replied.

Silas looked at the sapling.

The leaves, slackened by the dead zone, lifted by a small degree. They tilted toward the lower gap beneath the bars where a thin draught came through. The cloth guard Reni had tied shifted slightly because the leaves pressed against it.

Silas watched the direction of the tilt.

"This is the line," he said.

Reni gave him a look.

"Of course it is," she said. "The line with something behind it."

Silas's mouth tightened.

Reni stepped back from the bars and ran her hands along the side walls, feeling for seams or a maintenance hatch. She pressed her fingers into mortar joints, testing for looseness.

The stone held.

On one side, the wall showed a collapsed section filled with rubble and hardened silt. On the other, the masonry was intact and thick.

“No way around,” Reni said.

Silas listened.

Behind them, the corridor carried the duller sound of water, higher than before. The dead-zone cold remained.

Reni turned her head toward the corridor.

“Going back is worse,” she said.

Silas nodded once.

He did not speak the rest of it aloud: going back also meant more grates, more covers, more chances for a plate to lift.

From somewhere beyond the corridor, voices echoed.

They were distant, blurred by stone and angle, but distinct enough to catch a clipped call and a reply. One voice carried a sharper tone, the kind used when speaking through a mouthpiece.

Reni’s face changed.

“They’re close,” she said.

Silas’s hand tightened on the cane.

He could not fight an Iron-Eater unit. He could not fight whatever was beyond the bars. He could barely stand long enough to pull.

Reni looked at the bars again.

“I’ll deal with it,” she said.

Silas did not argue.

He heard the weakness in his own silence and accepted it as a fact.

Reni crouched and scanned the floor.

A low buttress jutted from the wall a few spans back, supporting an arch. It provided cover from anyone looking down through a lifted cover or through the bars if the creature moved close.

Reni jerked her head toward it.

“Behind that,” she said.

Silas pulled the sled back into the buttress shadow. The plank scraped once. He winced and kept pulling.

Reni moved fast.

She gathered debris from the corridor edge: broken brick, a strip of old board, and a length of scrap iron half-buried in silt. The iron was not an Iron-Eater rod; it was corroded and pitted, likely from old maintenance.

She tested its weight, then set it down.

Silas watched her hands.

“What are you doing,” he asked.

Reni did not look up.

“Setting it so it can’t rush us clean,” she said.

Silas’s mouth tightened.

“That may draw them,” he said, meaning the Iron-Eaters.

“It’s already close,” Reni replied.

She set one brick on its long edge near the buttress corner, close enough to the bars that anything coming through the gap would have to step over it. She placed a second brick behind it, wedged so the first would roll sideways into a joint if it was hit. Then she propped the board with its near end on the shelf and its far end resting against the base of

the grate; if something shoved through, the board would slap the bars and make noise.

Reni laid the scrap iron length along the floor at a shallow angle, one end aimed at the lower gap beneath the bars. If a paw or limb pushed through, the iron would slide and wedge against the stone frame.

She unwound about a forearm's length of fuse cord from her wrist and laid it in a straight run under the propped board, the free end tucked back toward the buttress where her hand could reach it.

Silas watched the cord.

"You have powder," he said.

Reni's eyes flicked to him.

"Not enough," she replied. "And not here unless I have to."

Silas tightened his grip on the cane.

Beyond the bars, the scraping sound returned.

It came closer, then stopped.

Reni held still, listening.

The voices in the corridor behind them echoed again, nearer by a small degree.

Silas's jaw clenched. He swallowed once and tasted blood.

Reni set the fuse cord down beside the debris and reached for another brick.

"Stay behind me," she said.

Silas did not answer. He adjusted his position so the pot sat behind the buttress, using the stone as cover against both the bars and any lifted cover above.

Reni's breathing slowed. Her shoulders remained tense.

The sapling's leaves stayed tilted toward the bars.

Silas watched them and kept his hands on the cane, waiting for the next sound to become a shape he could not deny.

# Chapter 6

## The Toll

The corridor ended at the same iron as before: thick bars set into a stone frame, the lock plate on the far side fitted smooth. The buttress gave cover only by its angle. It did not hide them; it only broke a straight view.

Reni crouched in front of the bars again. She kept her face turned slightly away from the lower gap and breathed through her mouth.

Silas stayed behind the buttress with the sled rope looped around his wrist. The plank lay flat. The pot sat true on it, though soil had smeared along the plank from earlier catches. The sapling's leaves remained bound near the base with the cloth guard; above that the leaf blades showed dimly, a darker green than anything else in the corridor.

Reni reached for the length of scrap iron she had set near the lower gap and drew it up. Pitted metal, corroded at the edges, no longer straight.

"You said locked from the other side," she murmured.

"It is," Silas replied.

"And yet," she said, and set the scrap against the frame where bar met stone.

Silas saw what she meant. The lock plate was inaccessible, but the stone frame had a seam where the iron had been set. The seam was narrow. The iron could not go through, but it could wedge.

Reni worked the end of the scrap into the seam by degrees, shifting angle until the metal caught. Her movements were quick but not careless. She had learned which sounds travelled.

The moment the scrap seated, the sapling's hum altered. It rose by a small degree, not the full flare of a growth spurt, but enough that Silas felt it through the rope.

Reni paused and looked back.

"You hear that," she said.

He did not answer with words. His jaw tightened. When he closed his teeth, a high vibration pressed against his molars.

Reni put her weight into the scrap and levered. The iron creaked once at the seam.

Silas watched the bars. The residue on the lower iron looked darker now, where dampness gathered from their breath and the corridor's wet.

The scraping sound beyond returned. It had been irregular before, closer and then further, then silence. Now it came in steadier spacing, heavy contact against stone.

Reni stopped levering.

"Is it coming," she asked.

Silas set the cane ferrule to the nearest bar. He did not put his ear to it; he held his palm against the shaft and used the old practice of listening through bone. The cold of the iron travelled into his fingers.

Another sound came through the bars, a low rough sound that could have been breath, and then a heavier strike against the far side that sent a hard ring along the frame.

Reni pulled the scrap free with a sharp twist and moved back two spans.

Silas felt the vibration in the stone under his boots.

The ward-beast hit the bars.

It came not as a careful test but as a full collision. The iron rattled hard. The propped board that Reni had set earlier slapped the bars, then

fell away from its prop with a clatter on stone.

Silas saw only parts at first: a mass of hide close to the bars, too close to read as a shape; a forelimb thrust between two bars, then withdrawn; a head turning low, muzzle flattened where bone had healed wrong.

Its hide looked thickened. Scar tissue lay in bands along the shoulder. The forelimbs did not match each other. One joint sat too far out from the body, the elbow angle wrong; the paw turned inward when it struck the ground. When it moved, the limb dragged and then snapped forward in an uneven reach.

It hit the bars again, and iron rang through stone.

Reni swore under her breath and backed behind the buttress, pulling Silas with a hand on his sleeve.

“Stay there,” she said.

Silas did not fight her. His cane hand clenched too hard and the ferrule scraped stone once. The scrape carried.

The beast turned its head toward the noise.

Its face came into view between the bars for a single breath. The eyes reflected little light, but the whites were visible when it rolled them. The muzzle was wet. One ear was half missing.

Silas smelled it through the bars and the corridor’s stale damp. There was animal and oily residue, as before, but underneath it ran a sharper scent. Ozone, the bite of it at the back of the nose, and burnt hair.

He had smelled that at pylons after a flicker. He had smelled it in the rose allotments when a conduit line ran too hot and killed a strip of root.

Resonance exposure.

Not a creature bred to hunt in tunnels. A creature left too long near the wrong kind of iron and tone.

Reni leaned out from the buttress edge and watched it.

“It can’t fit,” she said, her voice controlled.

Silas’s eyes went to the gaps.

“It can strike,” he answered.

The beast thrust its forelimb through the lower gap beneath the bars. The paw came through far enough that claws scraped stone on their side. The limb shook as it bore weight through an angle it was not meant to take. The claws hooked at air.

Reni pulled back.

“It can reach,” she said.

Silas kept his mouth shut. His throat tightened. He tasted old blood from his split lip.

Behind them, in the corridor they had come from, sound carried again.

Not water this time. Boots.

The cadence was even. Weight fell in regular spacing. It did not have the drag of a tired patrol. It matched what Silas had heard through the lifted cover when they fled the channel shelf.

And with it, a voice. The words were clipped. The tone had an edge, altered by a mouthpiece.

Silas could not catch the whole sentence, not at that distance and through stone, but he heard the sound of command.

Reni heard it too. Her shoulders rose and fell once.

“They’re not far,” she said.

The beast hit the bars again.

The sapling’s hum sharpened, not into song, but into distress. It did not quiet when the beast struck; it answered the metal’s vibration and the impact.

Silas shifted closer to the pot. He did it without standing fully. His ribs would not allow a straight spine without protest.

He set his left hand on the pot rim and found damp clay. Soil had smeared there where the crack had widened.

His thumb bandage had loosened during the last haul. When he tightened his grip, pain ran through the pad and warmth spread. Blood seeped under the cloth, then over it.

He pressed the wrapped thumb against the rim, steady. He kept his breathing measured. It was an old Keeper trick: slow the hands, slow the work.

The hum did not settle.

It held its harsh edge and then rose, faintly higher, the vibration carried through clay and into his wrist.

Silas's mouth tightened.

Dead-zone fringe. The ward baseline stayed too sharp, too close to the stone.

Reni watched him and then looked away.

"No," she said. "That's not helping."

"It should," Silas replied, and heard the weakness in the word.

Reni crouched again near the bars. The beast had pulled back. It paced on the far side in a short line, constrained by the corridor beyond. The uneven forelimb made it shift its weight poorly. It did not stop it. Each step scraped claw against stone.

Reni lifted her hand and held it near the lower gap without offering it.

"If it reaches, it can hit," she said.

"Yes," Silas replied.

She looked back at him.

“We can’t sit here and wait to see what they do.”

The boots behind came closer. The voice carried again, nearer now, and another voice answered from farther off, at a different angle down the run.

Silas pictured the transport cage on a handcart. He pictured iron rods placed to stone, and mouths set to mouthpieces, and the way a man could be pinned by sound before he was touched.

Reni’s hand went to her wrist where the fuse cord was braided.

“I’m opening it,” she said.

Silas stared at her.

“You mean to go through.”

“I mean to get the pot through,” she replied. “And you.”

The beast struck the bars again, and iron rang.

Reni flinched once, then recovered.

“I can pull it off the threshold,” she said. “Sound. It comes to sound.”

“It comes to vibration,” Silas answered, and felt the hum in the rope like a second pulse.

Reni’s mouth twisted.

“Same thing down here.”

Silas drew in a breath that stayed shallow.

“The iron,” he said. “If you lever the frame, if you scrape the bars, it will worsen the sapling’s reaction.”

Reni looked at the pot, then back toward the corridor where the boots approached.

“And if we don’t,” she said, “they put it in a cage. There isn’t a clean option left. Not now.”

Silas did not reply. He set his palm on the pot rim again, as if pressure could become instruction.

Reni reached for the scrap iron once more. This time she did not hesitate.

“Hold the rope,” she said. “When it shifts, don’t let it tip.”

Silas tightened his grip on the rope.

Reni wedged the scrap into the seam again, deeper than before. She braced her boot against the stone frame and levered.

The iron creaked.

The bars moved by a fraction.

It was not enough to slip through.

It was enough to prove it could move.

The beast turned toward the sound immediately and slammed into the bars again.

Reni pulled back behind the buttress.

Silas kept his eyes on the gap, and on her face.

Reni breathed through her nose.

“Right,” she said. “We do it fast.”

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Reni did not wait for the beast to pull back again. She took the scrap iron, drove it into the seam, and levered with both hands. Her shoulders tightened. Her boot braced against the stone frame.

The bars shifted.

Not much. A finger’s breadth at first, then another fraction as the metal flexed within the stone bed.

Silas felt the change through the floor. The sapling's hum rose into a higher pitch, and the rope vibrated against his wrist.

Reni glanced back.

"Now," she said.

The beast struck the bars from the far side. The iron rattled, and the seam tightened again.

Reni swore and levered harder.

"Hold it," she told Silas.

He kept the rope tight and his cane close, then shifted his cane hand to the rope so he could brace with both hands.

Reni shifted her weight, pushed her shoulder against the bar, and forced the opening wider by another fraction.

It became possible. Not comfortable. Possible.

Reni slipped through first.

She turned sideways and went, one shoulder, then the other. The iron scraped wool. The sound tightened Silas's jaw.

On the far side she landed in a crouch on rough brick. She did not straighten. She reached immediately for the cord at her wrist.

She had already unwound some from her wrist earlier, and it had been damp-stiff when she laid it under the propped board. Now she pulled free a length long enough to work.

She looped it around the nearest bar and around a protrusion in the stone frame where an old fastening point sat. Her fingers moved quickly. She tied it off in a knot that did not need elegance.

The cord held the bars from closing fully. It did not keep them wide. It kept them from slamming shut.

Reni looked up at the far corridor beyond the grate. It ran on, narrower than the one behind. The brickwork showed older repair

patches. The floor was uneven.

She grabbed a broken brick from the base of the frame, drew her arm back, and threw it down the corridor.

It struck stone and skidded, then hit a wall and cracked with a hard sound.

The ward-beast turned immediately.

Silas saw it through the bars: a mass shifting away from the threshold, forelimb dragging and then snapping forward. Its head swung toward the sound.

Reni did not wait for it to go far.

She darted along the far side of the threshold, keeping tight to the wall.

For a single breath Silas thought she had done it.

Then the beast pivoted.

It moved faster than its joints suggested it should. The uneven forelimb did not slow the turn; it only changed the angle.

Its forelimb shot back toward the bars and struck through the opening where the bars had shifted.

Reni's thigh took the hit.

Silas heard the impact as much as he saw it: a dull strike against flesh and wool, a short scrape of claw, then Reni's body dropping.

She went down on the far side with her face turned toward the brick.

Her forearm scraped the wall as she fell. Skin broke. Blood showed immediately, dark in the low light.

Reni opened her mouth.

No sound came.

Her jaw clenched. Her teeth bared for a single breath. She bit down on whatever cry would have come, and Silas understood without being told. The boots behind were closer now. A cry would carry.

The beast pushed its paw through again, claws scraping for purchase.

Reni rolled away from the reaching limb and pressed her injured thigh to the ground, hands braced to push herself back.

Silas moved.

He did not have time for careful shifts.

He took the rope, leaned his weight into it, and dragged the plank sled toward the gap.

The pot scraped iron.

The sound was high and sharp.

The sapling's hum flared.

Silas felt it in his molars and in the rope. The vibration ran up his arm and into his shoulder. His ribs protested, and his breath caught, but he kept pulling.

On the far side, the beast reacted to the flare and slammed into the bars again, then thrust its forelimb through the lower gap, claws hooking.

Reni's eyes met Silas's through the bars.

Her face had lost some colour. Sweat sat at her hairline.

"Get it through," she mouthed.

Silas reached the frame. The plank edge hit the stone lip and caught.

He crouched, hands shaking, and pushed the plank's front edge up with his palm while keeping the rope tight.

The pot tilted by a small degree. Soil shifted. He corrected, pulling the rope and pushing the plank in the same motion.

The pot base scraped iron again.

The hum spiked, then held high.

The beast hit the bars in response.

Reni forced herself up to a knee. Her hand went to her thigh. When she pulled it away, her fingers were wet.

Silas got the plank's front edge through.

The opening was narrow. He had to keep the pot centred or it would catch and tip.

His cane lay against the buttress behind him. He could not reach it.

He used both hands.

The plank slid forward in small jerks.

The pot cleared the bars by a hand's breadth and then caught again. The base rubbed the iron frame.

On the far side, Reni reached for the plank and pulled, careful not to put her hand near the pot crack.

The beast thrust its limb through the lower gap again.

The paw came further this time, claws splayed. It struck stone on their side, then scraped at air.

Silas pulled harder.

The plank lurched.

The pot rocked.

Reni caught it with both hands through the cloth pads still tied near the rim.

"Steady," Silas hissed, and did not recognise his own voice.

Reni did not answer. Her jaw was locked.

The plank slid forward. The pot cleared the frame.

Silas dragged the last of the sled through.

The moment the pot left contact with the iron, the hum shifted. It did not settle, but the pitch dropped by a fraction.

The beast made a rough, low sound.

Its forelimb stayed through the lower gap.

Reni looked down.

An iron pin lay near the frame on her side. It had likely been part of the grate's assembly or a maintenance fastening, loosened by the repeated impacts.

She snatched it up.

She rose on her injured leg.

Silas expected her to go down again. She did not. She moved with a stagger that cost her.

The beast's forelimb thrust further through the gap. The paw pressed against the stone, searching for a hold.

Reni jammed the iron pin between the limb and the stone seam at the base of the frame.

She did not try to stab. She used the pin as a lever.

She pushed it into the wall seam, then forced the beast's limb upward and sideways, into a narrow angle it could not pull cleanly out of.

The limb jerked.

Claws scraped stone.

Reni's hands shook but did not slip.

"Move," she breathed, the word barely sound.

Silas pulled the sled further down the far corridor. He did it fast, and the plank scraped brick. He did not stop.

Reni held the pin for several counts.

The beast thrashed its limb once, then again. The thickened hide around the joint bunched. The uneven elbow angle worsened the pull.

The pin held.

Seconds.

It was enough.

Reni yanked the pin free and lurched away from the gap.

The beast's limb snapped back through the bars. It struck iron as it withdrew, and a hard ring travelled down the corridor.

As Reni passed the frame, she planted her boot on the shifted bar and shoved the grate back until the cord took the strain. The ward-beast hit iron at once. The ring carried along the stone toward the boot-cadence behind them.

Reni moved after Silas, one hand on the wall.

Her thigh dragged slightly as she walked, then she corrected, forcing the leg to bear weight.

Blood marked the stone where her boot passed. Not a flood. A trail.

Silas reached a corner and pulled the sled around it, using the wall to keep the pot from tipping. He kept one hand on the bricks until his balance returned.

Reni fell behind the corner after him.

She slid down the brick, breath short, and sat with her back to the wall.

Silas shoved the sled against the wall and turned back.

Reni had both hands on her thigh now. She pressed hard through the wool.

Her forearm scraped in thin lines down toward her wrist.

She looked up at him.

“It got me,” she said.

Silas stared at her hands.

“How deep,” he asked.

Reni’s mouth pulled back.

“Deep enough,” she said, and swallowed once. “Deep enough to slow us. Not for a few steps.”

\*\*\*

Silas crouched in front of her. The corner gave them only a brief concealment; it did not stop sound. The beast struck the grate again behind them, and the iron ring returned in regular pulses through the corridor.

Silas reached for Reni’s hands.

She jerked away.

“Don’t,” she said.

He shifted his hand to the hem of her coat.

“You said deep,” he replied.

Reni’s eyes narrowed.

“I said it slows us.”

Silas looked at the blood trail. Under the ward damp, it did not dry quickly.

He looked back up.

“Show me,” he said.

Reni gave a short laugh without humour.

“You want to take measurements now,” she snapped.

“I want to know whether you can walk,” Silas answered.

The corridor behind carried voices again, closer. A call came from the run they’d used, then an answer came from a branch off to the right.

Reni’s eyes flicked toward the sound.

Silas reached for her coat hem again.

“Now,” he said.

Reni spat on the stone beside her boot and then pulled the coat aside.

The wool was torn where the beast’s claw had caught. Beneath it, her trousers were split. The skin along her thigh was cut in a long gash at an angle. Blood filled the line and ran down toward her knee.

“You won’t keep pace,” Silas said.

Reni’s eyes hardened.

“I will,” she replied.

Silas looked at the sapling. The hum stayed present, neither calm nor full flare.

He knew what sap could do. Not as magic. As function.

Reni watched his face.

“No,” she said. “Don’t start with your guild talk.”

“It is not talk,” Silas replied.

“It’s superstition,” she said. “You want to smear plant spit on me and call it law.”

Silas’s gaze dropped to the blood on stone.

“You are already paying,” he said.

He looked back up.

“Do you prefer to die practical,” he asked, “or do you prefer to keep moving.”

Reni's mouth opened. No answer came at first.

"Fine," she said. "Do it. But fast."

Silas moved to the pot.

He chose one leaf from the lower-middle and took it between finger and thumb at the petiole.

His hands shook. He forced them still.

He tore.

Milky sap beaded immediately at the torn vein.

Reni watched it, eyes fixed, her breathing held and then released through her nose.

Silas pressed the torn edge of the leaf against the wound.

The sap spread. It thickened where it met blood. The wound edges drew closer by a small degree. The skin tightened. Blood flow reduced.

Reni inhaled sharply through her nose.

Silas kept the leaf pressed for several counts, then his vision blurred. The brick edges doubled.

Warmth ran down his upper lip.

Blood.

Vertigo.

He went down to one elbow on the stone, careful not to pull the leaf away too soon.

Reni grabbed his shoulder to stop him sliding fully to the floor.

Silas lifted the leaf away.

The wound line remained sealed enough to hold.

Reni stared at her thigh, then at the blood on his lip. Her fingers tightened on his sleeve, and her breath came quick.

Silas tore a strip from a damp cloth pad and pressed it to his nose. Blood soaked it quickly.

“You can do that again,” Reni said.

“No,” Silas answered.

He forced himself to sit upright.

“The sapling cannot do this endlessly,” he said. “That leaf was stored water and sugar. It will miss it.”

“And you,” Reni said.

“And me,” Silas replied.

He tightened the knot on the cloth with stained fingers. His hand steadied on the strip. He watched Reni set her weight on the sealed leg and push herself up. The thought came and held: this was for her.

The calls behind them came again, closer and clearer now.

Reni released his shoulder.

“Get up,” she said.

Silas pushed himself to his feet using the wall and his cane.

Reni rose too, limping immediately, but bearing weight.

Silas wrapped the blood-wet cloth around his nose with a knot that would hold long enough. He checked the rope tension once, then pulled.

Behind them, a mouthpiece tone came from the corridor they’d used. A second answered from a right-hand branch, shorter and closer, and boots split between the two.

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Reni led them into narrower corridors where imperial iron bracing began to appear at regular intervals. Plates were riveted and numbered in

the imperial manner. The ward baseline sharpened close to the iron.

They passed a junction where warmth rose steadily and coal smoke threaded through the air, the smell of boiler work above.

Behind them, voices carried again, closer, splitting into coordinated calls.

Reni stopped at a vertical access ladder bolted into stone. She looked up, then back at Silas and the sled, hesitated, and then placed one boot on the rung.

“We go up,” she said.

Silas climbed first. Halfway up, vertigo returned. His boot slipped, scraped iron.

Below, Reni steadied the rope, took tension into her forearm, and kept the pot from jerking.

Silas reached a small landing with a rusted service door. He tested the handle once. It did not move.

Reni hauled the sled and pot up the ladder one rung at a time, her limp worse on the climb.

Silas lunged to catch the rope at one point; his palm scraped iron and bled.

They got the pot onto the landing.

Reni put her ear to the door. Through pipes and metal, faint music carried from above, a repeated rhythm from occupied palace space.

Below, in the shaft, boot cadence and mouthpiece calls came closer.

They crouched on the landing, injured and bleeding, before a door locked from the palace side, with the sapling’s hum present against the iron-braced stone and the search moving below.

# Chapter 7

## The Bad Bargain (Mid-Book Reversal)

The landing above the ladder was no more than a square of stone with a door set into it, and that door had the look of every palace service access in Sector Four: iron strap hinges, a plate of rust around the latch, and a seam so tight that no light came through. Reni kept her shoulder against the wall for balance and put her ear to the metal. The music that had been faint before carried more clearly now, a repeated rhythm moving through the pipes, and beneath it the steady warmth of boiler lines somewhere deeper in the palace foundations.

She drew back and put her hand to the latch. The handle turned a fraction, then stopped. She tried again, slower, as if the first attempt had been too quick to catch the right angle. The metal gave the same short movement and no more.

Silas watched her from where he crouched beside the plank sled. His cane lay across his knees. The cloth at his nose had gone stiff at the edges; when he breathed, it pulled at the knot. He kept one hand on the pot rim, not to calm it, he had learned in the last corridor that the dead-zone edge made that useless, but to keep it from shifting if the root pressed again.

Reni lifted her knife. The blade was narrow, its edge used for wire and seam work rather than clean cuts. She slid it at the latch plate and tried to find a gap.

Metal scraped.

The sound did not echo the way it did in the open sewer runs, but it carried enough. The shaft below was a narrow brick cylinder with iron

rungs, and voices travelled well through it.

Silas's throat tightened. He looked past Reni to the ladder opening.

Reni stopped, blade held still against the plate, then pulled it away and tried again with her fingers, twisting, tugging.

The latch did not move.

She hit the door once, low and controlled, with the heel of her hand.

The hinges rattled and settled.

Silas heard it and thought of the cover plates in the under-city ceiling, the fraction of light, the scrape of metal on stone. The Iron-Eaters had done that with care. They would do it again with less care if they had a reason.

Reni drew back her boot as if to kick.

Silas said, "No."

It came out flat. His mouth was dry, and the blood taste at the back of his tongue returned.

Reni looked at him.

"It's locked from their side," she said. "You already knew that."

"I hoped," Silas replied, and kept his hand on the pot.

Reni's jaw worked. She looked at the door again, then leaned in and pushed her shoulder against it. Her coat, patched and cut, rubbed the stone. She shifted her weight and drove.

The hinges creaked.

Not loud. Enough.

Reni froze with her shoulder still against the door.

From below, the ladder shaft carried a sound that had not been there a moment ago: a mouthpiece tone, a short note that flattened and then cut off.

Reni stepped back at once.

Silas's fingers tightened on the pot rim. The hum did not change, but he felt it in the clay through his palm. He did not look into the shaft; he had learned the habit of not looking where his weakness wanted to look.

Reni spoke low. "Right. So we don't make more of that."

She turned away from the door and squatted beside the sled.

Silas swallowed. The cloth at his nose shifted.

"We cannot go back down fast," he said.

Reni's eyes flicked to the ladder, then back.

"I can," she said.

Silas did not answer at once. He moved his cane and set the ferrule on the stone beside him. The vibration through the floor was faint here; iron bracing in the corridor made the ward baseline sharper in a way that did not always match his old counts.

"My foot slipped halfway up," he said. "I would not make it down if they came into the shaft."

His fingers tightened on the cane ferrule.

Reni's face tightened.

"So you're stuck," she said. "And the pot is stuck with you."

Silas kept his mouth shut. The word stuck fit too many things.

Reni lifted her hand and pointed at the pot.

"We need force," she said. "People. Charges. Something that breaks a palace door. Because this isn't a route. This is a wall."

Silas watched her hand, then the pot, then the corridor.

"The route is the courtyard," he said.

"That's the end," Reni snapped. "Not the route. The route is how we stop getting penned in."

Silas's fingers slid on damp clay where soil had smeared from the crack.

"We do not need to break a palace door," he said. "We need to place it on the Stone."

Reni's eyes narrowed.

"And what," she said, "if the Stone is under half a span of imperial paving and a ring of soldiers with rods and cages? You plan to stroll out with a pot and a cough and ask them to stand aside?"

Silas looked down at his cane.

"No," he said.

Reni's hand went to her fuse cord, braided against her sleeve.

"I can get a charge," she said. "A small one. I can get two. I can get people who know where to put it so it doesn't just blacken stone. And if the sapling reacts to iron and vibration, then we give it iron and vibration. We give them a failure."

Silas's head lifted.

"You want to detonate it," he said.

Reni's voice sharpened. "I want to live long enough to do anything. And I want them to bleed. That's not poetry. That's the only thing they count."

Silas kept his hand on the pot rim.

"It must be planted," he said.

Reni's mouth pulled back.

"You keep saying that," she replied. "Planted. As if we're in your rose beds with gloves on and a list."

Silas's throat tightened at the word list.

“Planted,” he said again, and forced the breath to stay even. “If it is only made into a blast, then it becomes one more tool that can be taken and repeated. A charge is a charge. They will measure it. They will build a counter.”

Reni stared at him.

“And your plan is that they can’t measure a tree,” she said.

“They can measure its conditions,” Silas answered. “They already do. But they cannot make it root on a Stone that does not consent. They cannot make the bond and call it theirs.”

Reni’s eyes dropped to the leaves bound with cloth. A few were bruised where the guard had rubbed against the stem. One leaf had been torn earlier to seal her wound; the space it left was visible as a stub.

“You already cut it,” she said.

“I tore one leaf,” Silas replied.

“For me,” Reni said, and her voice did not soften. “And now you won’t tear another.”

Silas did not answer the accusation directly.

“It was not for barter,” he said.

Reni’s gaze snapped up.

“That’s what I’m talking about,” she said. “Barter. Trade. Deal. Whatever word you like. Everything here is trade. Food. Paper. Silence. Information. You traded your Registry and you still got left with nothing. And now you want to stand on ceremony with a sapling.”

Silas’s jaw tightened. A thin line of pain ran under his ribs where the rod had landed.

“It is not ceremony,” he said. “It is constraint.”

Reni leaned in.

“Then constrain it,” she said. “Strip leaves. Take sap. Cut a twig. Something small enough to carry to someone who has powder and hands. You don’t need to give them the whole pot. You need to buy help.”

Silas’s hand moved from the pot rim to the cloth guard at the stem. He felt the damp weave where sewer water had soaked it.

“No,” he said.

Reni blinked once.

“No,” she repeated.

Silas did not look away.

“No,” he said again, and kept it as plain as he could. “I will not let you carve it into tokens. I will not let you strip it for payment. It already takes blood. It already takes what it takes.”

Reni’s face changed then, not into rage, but into something sharper.

“So it’s sentimental,” she said. “That’s what this is. You have a pretty thing in a pot and you want to keep it pretty.”

Silas felt heat rise behind his eyes.

“It is not pretty,” he said.

Reni’s mouth lifted at one corner.

“Then what is it,” she said. “A god? A crown? A relic? You talk like those people who still whisper about kings and pretend the old rites can fix a garrison.”

Silas’s hand clenched on the cloth. The hum remained steady, but he felt it along the bones of his wrist.

“It is a living system,” he said. “It has rules.”

“Everything has rules,” Reni replied. “The rule down here is that if you can’t move, you get taken.”

From the ladder shaft came another sound: boots, closer than before, and the short call of a man speaking through a mouthpiece.

Reni's head turned.

Silas pushed the sled rope away from his body and gathered it again, as if he could prepare to move by the act of holding.

Reni spoke low. "We can't stay on this landing."

Silas nodded. He could not climb down; the ladder rungs were a count he did not have in him twice.

She glanced once at the service door, then turned away.

The corridor beyond the landing ran to the right, narrower than the one they had climbed from, with iron bracing plates bolted at shoulder height. There were imperial numbers stamped into them. The floor was uneven where an older brick line met newer repairs.

Reni moved first, limping with a controlled set to her jaw. The sealed wound had held, but the skin around it pulled tight under movement and the sensation made her walk stiffly.

Silas pulled the sled after her. The rope bit his palm where the scrape had torn it earlier. The pot shifted a fraction and he corrected with his shoulder, keeping it centred.

Behind them, the ladder shaft carried voices again. Silas heard the cadence and knew the difference between a tired patrol and a team moving to contain.

Reni stopped at a junction where the corridor narrowed again.

She turned back to Silas.

"I know someone," she said.

Silas's eyes did not leave her face.

"A cell," she added, and her voice flattened as if she wanted to make it sound like nothing. "Tunnel people. They have charges. They have

hands.”

Silas’s mouth tightened.

“They will try to own it,” he said.

Reni lifted her chin.

“They’ll try to live,” she replied.

“And they will trade it,” Silas said. “Or cut it. Or carry pieces for luck and call it victory.”

Reni’s eyes narrowed.

“You don’t get to talk about trading,” she said. “Not you.”

Silas did not flinch. He had heard worse, and he had earned it.

“I am telling you what they will do,” he replied. “Because I know what hunger does to hands.”

Reni’s shoulders rose and fell once.

“Hunger is what makes anything happen,” she said.

The mouthpiece voice from the shaft came again, closer.

Reni looked past Silas at the ladder direction.

“We can’t carry you and the pot and also fight them,” she said. “So we need more bodies. Or we need powder.”

Silas’s fingers tightened on the rope.

“And what will you pay,” he asked.

Reni’s gaze flicked to the sapling.

“Not that,” she said, too quick.

Silas did not answer. He watched her face, waiting for her to pull back.

Reni’s hand went to her wrist and she slid the fuse cord free from her sleeve braid. The damp had stiffened it. She tucked it into an inner

pocket.

She adjusted her knife sheath.

“I’m going,” she said.

Silas stared at her.

“You will leave it,” he said.

Reni’s eyes cut toward the pot.

“I can’t drag it and find them,” she replied. “And you can’t drag it and run if they come up. That’s the point. We’re pinned.”

Silas felt his mouth go dry.

“Reni,” he said.

She looked at him. For a moment there was a flicker of something like hesitation. It did not last.

“Stay here,” she said. “Keep it quiet. I’ll come back.”

Silas’s hand went to the pot rim again. Damp clay. A thin smear of soil. The crack line ran further down the side than it had in the last corridor.

“You will bring them here,” he said.

Reni’s mouth pulled back.

“Everyone is already here,” she replied, and nodded toward the ladder shaft.

She turned and moved away into a side cut, narrow enough that her shoulders brushed brick. Her limp made her steps uneven. She did not look back.

Silas was left with the sled, the pot, the iron-braced corridor, and the rising cadence below.

He crouched. The movement pulled at his ribs and he had to pause with one hand on the cane to keep from tipping.

The hum from the sapling filled the corridor. It had been present before, always present, but now the sound seemed louder in the absence of Reni's movement and speech. The leaves trembled slightly where the cloth guard touched them.

Silas pressed his palm to the pot rim and tried to slow his breathing. He counted the way he did in dead zones, a steady number to keep his chest from tightening into panic.

He thought of pollen.

The last time he had inhaled it he had nearly burnt his palm and coughed blood. The overlay had been useful; it had also made him careless.

He licked his lips. The air in the corridor was stale, with iron and damp brick.

Boots sounded in the shaft again. A voice carried a clipped command.

Silas's fingers shook on the cane.

He reached toward the sapling's lower leaves, not to tear one, not to cut, only to lift the cloth guard and see whether the stem warmth remained. The stem felt less warm than it had in the sewer run, but not dead-zone cold. There was a tack of sap where his thumb brushed the bark.

He withdrew his hand.

If he inhaled pollen now, he might get steadiness. Or he might get dizziness and collapse in the corridor with the hum loud enough to guide men with rods.

He stayed still, listening.

The hum continued.

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Reni did not allow herself to run. When she hurried, her boots slid on grit and she risked a fall, and she could not afford another split of skin on her leg. She moved at a pace that kept her upright and kept her breath controlled. The sealed line along her thigh pulled at every step, and the sensation made her jaw tighten.

She took a maintenance cut off the iron-braced corridor, a slit between brickwork where a repair had been left incomplete. Her shoulder scraped stone and she adjusted to move sideways, knife hand forward. The cut narrowed into a crawlspace that smelled of soot and old oil.

She dropped to her hands and knees. The brick beneath her palms was gritty. Her forearm scrape stung when it met the rough surface.

In the distance, a mouthpiece note sounded again, and then the boot cadence returned, a steady rhythm on rung and stone.

Reni pushed forward.

The crawlspace rose after several spans into a broader tunnel where the ceiling was higher. Soot coated the upper brickwork in a strip, and the floor showed scuffed marks where boots had passed often enough to wear the grit down to smoother stone. A lamp sat in a niche, shielded by a bent plate of metal. Its light was low and yellow, more smoke than flame.

A second lamp was further along, and a third beyond it.

The meeting point.

Reni straightened and stepped into the larger space without calling out. She counted exits as she always did: the crawlspace behind, a side run half-collapsed on the left, a broader corridor ahead with a bend that hid its end.

A figure rose from behind a pile of bricks and an old timber prop. Thin, leather apron, hair braided tight. The burn at the jaw was visible even in the low lamp light.

Ysolde Marran looked at Reni's coat, then her hands, then her leg.

“You’re limping,” Ysolde said.

Reni did not answer the observation.

“I need powder,” she said.

Ysolde’s mouth lifted.

“Everyone needs powder,” she replied. “What do you have.”

Reni kept her hands visible.

“I have a route,” she said.

Ysolde tilted her head.

“A route is nothing,” she replied. “Routes are how people get killed. What else.”

Two others were in the tunnel now, stepping out of shadow. One carried a bundle wrapped in cloth. The other had a pouch at his waist that clinked when he moved.

Reni’s eyes went to the pouch.

Nails.

Imperial nails were a currency in some parts of Sector Four; they were also a tool. They could be driven into stone seams, or used as shrapnel if a charge was desperate enough.

Ysolde watched her gaze.

“You came alone,” Ysolde said. “Where’s your friend. The old gardener.”

Reni’s face stayed still.

“He’s waiting,” she said.

Ysolde’s eyes narrowed.

“Waiting,” she repeated. “With what.”

Reni's hand went to her inner pocket and she drew out the fuse cord. It was short, damp-stiff.

"I have this," she said. "And a living thing."

One of Ysolde's people made a sound under their breath.

Ysolde did not move.

"Living," she said. "In a pot."

Reni's throat tightened.

"Yes," she said.

Ysolde stepped closer. Her knife was visible at her belt, but her hands stayed open.

"What kind," Ysolde asked.

Reni glanced toward the lamps, then toward the dark corridor.

"A sapling," she said. "World-Tree."

After she said it, the tunnel went still. Reni heard the others' breathing shift, a short pause, then faster. Ysolde's eyes did not widen. She had a disciplined face, but the line at her mouth tightened.

"You're saying that to get powder," Ysolde said.

"I'm saying it because it's true," Reni replied.

Ysolde gestured. One of the others set down the wrapped bundle. When the cloth shifted, Reni saw dark powder and a waxed packet, and a length of cord thicker than hers.

Ysolde crouched beside it and picked up a small charge casing, an old metal pipe cut short.

"You want this," she said. "And you want men."

Reni said, "I want two who can stand in a corridor and not freeze when rods come out."

Ysolde's mouth lifted again.

“Rods,” she said. “So you’ve been chased by the Iron-Eaters.”

Reni did not deny it.

“They’re close,” she said.

Ysolde set the pipe down.

“Tell me,” she said. “What does your sapling do.”

Reni’s hand went to the healed split in her lip, a habit when she tried not to show fear.

“It breaks the Wards,” she said. “It makes a counter. Not in the street, not anywhere. It needs the anchor. The old man says the King’s Stone is under the palace courtyard. That’s where it has to go.”

Ysolde listened with her head tilted slightly.

“And you believe him,” she said.

Reni felt anger rise.

“I believe what I’ve seen,” she said. “The thing hums. The iron reacts. The Ward-beast reacted. The rods reacted. And when the old man bled into the pot, the sapling grew in minutes.”

One of the cell members made a short sound.

Ysolde’s gaze flicked to him.

“Quiet,” she said, and looked back at Reni.

“So it’s fed,” Ysolde said. “And it answers.”

Reni nodded once.

“It answers blood and pain,” she said.

Ysolde’s eyes sharpened.

“And you bring it to the palace,” she said. “Then what. Roots through paving. Soldiers crushed. Walls split.”

Reni kept her voice flat.

“Then the Wards fail,” she said. “And the pylons stop pulsing their timed signals.”

Ysolde stood.

“Proof,” she said.

Reni’s throat tightened.

“I didn’t bring it,” she said.

Ysolde’s head turned slightly.

“You didn’t bring it,” she repeated.

“It’s too heavy,” Reni said. “And I had to move fast. The old man can’t move fast.”

Ysolde’s eyes moved over Reni’s leg again.

“And you can,” she said.

Reni did not answer.

Ysolde walked to the wall niche and lifted the shielded lamp plate a fraction, checking the corridor beyond by light shift, then set it back.

“Here’s what I think,” Ysolde said. “I think you have something living. I think it is valuable. I think it is too large.”

Reni’s jaw clenched.

“It has to stay whole,” she said.

Ysolde turned.

“Whole,” she repeated, as if tasting the word. “Whole things are easy to seize. Whole things are hard to move. Whole things make one capture worth ten.”

Reni stepped closer.

“If you cut it,” she said, “it will root wrong. It will tear through whatever it finds. It will break the city in places that don’t matter. And it will still not break the Wards.”

Ysolde's expression remained controlled.

"That's the old man's story," she said.

Reni's hands tightened into fists.

"It's not a story," she said.

Ysolde's gaze moved to the nails again.

"I can make you relics," Ysolde said.

Reni blinked.

"What," she said.

Ysolde lifted the pouch and poured a handful of nails into her palm. They were blackened and stamped with imperial marks, stolen from crates or torn from frames.

"Relics," Ysolde said again. "Small pieces. Splinters. Chips. A leaf dried in wax. A root shaving. Something a recruit can carry and believe in. Something that makes a person get up when their ration is gone and the curfew bell rings. Something they can press against a pylon and call it resistance."

Reni's stomach turned.

"You want to carve it," she said.

Ysolde's eyes did not leave her.

"I want to spread it," Ysolde replied. "Because a pot can be caged. A pot can be taken down to a palace basement. A pot can be measured and boxed. But a hundred people with a piece in their pocket is harder to count."

Reni shook her head once.

"No," she said. "It stays whole. It goes to the Stone. That's the point."

Ysolde's mouth tightened.

“And who carries it,” she asked. “You and a man who can’t climb down a ladder.”

Reni’s face flushed with anger.

“Two people carried it through a grate and past a beast,” she said. “Two people got it this far.”

Ysolde lifted her hands.

“And now you came to me,” she said. “So you know two isn’t enough.”

Reni’s breath came out sharp.

“I came for powder,” she said.

Ysolde nodded.

“Good,” she replied. “Then we speak in plain terms.”

She gestured to the bundle.

“I will give you two charges,” she said. “I will give you two bodies. Not children with rocks. Two who can hold a corridor.”

Reni held still.

“And,” Ysolde continued, “you will deliver the sapling into our custody.”

Reni’s throat tightened.

“No,” she said.

Ysolde’s eyes hardened.

“Yes,” she replied, without raising her voice. “Because if you want my powder, you don’t keep the thing that buys it.”

Reni’s fingers curled against her palm.

“I’m not handing it over to be cut up,” she said.

Ysolde stepped closer.

“I did not say cut,” she replied. “I said custody.”

Reni looked at the two others, at their faces in the lamp light. One was young enough that his cheeks still had fullness. The other had a scar line across his temple, and his hands were black with soot.

Hungry.

Suspicious.

Not fools.

Reni thought of Silas sitting alone in the corridor, his cane on stone, the hum carrying. She thought of the Iron-Eaters in the ladder shaft, rods up, cages on carts.

She swallowed.

“I bring you to it,” she said. “You bring the charges. We move it together. It stays whole.”

Ysolde’s mouth lifted, not with humour.

“You bring us to it,” she said. “And then it is ours to decide. That’s what custody means.”

Reni stared at her.

Ysolde watched her face with the patience of someone who had made too many bad bargains to pretend they were clean.

Reni’s thigh pulled as she shifted her weight. The sealed skin line tightened. She felt sweat at her hairline.

She looked down at her fuse cord.

From the corridor beyond the lamps, a mouthpiece note carried, then cut off.

She looked up again.

“Two charges,” she said.

“And two bodies,” Ysolde replied.

Reni nodded once.

“Fine,” she said.

Ysolde’s eyes narrowed.

“Fine,” she repeated. “You’ll lead.”

Reni did not allow herself to argue about that. She had offered the route. She had offered the leverage.

She turned toward the crawlspace.

The two cell members gathered the bundle of charges and the pouch of nails. One slung a sack over his shoulder; the fabric sagged with weight.

As they moved, the sack swung and a few small objects clicked together. Reni saw them when the mouth opened for a moment: fruit pits, dark and polished, some drilled and threaded on string.

Charms.

Reni’s step checked. Her stomach tightened.

Symbols already functioned as currency here. Ysolde did not need the sapling as a living anchor to the King’s Stone; she wanted it as a source of pieces.

Reni kept moving anyway.

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Silas heard them before he saw them. Steps in the side cut, more than one, uneven, not the measured cadence of the Iron-Eaters. He kept his body close to the pot, one hand on the rim, the other on the cane.

When Reni appeared, his chest loosened for half a breath.

Then Ysolde Marran came after her, and two others behind.

Silas’s mouth went dry.

Reni stopped a span away.

“Silas,” she said.

Silas did not answer her first. His eyes stayed on Ysolde.

He pulled the sled rope and dragged the plank back a fraction, positioning the pot behind his hip as far as the corridor allowed.

Ysolde’s gaze went to the sapling at once.

“That,” she said.

Silas kept his voice controlled.

“Do not touch it,” he said.

Ysolde’s mouth lifted.

“You’re the rose man,” she said. “The collaborator. The one they keep.”

Silas felt the word collaborator in his ribs.

“I am the one carrying it,” he replied.

Ysolde stepped closer.

“And you’re the one keeping it whole,” she said. “That’s wasteful.”

Reni’s voice snapped. “Ysolde.”

Ysolde did not look at her.

“We don’t have time for gentle handling,” Ysolde said. “We have time for tools.”

Silas’s hand tightened on the cane.

“It is not care,” he said. “It is rule.”

Ysolde’s eyes flicked to him.

“I don’t care about your guild words,” she said. “I care about what people can carry.”

Silas did not move from the pot.

“You spoke of carving,” he said.

Ysolde’s expression did not change.

“I spoke of spreading,” she replied. “A leaf in wax. A chip of root. Something that gives a person courage when the curfew lines close.”

Silas kept his voice low.

“If you cut it,” he said, “it will root wrong. It will press into mortar seams and conduit beds. It will tear stone looking for an anchor. Roots will press into seams regardless of orders.”

Ysolde’s eyes narrowed.

“That sounds like a threat,” she said.

“It is consequence,” Silas replied.

Reni stepped forward.

“It needs the palace Stone,” she said. “That’s why we’re here. That’s what I told you.”

Ysolde turned her head slightly.

“You told me it needs an anchor,” she said. “You didn’t tell me the old man would refuse to do what keeps us alive long enough to reach it.”

Silas stared at Reni.

“You told her,” he said.

Reni’s mouth tightened.

“I told her we needed help,” she said.

Ysolde lifted her hand.

“Enough,” she said, and nodded to one of her people.

The man with the soot-black hands stepped forward. His gaze stayed on the pot.

Silas said, “Do not.”

The man reached anyway.

His fingers landed on the pot rim.

The hum spiked.

It was not a song. It was a sharp increase in vibration that made Silas’s teeth ache. The leaves drew in by a finger-width against the cloth guard, and the stem felt warmer under Silas’s palm. Sap at the rim went tacky where the man’s thumb had pressed.

Inside the pot, a pressure line became visible as the clay bulged, then a hairline crack opened further down the side. A small strip of soil shifted and slid onto the plank.

The man jerked his hand back.

“What is that,” he said.

Silas’s hand tightened on the rim.

“That is why,” he said.

Ysolde’s gaze stayed on the crack.

“It’s breaking,” she said.

“It will break if you treat it as a thing to seize,” Silas replied.

Reni stepped between them.

“It stays whole,” she said. “We carry it to the palace. We put it on the Stone. Then it does what it does.”

Ysolde looked at her.

“You’re injured,” she said.

Reni’s face stayed hard.

“And you’re hungry,” she replied.

Ysolde’s eyes did not soften.

“I am,” she said. “So I don’t pretend about this. I don’t pretend you’re a partner. You’re a runner. You came with an offer. The offer buys you a say until it doesn’t.”

Reni’s hand went toward her knife.

Ysolde lifted two fingers.

“Hold her,” she said, and did not raise her voice.

The younger one moved first, quick. He grabbed at Reni’s wrist.

Reni twisted away and drove her elbow back into his ribs.

He made a short sound and folded.

Her movement pulled at her thigh. The sealed wound line tightened. Pain shot up her leg and she staggered for half a step.

The other cell member moved in, hands reaching for her shoulders.

Reni hit him with her forearm, the scrape stinging as skin met cloth and bone. She drove forward with her shoulder and knocked him into the wall.

Brick rattled.

A loose piece of mortar fell and clicked on stone.

Reni heard her own breath, harsh and too loud.

In the ladder shaft direction, a mouthpiece note sounded, sharper than before.

Silas pulled the sled rope.

He tried to move the pot away from the struggle, dragging it toward the side cut.

The rope slid in his injured palm.

His vision blurred.

The corridor turned into a double line of iron braces and brick.

He took one step and his knee buckled.

He went down, not hard enough to crack bone, but hard enough that his ribs flared with pain.

His hand stayed on the pot rim.

The hum remained high.

Ysolde's eyes snapped to him.

"There," she said. "That's your problem. You can't move."

Reni turned toward Silas, breath hard.

"Silas," she said.

Ysolde stepped forward.

"Take it," she said.

The man with soot-black hands reached again.

Silas clenched his jaw and kept his palm on the rim.

"No," he said.

Boot rhythm sounded in the ladder corridor, closer than it had been.

A voice carried, mouthpiece-altered and controlled.

"Contact," it said.

Reni's head snapped toward the sound.

Ysolde heard it too.

Her eyes flicked to the charges slung over the shoulder of the younger one.

"Fast," she said. "Carry it out. If it breaks, it breaks. We're not dying in a corridor for a pot."

Silas's throat tightened.

“If it breaks here,” he said, and forced the words out between breaths, “it will root into the lines. Into conduits. Into stone joints. It will tear this sector in half looking for a seat.”

Ysolde looked down at him.

“Then it will tear them,” she said. “That’s still better than a cage.”

Reni’s face changed.

She saw it then, not as a plan, but as a pattern: imperial cages on one side, rebel relics on the other. Hands reaching for the same living thing with different words.

She turned back toward Ysolde.

“No,” Reni said.

Ysolde’s eyes narrowed.

“You made the bargain,” she replied.

Reni grabbed the sled rope.

She yanked.

The plank slid. The pot rocked. Silas held it upright with his hand and forearm, keeping it from tipping as the rope jerked.

The hum flared again, louder in the confined corridor.

Boot rhythm from below quickened. Rod tips struck stone with short taps.

Ysolde swore.

The younger one, bent from Reni’s elbow strike, reached into the bundle and pulled out a small charge. His hands shook with haste.

He struck flint.

Reni’s eyes widened.

“Don’t,” she said.

The fuse caught.

The charge was thrown, low and hard, toward the ladder corridor mouth.

The blast was not large, but the corridor was tight. Dust and grit exploded out of the mortar seams. A section of older brickwork cracked and collapsed inward. Stone fragments clattered on iron bracing. The air filled with dust.

Silas coughed at once. The cloth at his nose darkened further.

Reni pulled the rope again.

“Move,” she said to Silas, and her voice sounded hoarse.

Silas tried to stand. His knee shook.

He kept one arm around the pot.

“I can’t,” he began.

Reni grabbed his coat collar and hauled.

He got his foot under him and rose enough to shuffle.

Behind them, Ysolde shouted at her people. The words were muffled by dust and the ringing in Silas’s ears.

Through the dust, iron rod tips tapped stone in short, steady intervals.

From the collapse, through the dust, a shape moved: Prefect Sorn’s silhouette, oilcloth coat, iron gorget catching the low light. Two Iron-Eaters behind him raised rods, their hands gloved.

Sorn’s voice carried, clear despite the mouthpiece.

“Restrain all,” he said. “Anomaly intact.”

Ysolde stepped toward him, hands out.

“Prefect,” she called. “We can give you the collaborator. The old rose man. Take him and let the rest pass. He’s the one you want.”

Reni felt her stomach tighten.

Silas did not look at Ysolde. He kept his hand on the pot rim, his other hand on the cane, using it as a third point of contact.

Sorn did not slow.

He raised his rod and set the tip to stone, reading through it by touch.

“Restrain all,” he said again. “Anomaly primary.”

The Iron-Eaters moved in.

Reni yanked the rope. The plank sled scraped, loud in the dust.

The hum rose. The vibration made Silas’s jaw ache.

Reni pulled him toward the side cut she had used earlier, the narrow maintenance slit. She had counted it as an exit on her way back; she had not counted on using it with a pot.

Silas clung to the pot.

He could have let go and moved faster. He did not.

The pot stayed upright because his hands stayed on it.

They reached the slit.

Reni shoved the plank nose into it.

The plank caught.

The pot shifted.

Silas tightened his grip and braced his shoulder against the clay.

Reni forced the plank again.

It scraped brick.

Her coat snagged on a broken iron bolt head. Wool tore.

She swore under her breath and kept pushing.

Silas heard Sorn behind them, rod tapping stone in short intervals. The rhythm was not hurried. It was methodical.

Reni got the plank through by a fraction.

The pot edge caught the brick seam.

She shifted angle and shoved harder.

The plank slid.

Silas stumbled as the rope jerked. His cane ferrule skidded on dust. He recovered by leaning into the pot.

They moved into the side passage.

It narrowed after several spans into a squeeze, a section where older brick had bulged inward and the ceiling had been patched with a low arch. The air was hotter here, closer to boiler lines, and the dust clung to damp skin.

Reni stopped.

The sled did not fit cleanly.

Silas's breath came short.

Reni set her teeth.

"Help me," she said.

Silas tried to shift his hands. His right palm bled where the rope had bitten into the scrape.

Reni shoved the plank edge into the squeeze.

The plank stuck.

She leaned her shoulder into it and forced.

Wool tore further. Skin on her shoulder scraped brick. She hissed through her teeth but did not stop.

The pot base scraped stone.

A crack line lengthened along the clay.

Soil spilled onto the plank and then onto the passage floor.

Silas felt the hum flare, not as a new tone, but as a stronger vibration. The root inside pressed again; he felt it as pressure against the clay through his forearm.

Reni swore.

She pulled the rope and shoved at the plank in one motion.

The plank slid through.

The pot followed, catching once and then clearing.

Silas came after, shoulders scraping brick. His cane ferrule clicked and he used the sound to keep his balance.

Behind them, through dust and brick, rod taps continued.

Sorn did not lose the trail.

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They stopped only when the passage widened enough that Reni could turn without scraping both shoulders at once. Dust lay on her coat and in her hair. Blood had mixed with dust at the edge of her forearm scrape, making a dark smear down to her wrist.

Silas crouched beside the pot. He kept his hand on it until his breathing slowed.

The sapling's hum did not drop to silence. It had steadied into a constant, loud baseline that filled the passage.

Reni moved to the mouth of the passage and looked back the way they had come. She did not put her head out; she kept her face in shadow and listened.

Rod taps. Boots. Farther now, but present.

She returned to the pot and sat against the brick with her knees bent.

Silas's cloth at his nose was dark again. He adjusted the knot with fingers that shook.

Reni stared at the pot for a long moment.

Then she spoke.

"They wanted to carve it," she said.

Silas did not answer at once. He looked at the crack line on the pot. Soil had spilled from it, leaving a damp streak.

"Yes," he said finally.

Reni's jaw tightened.

"I didn't bring them to cut it," she said. "I brought them because you were stuck and the door was locked from the palace side. I brought them because we need force."

Silas's eyes stayed on the pot.

"Force," he said.

Reni's voice sharpened.

"Yes," she replied. "Force. Powder. Bodies. Anything that makes them stop treating us like cattle. That's what I know. That's what I've seen work."

Silas's mouth tightened.

"It works," he said, "until the hand that holds it decides it has rights."

Reni stared at him.

"You have no standing to say that," she said. "Coming from you."

Silas lifted his head.

"I am not asking you to call me clean," he said. "I am telling you what I learned."

He set his fingertips against the cracked clay, then drew them back when the rim tack pulled.

“Force without restraint becomes another cage,” he said.

Reni’s lips parted as if she would spit another insult.

She did not.

Her eyes dropped to her thigh.

The squeeze had pulled her wound open. The sealed line had split at one end. Blood had soaked into her trousers, darkening the fabric down toward her knee.

She pulled the cloth aside and showed Silas without being asked.

“There,” she said. “That’s what your restraint buys.”

Silas’s gaze went to the wound. The earlier sap seal had held in the centre, but the edge had torn under strain.

He looked at the sapling.

Reni watched him.

“Don’t,” she said, and the word came out flat. “Don’t start counting leaves at me.”

Silas’s throat tightened.

“I will not tear another,” he said.

Reni’s eyes narrowed.

“So you are cruel,” she said.

Silas did not flinch.

“I am choosing what survives,” he replied. “The sapling needs what it has stored. The next stages are heat and iron and the Stone under paving. It will need sap in its veins. It will need leaves to make it. If I strip it now for comfort, it will arrive weaker.”

Reni’s face tightened.

“And I arrive weaker either way,” she said.

Silas’s mouth pressed into a line.

“Yes,” he replied.

Reni stared at him for several breaths.

Then she let her head rest back against the brick.

“Fine,” she said. “I get it. I don’t like it.”

Silas nodded once.

He kept his voice low.

“We cannot bargain like that again,” he said. “Not without both of us present. If you speak to a faction alone, you will be bought.”

Reni’s eyes flashed.

“I wasn’t bought,” she said.

Silas did not argue the word. He looked at her thigh again.

“You were pressed,” he replied.

Reni’s hands tightened on her coat hem.

“And you,” she said, “you don’t take pollen without me watching. Because you’ll collapse and I’ll be dragging you again.”

Silas’s jaw tightened.

“Yes,” he said.

Reni let out a breath.

“Good,” she said.

For a moment neither spoke.

The hum remained steady, loud. It did not flare with panic now; it ran as a constant vibration through the clay and plank and brick.

Silas set his cane ferrule to the floor and listened by touch. The ward baseline in this passage was still present, but it felt less sharp than in the iron-braced corridor. The hum sat against it in a way that made his molars ache less.

He looked at the sapling leaves. Despite bruises and the cloth guard, their posture was slightly more lifted than it had been in the dead-zone run.

“Closer,” he said.

Reni’s head turned.

“To what,” she asked.

“The anchor,” Silas replied. “The Stone. The hum steadies like this when the line is more direct.”

Reni’s mouth tightened.

“Or when it’s louder because we can’t hide it,” she said.

Silas did not deny that.

“It can be both,” he said.

Reni shifted her weight and reached for the sled rope.

She took more of it than she had before, sliding her hand further up and lifting the rope to keep the plank from catching.

Silas watched her, then looked away.

“What are you doing,” he asked.

Reni did not look at him.

“Moving,” she said.

They stood.

Silas used the cane to rise. His ribs protested. The cloth at his nose pulled and he adjusted it with a quick motion, then took the rope.

Reni's leg shook when she put weight on it. She did not mention it. She set her jaw and began to pull.

The passage ran forward and widened. The brickwork changed after several spans, older and smoother, with a damp sheen where water had condensed and run in thin lines. The air smelled of metallic water again, and the floor dipped.

Silas recognised the construction.

"A cistern," he said.

Reni did not answer. She kept pulling.

Behind them, far off, rod taps continued, not close enough to be immediate, close enough to be remembered.

They reached the broader chamber edge. The ceiling rose. The floor was slick with old damp. A low wall curved in a partial circle, and the air cooled slightly.

Silas guided the sled over the lip.

Reni kept hold of the rope, carrying more of the weight than she had in the first days of flight.

The hum remained steady and loud in the larger space.

They moved into the cistern chamber without speaking again, both knowing that rest would not be safe, only possible for a few breaths before the next decision forced itself upon them.

# Chapter 8

## The Green Dream

The cistern chamber they entered had been built for volume and weight; the curved wall showed older lime mortar under the newer patches, and damp had darkened the brick where water condensed and ran down in thin lines. Reni did not stop in the open curve. She pulled the rope until the plank sled scraped into a side mouth where the ceiling dropped and the brickwork changed to a tighter bond. The passage narrowed into a dry bay above the water line, with a shallow ledge that ran along the wall and then ended in a broken step.

Stale water lay below it. The surface carried a thin film and small fragments that had collected in a slow eddy. The smell was metallic and old.

Silas followed the ledge with his shoulder close to brick. The cane ferrule clicked once as it met a raised seam; he shifted it at once and kept the sound to a minimum. The sled's scrape fell off quickly in the bay and did not echo. In the broader curve, sound had travelled along the wall and returned in delayed repeats. Here, uneven brick broke the echo.

Reni stopped at the broken step and set her palm on the wall, testing for grit and moisture. She turned and lowered herself to sit, careful with the injured leg. The movement pulled at the cloth and skin along her thigh. She set her jaw and kept her breath quiet, but her fingers tightened on her trouser fabric, and when she shifted to settle her weight the edge of the wound leaked again. Dark wetness spread in the cloth at her inner thigh.

Silas watched her hands. He did not ask whether it hurt. The question produced no useful answer.

He dragged the plank the last span and stopped with the pot close. He sat with his back against brick and drew the pot in until the rim nearly touched his knees. His ribs ached at the angle, and the exhale that followed came harder than he intended. Warmth ran at once under the cloth tied around his nose. He pressed the knot tighter with two fingers, and the cloth darkened.

Reni looked at him once, quick, then away toward the mouth of the bay.

The sapling's leaves were dusted with grit from the collapsed brick and the narrow squeeze. The cloth guard around the lower stem had kept some of the scraping off, but dust had settled on the upper leaves and gathered along the vein lines where sap had dried in thin tack.

Silas lifted one leaf between thumb and forefinger, brushing grit away with the pad of his index finger. The slow motion kept it from tearing; when he released it, the leaf flexed back into place. He did not tear another leaf for any reason. His hand stayed close as he worked the grit away one patch at a time.

His throat felt dry. The urge to take pollen rose with it, not as thought, as a pull in the back of the nose and behind the eyes. He swallowed once. The swallow did not help.

Reni shifted on the ledge, leaning forward with her forearms on her thighs, and listened down the passage. Her head tilted in small increments. She did not settle into stillness. Her gaze moved from the mouth of the bay to the ceiling line, to the darker notch where the brick changed, then to the ledge behind them. She counted exits without speaking, lips moving once, marking a number.

Silas kept his voice low.

“Any boots?”

“Echoes,” she said. “Far.”

He listened. The bay changed how sound carried. The wider cistern curve had carried every scrape and cough and returned it. Here, the only sound was the slow shift of water below and their own breathing.

He took the cane ferrule and set it to the brick beside his hip. He did not strike it; he pressed it and kept it steady. The vibration he felt through his wrist was faint, but it was there: a regular pulse, a mechanical cycle that did not match water movement.

They were not outside the lattice. They had only found a pocket where sound did not carry as well.

Reni's eyes narrowed at his posture.

"What is it?" she asked.

"A conduit cycle," he said.

She looked up at the ceiling. In this light it gave nothing back.

Silas's thumb began to throb where he had cut it again and again to feed soil. He flexed the knuckle once and stopped.

He had agreed to rules with her in the narrow passage: no pollen without a watcher; no bargains alone. It was a small agreement, but he felt the weight of it now more than he had when he spoke it. He did not have the strength to pretend he could afford solitude.

"I want it," he said.

Reni's face stayed hard.

"The pollen," he added, and the words left his mouth dry.

She did not laugh.

He kept his voice controlled.

"If I take it, watch me. If I stop answering, stop me. Don't let me keep breathing it."

Reni held still for a moment. The bay left little space between them. Her eyes flicked to the sapling and then to the cloth on his nose.

“You gave in to it in the cellar,” she said.

“I lost track of what I was doing for it,” he replied.

Reni’s throat moved once as she swallowed. She looked down at her thigh again, at the wet patch where the wound had seeped.

She nodded.

“Fine,” she said. “But you don’t get to say after that you didn’t ask.”

He accepted that.

She reached into her coat and pulled out a small flask, dented and cold to the touch. The metal had taken on the same smell as the water in these tunnels. She unscrewed the cap with fingers that shook once, then steadied.

“One mouth,” she said.

Silas watched the level. It was low.

She took a swallow, small, then held it out.

He took it and drank less than she had. The water tasted of iron and stone. It cooled his tongue for a moment and then left the throat dry again.

Reni took the flask back and drank the larger swallow. She closed the cap and returned it to her inner pocket with care.

Silas did not argue. The leg needed blood in it more than he did.

He returned to the sapling. The leaves were still drooped. The stem had lost some warmth in the dead zone, but in this bay, away from the thickest run of ward grind, it had regained a little. When he touched it with the side of his finger, tack remained.

He brushed grit from one more leaf and then paused, hand hovering over the bud cluster near the top.

He heard a tremor in the brick. Not a sound, a vibration that ran through the wall and into his shoulder blade. It arrived in a single pulse

and then faded. The cane ferrule under his palm picked it up, too.

Reni sat upright.

“You felt that,” she said.

“Yes,” Silas replied.

Her eyes went to the mouth of the bay again. She did not relax.

The cistern was quieter than the corridors, but it was still part of the city’s underworks. The lattice ran through stone whether they were alone or not.

No second pulse came. After a moment, his attention went back to the buds under his fingers.

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Silas rubbed his thumb and forefinger along the edge of a bud where pollen had thickened into pale dust. He did it carefully, keeping the motion light. The sapling had already lost one leaf to Reni’s wound; he would not tear tissue again to answer want.

He held his fingers out.

Reni stared at the pollen for a breath.

“You,” she said.

“Not yet,” Silas replied. “For you. It takes the edge off. It helps you keep weight on that leg.”

Reni’s mouth tightened.

“And it makes you want more,” she said.

“Yes,” he replied.

She watched him with suspicion that did not soften.

“Don’t feed me a habit,” she said.

“It is already a habit,” Silas said. “The only choice left is whether it is used for a purpose.”

Reni’s hand lifted, then stopped halfway.

Her thigh shook once, a small tremor that ran down to the knee. She pressed her palm hard against the wound through cloth and the tremor eased, then returned.

Silas held his fingers steady.

Reni leaned in and took the pollen with a sharp inhale.

Silas watched her face.

The first sign was a change in her breathing. Her chest lifted higher than it had, then her shoulders dropped and her next breath came easier. The skin along her cheek cooled where a draft ran, and the pressure shifted across her ears.

Her eyes closed for a moment; her mouth stayed open as she took in air, then shut as she swallowed.

Her fingers, which had been tight on her trouser fabric, released and flexed.

She opened her eyes and stared past the bay mouth.

“What do you see,” Silas asked.

Reni did not answer at once. Her head turned toward the wall, then up to the low ceiling.

“It’s...,” she began, and stopped. She blinked hard. “Pressure’s different.”

He waited.

She swallowed again.

“There’s open space,” she said, voice lower than before. “Not here. North-east.”

Silas felt his molars tighten. North-east in these tunnels meant palace-side, under the iron bracing and the boiler lines.

Reni's hand lifted and pointed, not toward the cistern mouth but to a section of brick in the bay wall, where mortar had been repointed at some time with a different mix. The patch was faintly lighter. Silas had noticed it as repair; she was pointing with certainty.

"There," she said. "That seam. That one's wrong."

Silas shifted, careful with his ribs. He set the cane to the wall and pushed himself up enough to lean in.

The seam ran vertical, narrow, half a handwidth from a corner where the brick changed bond. The mortar line had a fine crack that ran along it, not from age but from pressure behind.

He placed his fingertips on it. The mortar felt drier than the rest of the bay.

"A blocked shaft," he said.

Reni's face remained fixed on the seam.

"I can feel a curve under the straight work," she said.

Silas turned his head.

"What curve," he asked.

She pointed again, but this time the gesture traced an arc, moving from the seam out toward the cistern curve and then back.

"Under the corridor lines," she said. "The straight imperial cuts don't sit right on it. There's older stone under them. A curve."

Silas understood the words before he wanted to. The palace had been built on older foundations. Before the conquest, the service routes had been set to the city's older ground and water lines, not to the Empire's straight overlays.

"That's the old run," he said.

Reni's eyes shifted to him. The pollen had changed her attention. Her pupils looked wider in the low light.

"You're sure," she said.

He nodded once.

"Pre-conquest service," Silas said. "They used to move ash and coal and water through those. They hid them behind plaster and pride. The Empire likes lines it can measure."

Reni kept her gaze on the seam.

"It's not a story," she said.

"No," Silas replied. "It's a map. A present one."

He did not say soil-law aloud as a rite. He had stopped using those words for years in public. But he could feel it in the shape of his own thought: the sapling did not give memory. It gave instruction.

Reni's shoulders dropped another fraction. Her jaw eased.

Then she shook her head once, sharp.

"Gods," she muttered.

Silas kept his voice level.

"Say what you see," he told her. "Say it now."

Reni looked at his fingers. Her own hand lifted toward the sapling buds, drifting there for half a beat before she caught herself.

"More," she said.

Silas pulled his hand back.

"No," he replied.

Her eyes flashed.

"I need it," she said.

"You want it," Silas corrected.

Her mouth opened on a protest.

He did not allow the argument to settle.

“Route,” he said. “Tell me where.”

Reni swallowed, breathing through her nose. Relief showed at the corners of her mouth and made her look younger. It did not soften her.

“Seam,” she said. “There. The one I pointed to. It goes up. Not the ladder shaft we came from. This is... narrower. Draft. Coal.”

“Which direction after,” Silas asked.

Reni blinked. Her jaw tightened as she forced herself back into function.

“North-east,” she said again. “Up, then a short run. I don’t know steps, I know... weight.”

Silas nodded.

“Keep going,” he said.

Reni drew a breath.

“Water’s behind us,” she said. “Stale here. Moving the other way. That’s how I know I’m not confusing it.”

Silas did not need that proof, but he let her speak it.

She shifted forward on the ledge and put her hand on the seam, fingers spreading, pressing.

She used her nails first, scraping at the mortar line. The sound was small. Grit came away under her nail edge.

“It’s loose,” she said.

Silas watched her hands. The pollen did not make her gentle. It made her precise.

Reni pressed her knife tip into the mortar crack and tested. The blade sank a fraction, then stopped at brick.

Her eyes flicked up.

“Actionable,” she said, and there was bitterness in the word.

Silas heard it. He did not answer. The answer would not help.

From beyond the bay mouth, down in the wider cistern curve, a faint tapping carried through a conduit line. Iron on stone, measured intervals. Not boots. Not water.

Reni’s head snapped toward the sound.

Silas set his cane to the floor and felt the vibration through it. The taps were distant, but present.

The pursuit was still in the underworks.

Reni’s mouth tightened.

“Now,” she said.

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She worked the seam with the knife tip and a shard of brick she pulled from the broken step. The shard had a sharp edge. She used it as a wedge behind the blade, pushing with controlled force.

Mortar crumbled in small grains. She caught some of it in her palm and let it fall into her coat hem rather than the ledge, keeping the noise down.

After each push she stopped, lifting her head to listen.

The rod taps did not repeat in a steady approach. They came and then did not come, as if the Iron-Eaters had turned into another branch.

Silas stayed beside the pot with both hands on the plank. He braced it against the ledge edge and the wall, keeping it from scraping.

The sapling’s hum held to a constant tone that filled the bay whenever they were still. It ran as vibration through clay and wood and

his knees.

His fingers cramped around the plank edge. He flexed them once, trying to loosen the grip without letting go.

Reni glanced back.

“Don’t drop it,” she said.

“I’m not,” Silas replied.

He shifted his weight. His ribs ached and his breath caught. The cramp in his hand tightened further. He had to release the plank with one hand and shake it out at his side, quick, then set it back.

Reni returned to the seam.

The mortar gave at last in a longer line. A section of brick shifted inward with a soft scrape. Reni caught it before it fell.

Behind it, darkness opened into a narrow vertical void. Rusted ladder rungs were set into the shaft wall, their iron surfaces pitted and flaked. A draft came down from above, faint but constant. It carried coal smoke and warm air.

Reni leaned in, careful not to put weight on the weakened edge.

“It goes,” she said.

Silas leaned beside her enough to see. The shaft was just wide enough for a body to climb. The opening, however, was not wide enough for the pot without angling it.

Reni pulled back.

“It’s north-east,” she said, voice clipped again. “Same. That’s the open space.”

Silas nodded once.

The route was credible now. Not hope. Not plan. A physical opening.

His joints tightened at the thought of climbing. The ladder in the previous shaft had already cost him a slip. These rungs were older, rusted, and closer together.

Reni did not look at him.

She pushed her knife back into her sheath and put both hands on the edge of the opening.

“I’m going,” she said.

Silas did not answer. He could not stop her. He also could not stay.

She lowered one foot into the shaft and found a rung with the toe of her boot. Her thigh trembled and she made a sound between teeth, not a word.

She set both feet and then shifted her hands to the rungs.

Silas pulled the plank sled forward until the pot sat beneath the opening.

They had wrapped the pot in rags earlier and tied cloth pads near the rim, but the clay had taken new cracks with every scrape. The rim had a hairline split that had not been there in the cellar. Now it widened with each jolt.

Silas and Reni lifted together, angling the pot. The weight was not only clay and soil; it had not been for days. Silas felt it in his shoulders and wrists.

The pot rim caught the brick edge.

Reni adjusted her grip, one hand still on a rung, the other reaching out to guide the rim.

“Higher,” she said.

Silas raised his end by a fraction.

Clay gave with a small crack, sharp enough to make his teeth ache. A new split ran along the rim line and down a span.

A small amount of soil spilled. It fell onto the plank and then onto the ledge stones.

His jaw tightened and he exhaled once, short and hard.

Reni's eyes flicked to the soil.

"Leave it," she said.

Silas did not. He could not.

He set the pot down for a breath, just enough to free one hand. He reached for the spilled soil and pressed it back into the crack at the rim, packing it into place.

His thumb cut reopened at once. Blood ran onto the soil and darkened it.

Pain shot up from the cut. He kept pressing.

Reni watched him, face tight.

"You're doing it again," she said.

"Yes," Silas replied.

He did not take pollen to dull it. Sweat beaded at his temples despite the cool air.

He packed the soil until the rim line held enough to lift again.

Reni shifted in the shaft, taking more of her weight on her good leg. She reached out and pulled the rope from the plank sled, drawing it up.

"We need a brake," she said.

Silas nodded. He could not afford the pot sliding back and taking his wrists with it.

Reni looped the rope around the wrapped rim and tied it in a simple hitch. She pulled the rope tight and then passed it around a rung inside the shaft, anchoring it. The rope took strain. The pot stayed angled, held by rope friction and their hands.

“Stages,” Reni said. “One rung at a time.”

Silas drew in a breath and tried to steady it.

They lifted and slid the pot into the opening by fractions. The rim scraped brick. The sapling’s hum changed in pitch for a moment, then steadied.

The pot began to drift back when Silas’s grip loosened.

At the crack line, thin roots extended through the soil at the rim. They curled out, pale against the dark brick, and wrapped around the rusted rung nearest the pot. The root surface left a wet smear where it touched iron.

The hum roughened for a beat, and one upper leaf sagged, then steadied.

The pot stopped sliding.

Silas stared.

Reni’s face tightened.

“It’s holding,” she whispered.

Silas did not answer with a guild phrase. He watched the root contact. The iron did not burn it away at once. Instead, sap marked the rung in a thin line.

The hum remained loud. In the shaft it would carry.

Reni shifted her hands.

“Move,” she said.

Silas took the rope and pulled, controlling the pot’s descent and ascent through the rung anchor. He could feel the rope bite into his scraped palm. The skin had not healed since the ladder landing. It split again. Warmth ran along his fingers.

They hauled the pot up one rung.

With each pull and pause, the roots tightened hard on a rung and then let go, leaving sap streaks where they slid.

The root that had wrapped the rung tightened along it as the pot moved, then released with a small jerk. Sap smeared along the iron where it slid. The pot jerked upward a fraction more than their pull should have produced, then stopped as the rope brake caught.

Silas's breath came short.

Reni climbed above him, taking more of the weight. Her injured leg dragged slightly as she found the next rung. She did not speak of it.

Silas followed, one rung at a time. He had fixed the cane through the rope loop at the rim so it hung below the pot; he could not use it in this space. His hands took the work instead, and the work made them shake.

They hauled again. Rope slid through his hands and burned where blood had wet the fibres. He tightened his grip and forced the rope to slow.

The pot scraped the shaft wall.

Another thin root extended, curling around a higher rung. The root contact was not clean. Rust flakes came away and stuck to sap. The root slid and then held long enough for Reni to shift her foot.

When it released, the pot jerked again, enough that the rim struck brick and the crack line widened by a fraction. Soil shifted inside. Silas felt it in the pot's change of balance.

He swallowed blood that had run down his throat from his nose.

Reni paused, holding still. She listened upward.

Faint music carried through pipes above, thin and regular. It had been present at the locked service door earlier, but here, in the shaft, it changed with each rung. It grew clearer in short increments as they rose. When they stopped, it did not fade to silence; it remained, altered only by distance.

Any clink on the rungs would carry up the shaft cleanly.

Reni's head tilted.

"Closer," she said.

Silas nodded.

They hauled again.

His shoulders shook with the pull. He felt his ribs tighten and held back a cough. A cough would carry.

The rope brake held. The pot rose another rung.

The roots extended again, thin and quick now, more of them. They curled around the iron rungs, leaving sap smears and drawing rust into their wet surface. The contact slowed backslide when the rope slipped.

Silas did not assign it a thought. He watched what happened. The roots reacted to motion and iron and the need for purchase. The result was a staged climb that could be done without a single fatal slip.

Reni's breathing grew louder in the confined space.

"Don't stop," she said, and the words sounded strained.

Silas forced another pull.

The pot jerked upward again when the root contact released, the rope taking the shock. The knot held.

Music above grew clearer by another step. A pattern of notes repeated, steady, meant for a room with heat and light. Here, in the shaft, the sound came through metal and brick.

Silas's hands shook on the rope. He could feel the hum through the fibres. His nose bled again, and he could not spare a hand to press the cloth.

Reni climbed another rung.

Silas followed.

Between them the pot hung in the shaft opening, suspended by rope and rungs and roots that left sap behind on iron. They were no longer in the cistern bay. They were in a vertical line leading toward the palace, with every movement counted in sound and breath.

Above, the music shifted again, louder by a fraction.

Silas held the rope tight and pulled for the next rung, knowing that if they were heard, there would be no corridor to vanish into, only the narrow shaft and the weight between them.

# Chapter 9

## The Lion's Den

Silas's hands had learned the shape of rungs in the dark, but the last pull still took more than it should have. The rope burned through the split skin at his palm; he kept it steady by tightening his grip until his fingers shook, then eased the pot another fraction upwards. Above Reni's boots, a final rusted rung came level with a lip of stone that did not belong to the shaft.

Reni reached first. Her shoulder disappeared through the opening, then reappeared as she turned, bracing herself between iron and brick.

"Stop," she breathed. "There's a floor."

Silas let the rope take the weight, then pushed the pot the last span until the rim cleared. The roots that had wrapped the rungs loosened and slid free; sap streaks remained on the iron. He did not look long enough to measure the marks. He pushed until the pot sat on stone and did not move.

He climbed after it, scraping his knee on the edge because his leg would not lift cleanly in the confined angle. The last rungs left his forearms burning, and the draft that had pulled straight up the shaft shifted into a sideways flow along the corridor.

When his head rose past the lip, the air changed. It was not the open damp of the cistern or the cold suppression of the dead zones. It carried warmth, coal smoke, and the sour note of metal water. The space beyond was narrow, but it was built from older stone than the tunnel runs: arch-work blocks, their curves half obscured by straight iron braces that had been bolted across them.

Reni crouched beside the pot. The cloth pads tied at the rim were darkened with soil and blood. She did not touch the crack line.

Silas pulled himself fully out and sat for one breath with his back against the braced wall. His cane hung uselessly through the rope loop at the pot rim, the ferrule a weight he could not put to the floor here.

The corridor ran left and right. On the left, an arch mouth had been boxed in with iron plating and riveted angles, leaving a slot of passage no wider than a man's shoulders. On the right, the old stone curve continued, but imperial retrofits had been set into it: straight sections of grated floor, a line of pipes along the crown of the arch, and a framed inspection plate stamped with numbers.

From above the pipework, music was audible, thin through metal, repeating in a pattern too steady for any worker's humming. Between phrases, a burst of laughter carried, cut off abruptly by distance and walls.

"The feast," Silas said, not to instruct but to name what his body already understood.

Reni's face tightened.

"More boots," she said.

"More eyes," Silas replied.

He pushed himself up. His ribs pulled against each movement and his mouth tasted of old blood from the nosebleed that had never fully stopped. He tightened his jaw and swallowed once, but it did nothing to clear the taste.

He moved a hand across the wall and found a marking he recognised in the dim lamp spill from a distant junction: not orchard signage, not the forked-root cut he had used under the city, but a service mark from palace work routes. It was a metal plate, set at shoulder height, with a stamped code and a small rose emblem in the corner that indicated garden supply runs. He had never been permitted beyond certain doors,

but he had carried compost sacks past these plates enough times to know their numbering.

“We’re under the palace,” he said.

Reni looked past him at the stone and braces, then back at the plate.

“Not just closer,” she said.

“No,” Silas answered. “Here.”

The sapling’s leaves were still dusted with old grit. At their edges, the margins curled inward by a visible degree, and the curl had not been there when they were in the cistern bay. Heat stress showed first at the tips. He watched for a moment, then placed two fingers on the stem through the cloth guard. The tack of sap remained, but it felt thinner. The stem held its shape, though the tissue under his touch gave slightly.

Reni watched his fingers.

“It doesn’t like this,” she said.

“The boilers,” Silas replied.

They pulled the sled forward along the corridor with short, controlled movements. The plank scraped once against a riveted floor strip; Reni halted immediately and waited, eyes fixed on the far end. No shout followed. The music above did not change.

They passed a drain outlet cut into the base of the wall, a spout set through stone into a shallow runnel. Water ran there, thin and constant. Silas still put the side of a finger to the stone beside the spout. The stone was warm.

He withdrew his hand.

“A boiler room is close,” he said.

Reni’s mouth tightened.

“We can’t cook it,” she muttered.

“We can’t leave it,” Silas said.

They went another few spans. At the far end of the corridor a junction opened into a wider service run. Lantern light moved there, a shifting line that brightened and dimmed against the iron braces.

Reni's hand closed on Silas's sleeve.

"In," she breathed.

She pulled him into a recess between two boxed arches. It was not a room, only a notch where an old doorway had been plated over and left a hollow behind the iron frame. They pushed the pot into it until the rim nearly touched the back wall. Silas pressed himself beside it, keeping his shoulder tight to the stone. Reni crouched in front, her injured leg held stiffly, weight on the other foot.

Boots passed at the junction. He did not see faces, only the lower edge of a coat, a lantern carried low, and the clean rhythm of patrol steps. The sound carried clearly through the braces; the Silence Wards damped stray noise, but boots on service stone still made a pattern.

Silas counted the steps without meaning to. His breath shortened. He kept his mouth closed so he would not cough.

The boots receded.

Reni waited longer than he would have. She did not move on the first lull. Only when the lantern light no longer flickered at the junction did she ease out of the recess.

Silas followed, his hand braced on the wall because the cane could not be used here. His palm left a faint smear on the iron brace where blood had soaked through the rope burn.

The tunnels had given him places to turn away and hide. Under the palace, his shoulders stayed tight and his breath kept catching high in his chest. There was no crowd noise to blend into and no open junction to slip through. Discovery here ended in restraint, iron, and a locked door.

Reni's eyes moved in quick angles along the braces and plates.

“There,” she said.

A side hatch sat low in the wall, set between iron uprights. The threshold showed scuffs, dark marks where boots had dragged coal dust, and a smear of grease along the latch plate. It was not soldier traffic. It had the pattern of labour.

Reni put a hand on it and leaned close.

“No guard stamp,” she said. “No tag.”

Silas watched her fingers. She did not hesitate.

“Workers,” she added.

He did not like trusting any route he had not walked himself, but the soldier corridors had their own certainty: straight lines, inspection points, eyes. Labour paths ran crooked and were less attended by those who cared only for order.

Reni lifted the latch. It gave with a small click.

She opened the hatch and slipped through first, then reached back for the rope.

Silas pulled the sled after her.

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The passage behind the hatch was lower and warmer, the ceiling crowded with pipes that dripped slow condensation. Somewhere ahead, a shovel scraped on stone and then struck metal with a hard sound.

Reni held up a hand. Her fingers were spread, a signal he had learned to read as silence without having to be told.

She moved to a second hatch, heavier, with a metal strap hinge and a latch that had been oiled recently. She put her ear to it. The shovel scraped again. A deeper sound followed, the shift of coal or ash.

Reni's hand closed around her knife hilt, but she did not draw it. She tried the latch with her other hand, slow.

It did not move.

She tried again, a fraction harder.

From inside, a bolt slid.

The hatch opened inward.

A man stood there, framed by boiler light. Soot darkened his hands to the wrist and sat in the creases of his knuckles. His eyebrows were singed, and two fingertips were missing from his left hand. He held the hatch edge with the other, keeping it from swinging wider.

He looked at Reni's face, then at Silas behind her, then down to the sled.

His eyes took in the pot, the cloth pads at the rim, the leaf curl, and the line of damp soil that had seeped from the crack.

He did not shout.

He watched them in silence for a breath.

Reni's shoulders rose. Her voice came out low and sharp.

"If you make a sound, "

The man's gaze shifted to her thigh. The wool there was darker where old blood had soaked and dried; a fresher line ran down from the reopened seam.

Then he looked at the pot again.

"Second bell," he said.

Reni blinked.

"What?"

"Guards change at the second bell," he said, still holding the hatch. "After that they walk the under-runs in pairs."

Reni's knife came half out of its sheath. The movement was more threat than plan.

Silas stepped forward by a small span.

"Varr," he said.

The stoker's eyes flicked up.

Silas had seen him before, never close, always in the heat haze near service doors. Workers such as him moved coal and ash and kept the palace warm while officers ate.

"You are Clem Varr," Silas said, keeping his voice formal, careful. "Stoker."

Clem's mouth tightened.

"You're the rose man," he replied.

Silas inclined his head. He did not deny it.

Reni's eyes narrowed.

"You know him?" she asked.

"I've seen him," Silas said.

Clem's grip on the hatch did not loosen.

"Do you have papers for her?" Clem asked, nodding once toward Reni without looking away from Silas.

"No," Silas said.

"Then don't bring her up the main stairs," Clem replied.

Reni's knife slid fully into her hand.

"Tell us where the guards are," she said.

Clem's gaze went to her knife, then away.

"Not here," he said. "Not at this door. But the foundations aren't empty. They've been down earlier with rods. You know the sound."

Silas's throat tightened.

Iron-Eaters in the palace underworks.

Reni's voice sharpened.

"You saw them?"

Clem's eyes went toward the corridor behind Silas, measuring distance.

"I heard them," he said. "Tap, pause, tap. Mouthpiece voice. They don't ask the stokers what we've seen. They tell us to stand back."

Reni's hand trembled once, then steadied.

Clem shifted his weight and opened the hatch wider.

"Move," he said.

Reni hesitated.

Silas saw it and knew its cost.

He addressed Clem again, not with command, not with the tone he would have used before the conquest when orchard Keepers had doors opened for them, but with the restrained politeness of a man tolerated because he was useful.

"We will not take long," he said.

Clem did not answer. He stepped aside, keeping his missing-fingered hand out of the way of the hatch.

Hot, damp air pressed against Silas's face as he crossed the threshold. Boiler air carried wet coal smoke, hot metal, and the sour tang of ash. The floor was slick in places where condensation had dripped. A shovel leaned against a bin; the bin was half full.

Clem did not lead them into the room. He kept them at the edge, near a pipe run where the heat was less direct.

He pointed with his soot-black hand.

Behind the pipe run, a panel sat in the wall, its seam barely visible under grime. It was meant for access, but it had been bolted tight.

Reni followed his gesture.

“A crawlspace,” she said.

Clem nodded once.

Silas looked at the panel bolt. It was large, the sort meant to stay seated through vibration.

Clem reached for it.

He did not rush. He placed his missing-fingered hand against the panel edge, then took the bolt with the other and turned it with a slow, deliberate twist.

Metal scraped.

Reni flinched. Her knife rose in reflex, then hovered, useless.

Clem kept turning.

The bolt loosened by a fraction. Another turn. Another. Each movement left evidence: the bolt head no longer flush; the panel seam no longer tight.

Silas watched Clem’s face.

“You cannot deny that later,” Silas said.

Clem’s eyes met his.

“I know,” he replied.

Reni’s suspicion sharpened.

“Why?” she demanded.

Clem did not answer. His gaze went up, toward the ceiling, where the music was loudest through the pipes and where laughter came in short bursts.

He released the bolt and tapped the panel edge once, testing.

A low shift came through the wall as the boiler cycle changed. Pressure moved through pipe joints; a valve hissed briefly.

The loosened panel moved on its seam and struck the frame with a blunt sound.

Thump.

It repeated on the next cycle.

Thump.

The sound was not loud, but it travelled through braces and pipes. Silas felt the vibration through his forearm where he leaned against the wall.

Reni stared at the panel.

“That’s deliberate,” she said.

Clem’s mouth stayed closed.

“Second bell,” he repeated.

Silas understood what that thump could do. It was mechanical, repeatable.

Clem stepped back and pointed at the panel seam.

“It’ll open now,” he said. “Not far. Enough to get you behind it.”

Reni moved first, dragging the sled rope. The plank scraped on stone; Silas caught it with his hand and lifted the edge by a fraction to keep the sound down.

They angled the pot toward the panel.

The sapling’s leaves brushed the pipe run. Silas caught them and folded them inward with his fingers, careful not to tear. The leaf margins were curled enough now that they held their bent shape for a moment.

Reni set her shoulder against the panel and pushed.

It opened by a span. The crawlspace beyond was no cooler, only closer and more confined.

Clem watched their faces again.

“You’ll hear them before you see them,” he said quietly. “Rods on braces. Don’t wait to be sure.”

Silas nodded once.

They pulled the sled into the opening. The plank caught on the seam; Reni swore under her breath, then stopped herself and tried again with less force.

Silas used both hands to guide the pot rim through without scraping. His palm burned where the rope had cut earlier. Warm blood ran down his wrist and into the cloth pad.

When the pot cleared, Reni dragged the plank fully into the crawlspace.

Clem pushed the panel partway closed behind them. He did not shut it flush. He left it seated on the loosened bolt so that it still moved with the boiler cycle.

Thump.

Thump.

The sound continued as the panel settled.

Clem’s face disappeared behind the closing seam.

Silas saw his soot-black hand on the edge for one last moment.

Then there was only the narrow crawlspace and the repeated mechanical beat behind them.

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The crawlspace was a service void between walls, wide enough for shoulders if they turned sideways, but not wide enough to carry the pot without scraping. Pipes ran overhead, wrapped in old cloth insulation that was stained where condensation had soaked it. Heat collected here without moving air. Moisture filmed the brick and ran in thin lines.

Silas's throat dried within a few breaths. He swallowed once. Nothing came up but the pull of his tongue against his teeth.

The sapling's leaves curled tighter at their tips. A lower leaf drooped until its petiole angled down, then held. The bud cluster at the top remained intact, but the tissue around it looked softer.

Silas pressed two fingers to the stem again.

The stem gave slightly under his touch.

Reni watched him.

"It's going," she said.

"It's strained," Silas replied.

Reni's voice turned harsher.

"We can leave it here," she said. "Hide it. Come back when, "

"No," Silas said.

She stared.

"You want it dead?" she demanded.

"If we leave it," Silas said, "we leave a trail. The pot isn't sealed. The soil has already spilled. We have blood on it. If it roots for purchase while we're gone, "

He stopped.

Reni's hand tightened on the rope.

"It won't root through brick in a day," she said.

Silas lifted his eyes to the seam lines in the crawlspace wall. Mortar here was old and dry. Grit sat loose at the base.

“It doesn’t need a day,” he said.

Reni’s jaw worked once. She did not argue further. She shifted her stance to keep weight off her injured leg and pulled.

They moved the sled in short pushes, keeping the plank as straight as the space allowed. When Silas tried to lift the front edge again, his wrist shook and the plank dropped, producing a sharper scrape.

He froze.

Reni held still, listening.

The panel thump continued behind them.

Thump.

No voice followed. No rod taps.

Reni pulled again.

Silas crawled beside the pot, shoulder and hip pressed to brick. His knee scraped on a rough patch where older stone had been patched with a newer mix. The scrape drew skin. He ignored it.

When he shifted his grip on the pot rim, his thumb brushed a torn nail edge. The cuticle split. Blood appeared at once, bright in the damp heat. It ran down the side of his finger and smudged onto the cloth pad.

Reni saw it.

“You’re leaking everywhere,” she said.

Silas kept his hand on the pot rim until the plank stopped moving.

The sapling’s hum had changed. It was not louder; it had lost steadiness. The vibration came in uneven pulses, broke, then returned at a different pitch. In the tunnels, the hum had been a baseline they could follow. Here, it did not give direction. It marked strain.

Silas leaned closer until his ear was near the rim.

“It’s not giving route,” he said.

Reni’s eyes narrowed.

“The pulses won’t settle,” she said.

Silas did not correct her. His mouth was too dry for it.

He reached for the dented flask.

It was in Reni’s inner pocket, where she had kept it close. He did not take it without asking. He looked at her.

Reni stared at him, then pulled the flask out and held it out with abrupt movement.

“That’s it,” she said. “That’s all.”

Silas took the flask. The metal was warm from her body and the heat in this space. He heard the small movement of water inside.

He hesitated.

His mouth tasted of iron. His split lip stung where it had dried and cracked again. His tongue stuck to his teeth, and the swallow he tried brought no saliva.

He uncapped the flask.

Reni’s mouth tightened.

“You’re going to drink,” she said.

Silas tipped the flask over the pot.

Water ran into the soil at the rim, darkening it instantly. It did not pool. It disappeared into the soil and left the surface dull again within moments.

Reni’s face shifted.

“You’re giving it the last of it,” she said.

Silas capped the flask with fingers that shook.

“A dead sapling cannot break Wards,” he said.

Reni stared at him. Her shoulders stayed high, and her grip on the rope did not loosen.

Silas coughed, a dry cough forced by heat and dust. The cough pulled at his ribs and sent a brief flare of pain through his side. He closed his mouth after, swallowing once to stop another.

Reni’s eyes flicked to the leaf curl again.

The soil at the rim was already less dark.

“It took it,” she said.

Silas watched the rim crack. The soil there sank in a fraction.

“It moved past the rim,” he said.

Reni’s eyes sharpened.

“What?”

He pointed with his bleeding finger toward the base of the pot where the crack line ran down. Grit at the edge of the plank was damp now, though the water had been poured at the rim.

“It’s not contained,” he said.

Reni looked at the damp grit, then at the pot.

“The pot’s a shell,” she said, and the words came out flat.

Silas did not correct her.

They moved again, keeping their hands under the rim where they could lift by a fraction without touching the crack line.

At the far end of the crawlspace, the wall changed. The pipe run turned upward. A vertical service shaft opened, framed by iron uprights and a ladder set into brick. The air here was slightly cooler, and it carried a faint note of compost and wet fibre.

Reni looked up the shaft.

“That’s it,” she said.

Silas’s head throbbed from heat and the empty flask, but the words slowed his breathing.

“It matches what you said,” he replied.

Reni did not look at him.

“It matches what I felt,” she said.

He watched her grip tighten on the rope.

They positioned the sled beneath the shaft. The ladder rungs here were cleaner than the rusted rungs in the hidden shaft; they had been scrubbed by workers’ hands.

Silas lifted his chin and listened.

Beyond the shaft, at corridor level, a sound carried that he recognised without needing the cane ferrule: iron on stone, measured taps. Not a shovel. Not a boot.

Reni heard it too. Her face tightened.

“Rods,” she whispered.

Silas nodded.

They climbed.

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The service corridor above was wider than the crawlspace and lower than the arched foundation run. The ceiling was crowded with pipes and iron braces. A line of doors ran along one wall, each with a small plate and a latch.

The iron taps came from ahead, nearer now.

Tap.

Pause.

Tap.

A mouthpiece voice carried, clipped, not shouting.

Reni's posture changed. She did not look for a route to run; her injured leg would not allow it. Her eyes moved along the wall and fixed on a recessed door with a linen tag hanging from a hook.

"In there," she breathed.

Silas saw the niche for what it was: storage. Linen for kitchens or feast service. The Empire liked order; it labelled even cloth.

Reni opened the niche door by a fraction. It was not locked.

She pulled Silas in first, then dragged the sled after him. The plank caught on the threshold; Silas lifted the front edge with both hands and slid it over with a soft scrape.

Inside, the niche smelled of soap and old starch. Stacked linen bundles sat on shelves, tied with cord. There was barely room to crouch beside them.

Silas pushed the pot under the lowest shelf so the leaves did not press outward.

The sapling's upper leaves were close to the niche door. If they brushed it, they would move the latch.

Silas put his hands on the leaves and folded them inward, holding them down against the stem. The leaf tissue was warmer than it should have been.

His fingers trembled. He held anyway.

Reni crouched near the door seam with her knife in her hand. The blade looked small in this place.

Her breath came shallow. She closed her mouth and took air through her nose, then stopped.

Boots approached.

An Iron-Eater passed the niche. Silas saw the lower edge of an oilcloth coat through the narrow door seam, then the dull iron line of a gorget.

The figure stopped.

Silas's hands tightened on the leaves.

The sapling hum steadied for a moment, then broke again into uneven pulses. The vibration stayed in Silas's palms.

The Iron-Eater paused long enough that Silas could count the breath he had not taken.

Then came the held stillness of a trained man in a corridor where small sounds mattered.

Silas held the leaves down so they would not tremble against the shelf.

Reni's fingers tightened on her knife hilt.

The Iron-Eater moved again, one step, then stopped once more.

Tap.

The iron rod struck the corridor brace just outside the niche. Vibration ran through the brace into the wall.

In Silas's hands, the sapling responded with a small movement: a leaf twitch at the tip, a single jerk that he felt more than saw.

His stomach tightened.

Reni's eyes widened. She held her breath until her face began to colour.

The rod tapped again, a fraction higher.

Silas pressed his palms harder against the leaves, flattening them against the stem.

The Iron-Eater did not open the niche door. The rod tapped once more, then stopped.

A mouthpiece voice spoke a short phrase down the corridor, clear for a moment.

“Boiler line. Check that beat.”

From behind them, through the pipe runs, the mechanical thump continued.

Thump.

Thump.

The Iron-Eater’s boots turned.

The rod tapped the floor once, then twice, then the boots moved away, not toward the niche, but back along the corridor toward the boiler area.

Reni’s breath left her in a thin stream through her nose. She did not speak at once.

Silas kept holding the leaves until the boot rhythm was fully gone.

Only then did he release them. They sprang back by a fraction and remained curled.

Reni’s knife did not go back into its sheath.

“That was close,” she whispered.

Silas nodded.

When they eased out of the niche, his left hand shook once, and he forced it still against the wall before he reached for the rope. The breath he let out after came late and controlled.

Clem's panel thump had given the Iron-Eaters a steady signature to chase. It had added a second line of vibration to the foundations. Men trained to find irregular living variance would follow the strongest repeatable beat when pressured.

Silas understood what that meant for Clem.

If an Iron-Eater reached the boiler panel and found a loosened bolt where there should have been none, they would not ask a stoker why it had been changed.

Reni shifted, wincing as her injured leg took weight.

"We move," she said.

Silas nodded once.

They eased the niche door open and pulled the sled out. The linen tag swung on its hook and clicked softly against the door frame. Silas caught it with his fingers to stop further movement.

They moved down the corridor in the opposite direction from the rods.

Reni's eyes searched for another worker mark. She found it in a plate near floor level, stamped with a code and scratched with a small rose emblem.

"Lift," she whispered.

The service elevator shaft was set behind a grate door. The door latch was simple, intended to keep unauthorised hands out rather than to resist force.

Reni opened it.

Inside, a cage sat on guide rails, its floor a grated plate. A counterweight chain ran up into darkness.

Reni looked at the mechanism with the quick precision she used for locks.

“Manual,” she said. “Counterweight. We can run it from here.”

Silas listened. The corridor behind them remained quiet, but that quiet was not safety.

Clem had said second bell.

When the guards changed, patterns would shift.

Reni’s gaze flicked to Silas.

“It’ll make noise,” she said.

Silas looked at the pot. The sapling hum had steadied again, faint in his molars, aligned with direction rather than breaking into uneven pulses.

“Noise,” he agreed.

Reni waited for refusal.

Silas did not give it.

“We cannot wait,” he said.

Reni’s mouth tightened.

“Fine,” she muttered. “Then we do it fast.”

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The mechanism was simple in principle and unforgiving in practice. Reni found the lever that released the counterweight brake. She tested it once, then stopped, listening for response. No shout came.

Silas and Reni dragged the sled into the cage. The pot barely fit. Leaves brushed the cage bars and left a damp smear of sap on iron where curled tips caught.

Silas placed his hands on either side of the pot rim, not touching the crack, and braced his forearms against the cage bars to keep the pot from

rocking.

Reni took the brake lever and eased it.

The chain moved.

Metal sounded against metal, not loud, but sharp enough in the confined shaft. The cage jerked as the counterweight took load, then began to rise.

Silas's stomach tightened at the motion. He kept his mouth closed and focused on holding the pot steady.

Reni's injured leg shook as she shifted her stance to balance in the moving cage. She did not speak of it.

The cage rose in short increments. Each movement produced a scrape against the guide rail, then a brief pause as Reni controlled the brake.

Silas listened for boots. None came.

As they rose, the air cooled by degrees. The coal-smoke note lessened. A different smell appeared: compost, damp fibre, and the faint sourness of rose cuttings left to rot under netting.

Silas's throat remained dry, but the cooler air reduced the tightness in his chest.

"We're near the gardens," he said.

Reni's eyes flicked up.

"Your place," she replied.

He did not correct the ownership.

The cage slowed and stopped with a small jolt.

Ahead, an access door sat set into the shaft wall. Light showed at its seam, thin and grey.

Reni held still, listening.

From beyond the door came distant sounds: a muttered call, the clink of metal, the shift of boots not in patrol rhythm but in preparation.

No voice sounded close.

Reni released a breath.

Silas's nose bled again. He felt it as warmth on his upper lip. He wiped it with the back of his hand, then looked at the smear on his skin.

He adjusted his coat. The wool was stiff with damp and dirt from the under-city. He tugged the collar into a more orderly line and pressed his blood-wet hand against the inside seam where it would not show.

Reni watched him.

"You're cleaning up," she said.

Silas kept his voice low.

"If we are seen," he said, "I must look as they expect."

Reni's gaze sharpened.

"You mean you're going to walk out," she said.

Silas did not answer with comfort.

He reached for the access door latch.

Reni's fear showed in her body. Her shoulders rose. Her breathing stopped and started again through her nose.

Her knife sat in her hand.

Silas looked at her once.

"Stay close," he said.

Reni's jaw tightened.

"I am," she replied.

Silas opened the door.

Cool air entered the cage, carrying the smell of rose compost more clearly. Light was dim but present, a thin grey that came through greenhouse panes.

They stepped out into a service area beside the rose garden. Winter netting lay folded along a wall. Bins for cuttings sat stacked, their edges rimmed with old soil. Beyond a glass pane, rows of roses stood cut back to measured height, their stems dark against pale gravel.

The sky beyond the greenhouse glass was not bright. It was only the first thin grey of dawn.

Silas pulled the sled out after him. The plank dragged on the floor, leaving a faint mark of damp soil.

Reni glanced toward a gate at the far end of the service area. Iron bars separated the garden service run from an open court beyond. He could not see the King's Stone from here; it was buried under paving in the courtyard beyond that gate.

He did not need sight to know direction.

The sapling's hum steadied into a strong baseline. It ran through the pot, through the plank, through Silas's hands when he touched the cloth pad. It aligned toward the gate.

Reni heard it too, not as sound alone, but as something she had learned to treat as a route.

"That way," she said.

Silas nodded.

The gate stood between them and the courtyard.

Behind them, below, the foundations carried rod taps and the last sight of a stoker's soot-black hand on a panel he had made impossible to deny.

Silas placed his palm against the pot rim, feeling the vibration steadied by cooler air and the last water poured into soil that no longer

stayed inside clay.

He drew the sled toward the gate.

Reni followed, limping, her knife still in her hand, and the dawn light through the greenhouse panes made their dirt and blood harder to hide. Beyond the bars, the courtyard flagstones lay in a square grid, pale in the grey light.

# Chapter 10

## The Last Rose

The greenhouse panes had been washed at some point in the last week; the glass showed fewer soot drips than the street windows in Sector Four, and the light came through in clean bands. It was still weak light, the sort that made iron look flat and skin look ill, but it exposed everything.

Silas paused with one hand on the door frame, steadying himself by habit. His other hand moved to the pot rim, fingertips finding the cloth pads without looking. Reni watched the small movements in his hands first, because she had learned that when he looked at something with care he often stopped being careful about himself.

The service area beside the rose beds had been kept to imperial order. Winter netting lay folded against a wall. Two bins held cuttings, each stamped with a small numbered plate. A third bin held compost, dark and wet, kept covered; the smell had a sharp edge that the lower-district heaps never had.

Silas moved with the pace he used on work mornings.

In his right hand, the cane came free of the rope loop at the pot rim. The ferrule showed a smear of sap and rust from the rungs. He lifted it with a brief tightening at his jaw, then set it down on the stone by the bin, not tapping, just placing it where his body expected it.

Reni pulled the rope attached to the sled. The plank shifted, and soil marked the stone in a damp line.

Instead of going straight for the gate, Silas turned toward the rose rows.

A strip of gravel separated the service run from the beds. Stems rose in measured lines, cut back to the same height and tied to thin cane supports. Most were bare. A few held leaves, thick and dark from cold. The beds had been mulched with imported compost; the layer lay on top, not worked into the older soil.

Silas stepped into the bed edge without thinking. Leaning toward a stem, he touched the tie and tightened it with a small turn.

Reni stared at his hand.

“We’re not here for roses,” she said.

Silas did not answer at once. He pinched a leaf that had turned black at the margin and snapped it off. The movement was quick and practised; the leaf broke cleanly.

He dropped it into the bed, then moved a bed further and checked another tie.

Past him, the barred gate to the courtyard stood at the far end of the service run. Iron bars rose taller than she was. The gate’s hinge posts were bolted into older stone. Beyond the bars there was open paving and a shape of wall that made a wide square.

Silas was still checking rose ties.

“You do this even now,” Reni said.

His shoulders lifted and fell once, a small breath set into his ribs.

“It’s what they pay me for,” he replied.

The word pay came out flat, more permission than coin.

Reni took two steps toward him and kept her voice low.

“You don’t have to, ”

He straightened, slow. His face was grey at the edges of his mouth. Dried blood had darkened under one nostril; he had wiped it and left a faint smear on the wool. His coat collar sat better now. He had pulled it

into place earlier without being told.

His eyes went to the pot.

Walking back to it, he set his left hand against the rim, found the crack line by touch, and avoided it.

“Habit is not comfort,” he said.

Reni looked at the rose beds again. The stems were strong for late winter, thicker at the base than the district hedges people had been cutting for kindling. The cane supports were new and straight. The compost layer smelled of rot that had been turned and sifted.

They had dragged Silas through dead zones where the brick stank of old water and iron, where his breathing shortened until he vomited, where the sapling’s hum dropped and the leaves sagged.

Here, under glass and guard, the Empire kept rose stems thick.

Reni drew in a careful breath through her nose. Her jaw set, and her fingers worked at the rope without meaning to.

“What do they feed these with?” she asked, and she left the edge in her voice.

Silas looked at the compost bin.

“Imported,” he said.

“From where?”

He shrugged in a way that made his coat pull tight across his shoulder.

“Not from Sector Four.”

Reni stared at the bin again. Straw ran through the compost in chopped lengths. She had seen straw like that in sack padding for shipments; the kind that came with stamped nails and oilcloth.

“It’s a display,” she said.

Silas's mouth moved, not quite a smile.

"Yes," he replied.

Reni took a step nearer the rose rows and looked at the pruning cuts. Each cut had been made at the same angle. Each stem had been cut above the same kind of bud. She could tell hands had done it, not a machine, because the cuts varied by a grain-width and some had a slight tear where a blade had been dull.

Constant labour. Hands pressed into this place day after day.

Reni's leg twinged where the ward-beast had struck her. The sap-sealed skin had tightened and held, but the muscle beneath still ached, and the reopened tear from the narrow squeeze had never been cleaned properly. She had learned to ignore it in tunnels. Here, on flat stone, it made itself known with each shift of weight.

Silas put his palm against the pot rim and closed his eyes for a moment.

Reni watched the sapling.

In the cooler air, the leaves did lift. It was a small movement. The curled margins did not flatten; the tissue stayed tight from heat and strain. But the petioles angled upward by a fraction and held. Grit dust clung to the leaf surface. There was no wind under the glass to move it.

The hum did not lessen.

Reni felt it in her teeth. The vibration stayed strong and steady, set toward the gate. It did not give her the shifting cues the pollen had given, but it made direction plain.

Silas opened his eyes.

"We go," he said.

Taking hold of the rope, he tightened his grip. The rope was stiff with damp and grime. His left hand shook once, then he forced it still.

Reni went to the gate first and pressed her face close to the bars. Her breath fogged the iron, then cleared.

The courtyard beyond had been scraped clean. The paving stones were pale limestone, fitted in a grid. Their joints were tight, filled with mortar. No moss showed between stones. The courtyard was bounded by straight walls with iron grates set at regular intervals. There were no corners deep enough to hide in.

She listened.

Boots sounded beyond the wall line to the right, not patrol rhythm but muster rhythm: groups moving together, stopping together, starting together. Metal buckles clicked. A shouted count carried, clipped and repeated.

“Three. Four. Five.”

A voice answered.

“Five.”

Another count began. Another set of boots took it up.

Reni turned her head and saw movement at the courtyard’s far edge: grey uniforms, a line of men near a pylon base, another line closer to a set of doors. Patrol rings, layered.

Even at dawn.

Stepping back, she looked along the wall line for a gap.

There was none.

Her gaze went to the hedge line that separated rose beds from path. The hedge had been clipped to the same height as the rose supports, a dull green wall with no holes large enough for a body.

Up at the greenhouse frame, iron ribs crossed overhead, bolted to stone. No climb points without being seen.

Reni looked back at Silas. He had pulled the sled a span closer. His posture had changed. His shoulders drew in. His face had gone blank in the way she had seen when Sorn stood in the doorway of his house and Silas became a tool.

Reni's stomach tightened.

"There's no way in," she said.

Silas did not argue.

"It was built like this," he replied.

"For what?"

His gaze went through the bars, not following the soldiers but taking in the paving and the open square.

"To be seen," he said.

Reni swallowed and kept her voice low.

"The courtyard is where they keep their officers' boots clean," she said. "It's where they line people up under an officer's eyes. It's where they shoot if they need to."

Silas did not look at her.

"It is where they stand in the open and make people watch," he said quietly.

The words made her mouth go dry.

The sapling's hum strengthened by a fraction as Silas pulled the sled closer to the gate. The pot shifted on the plank. Damp grit squeezed out at the base, leaving a darker mark on the stone.

Reni watched the pot.

The cracks had widened enough that the cloth pads were no longer hiding them. One long crack ran from rim to base, and there were shorter ones branching off, hairlines forced open by pressure from inside.

She remembered the water Silas had poured into the soil in the boiler crawlspace. It had disappeared into the pot and then shown up outside it.

Shell, she thought again.

Her jaw locked.

“We could draw them off,” she said.

Silas’s hand paused on the rope.

Reni kept her voice in practical terms.

“I could set a charge elsewhere,” she said. “Not here. Down the service run. Somewhere the sound carries. You go in while they’re looking away.”

Silas’s eyes moved to her face.

“No,” he said.

“Why?”

He turned his head toward the pot and touched the rim again, feeling for the crack line.

“It cannot wait,” he replied.

Heat ran up Reni’s neck. She held her voice behind her teeth, because sound drew rods and soldiers.

“The soldiers will be looking away if we make them,” she said.

Silas’s voice stayed even.

“The roots are already pushing,” he said.

Reni looked down. A thin root had pushed through the crack at the base in the underworks; she had seen sap streaks on rusted rungs. She had also seen leaf curl in heat and droop in dead zones. She did not pretend she understood the plant’s rules beyond what it forced them to learn.

Silas did not say the word anchor. He did not need to.

Reni's hand went to her coat pocket where her fuse cord sat. A short coil. Damp-stiff. She could feel it through the cloth.

She did not take it out.

Silas pulled the sled back by a fraction.

Beyond the bars, the muster rhythm changed. Boots stopped. A shouted count ended and a new voice spoke, sharp, then cut off.

Someone laughed, briefly.

Feast laughter carried down through the palace spaces above the foundations. It had carried in pipes. It carried here as well, thin and early.

Reni made a decision without speaking it.

"Hide," she said.

Silas's eyes flicked to her. He did not argue.

Reni moved along the hedge line, one hand on the clipped branches. Where two hedge sections met, the base sagged; the older stone foundation had settled unevenly, leaving a low opening.

Dropping to a crouch, she pulled branches aside with careful fingers.

Silas hauled the sled to her. The plank scraped once on stone and she froze, listening.

No immediate call answered it.

Reni pulled harder. The gap admitted the pot by a fraction when they angled it.

Silas set his cane down on the path and used both hands to push the pot rim through, cloth pads catching on the hedge branches.

Reni shifted, and pain flared in her leg. She clenched her jaw until her teeth hurt.

They got the pot into the gap, half hidden by clipped green.

Reni pressed back into the hedge and held still.

From here she could still see the gate through the branches, and she could still hear the muster counts.

Silas crouched beside the pot. His breathing was controlled but not deep. He kept his mouth closed and drew air through his nose until the dried blood made him flinch.

They stayed in the hedge gap long enough for the shape of it to settle in Reni's mind. A crossing meant open paving, and the soldiers were trained to shoot the first movement that did not match their counts.

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Silas's hands rested on his knees. The knuckles were swollen and stained with soil that never washed out. The skin around the rope burns was split, and the damp air made the cuts look larger.

Reni watched his hands and then forced herself to look away.

"Say it," she said.

Silas lifted his head.

"Say what?"

"The plan," Reni said. "Not the part where we die. The part where we don't."

Silas's mouth moved once, and he swallowed.

"The only way to reach the Stone," he said, "is to walk in."

Reni stared at him.

"That's not a plan," she said.

"It is," he replied.

He shifted his cane and settled it in his right hand. The ferrule clicked once against the path stone, a small sound that pulled Reni's shoulders up.

Silas kept his gaze on the gate.

“They know me,” he said.

Reni’s throat tightened.

“They know you as the rose man,” she said.

His eyes stayed forward.

“They let me through,” he replied. “They don’t watch my hands.”

Reni wanted to spit at the calm of it. Her tongue pressed hard against her teeth.

“You’re asking them to let you through with that,” she said, nodding toward the pot.

Silas did not look down.

“I will not carry it hidden under cloth,” he said.

Reni’s hand moved under her coat without her meaning it, checking the position of her knife.

“Then let me,” she said.

Silas turned his head toward her.

“No,” he said.

Reni’s voice rose by a fraction.

“I’m faster,” she said. “I can run it across before, ”

He cut her off with the smallest movement of his hand.

“They will shoot you,” he said.

Reni’s mouth opened, closed.

“And if they don’t,” he continued, “they will seize it before it touches stone.”

Reni’s fingers tightened against the hedge branches. The clipped twigs pressed into her palm.

“You don’t know that,” she said.

Silas’s voice remained flat.

“I do,” he replied.

Reni held his eyes for a moment. She could see the bloodshot edges and the thin skin under them. The lines in his face looked deeper in this light.

She looked away first.

A shout carried from the courtyard again. Another count. Buckles checked; lines shifted together under a sharper voice.

Reni’s leg throbbed, and she set more weight onto her good foot.

Silas spoke again.

“When it begins,” he said.

Reni snapped her gaze back.

“When what begins?”

“When the sound changes,” he said. “When the hum returns to the city.”

Reni felt her teeth buzz again at the word hum.

“You run,” Silas said.

Her breath caught.

“No,” she said at once.

Silas’s face did not change.

“You do not run to save me,” he said. “You run to find the workers.”

Reni’s throat tightened harder.

“What workers?” she demanded.

Silas’s eyes went briefly upward, toward the palace roofs she could not see from here.

“The ones who move under this place without being seen,” he said. “The ones who know which bolts can loosen. The ones who know which drains carry clean water. The ones who keep quiet because they have to.”

Reni thought of a small runner in a linen cap taking a baton strike at an inspection line. She thought of a stoker’s soot-black hand on a panel seam.

She did not say their names aloud.

“They will act,” Silas said.

Reni’s jaw worked.

“And you want me to leave you here,” she said.

Silas met her gaze.

“You will not be able to pull me out,” he said.

“I’ve pulled you everywhere,” Reni snapped.

His mouth moved once.

“You have,” he replied.

The admission did not soften him.

“You already know how to survive,” he said. “When it breaks, you find them and keep them moving. You don’t stand in the open trying to be brave.”

Reni’s hand went to the hedge again and closed around a branch so hard she felt the bark cut into her skin.

Her own voice came out sharp.

“Don’t talk to me like I’m a child,” she said.

Silas did not flinch.

“I am speaking as plainly as I can,” he said.

Reni swallowed. She tasted iron. It was in the air here too, thinner than in the tunnels but present.

“You’re going to die,” she said.

Silas’s mouth tightened.

“I might,” he replied.

Reni stared at him.

The word might was not comfort.

With a slow movement, he shifted his coat and reached under it. Reni’s hand moved to her knife again, reflex, then stopped.

Silas’s fingers came out holding a tool.

A trowel.

It was old. The metal had been filed and sharpened at the edge, not to cut flesh but to cut soil. The handle was worn smooth where a palm had pressed it for years. A faint line of green paint showed near the base, almost rubbed away.

Silas held it out.

Reni stared at it.

“It is not for fighting,” he said.

Reni’s mouth opened.

“Then why, ”

“It is for work,” Silas said.

He did not raise his voice. He did not make it sound noble.

“You use it to find those who know soil and water,” he continued. “Not those who trade in slogans. Not those who want to cut a thing into pieces and carry it around.”

Reni’s stomach turned at the memory of fruit pits strung on cord.

Silas’s eyes stayed on the trowel.

“When the paving breaks,” he said, “people will try to turn it into a story. Others will try to measure it and cage it again. You look for the ones who can dig, shore, and move people out of the way.”

Reni’s hand hovered.

She could not make herself take it quickly.

“If I take that,” she said, “it means you’re not coming back.”

Silas did not deny it.

“It means you have something in your hands that can build,” he said.

Reni’s breath went rough. She could not find a clean place to put what rose in her chest.

Her hand shook when she finally took it.

Heat held in the handle where his palm had been.

She gripped it too hard and forced her fingers to loosen.

Silas watched her hands.

“You will hate me for asking,” he said.

Reni’s voice came out rough.

“I already hate you,” she said.

The words were true and not complete.

Silas dipped his head once.

His eyes went to the pot.

“I do not know if my blood will be enough,” he said.

He did not say it as confession. He said it as information he needed her to have.

Reni’s grip on the trowel tightened.

She did not answer at once.

The muster sounds continued beyond the gate. Another count. Another reply.

Reni forced herself to ask the question that had sat in her for days.

“What does it do to the city?” she said.

Silas looked through the hedge branches again.

“It breaks the Wards,” he said.

Reni held still.

“The stone will crack,” he said. “Old joints will open. New iron will shear. If someone is under a grate when it shifts, they will die. If someone is in a service corridor when a wall gives, they will die.”

Cold slid under Reni’s ribs.

“And if we don’t do it,” she said.

Silas’s face did not soften.

“They keep this in place,” he replied. “They keep the city quiet, and they keep taking what they want until nothing works without their count and their keys.”

Reni looked down at the trowel. It was a simple thing. It did not glow. It did not hum. It did not promise victory.

It was still heavy in her hand.

Silas’s gaze went to her face.

“One last constraint,” he said.

Reni did not like the word constraint. It sounded like a cage.

He said, “No bargains.”

Reni’s jaw tightened.

“I know,” she said.

He continued.

“And no pollen,” he said.

Reni swallowed.

The pollen had given her a path out of the cistern wall and into the palace. It had also made her reach for more.

“I know,” she said again.

Silas nodded.

“We go in with what we have left,” he said.

Reni looked at him and then looked away, because keeping her eyes on him made the edge of her plan fray.

“Fine,” she said.

Her voice shook on the last word.

Silas shifted forward and took the rope in his good hand.

Reni adjusted her stance so her injured leg took less weight. She held the trowel against her thigh, not for comfort and not for threat, just to keep it from slipping.

Silas moved his gaze to the gate.

“Stay behind the shrubs,” he said.

Reni did not answer.

She could not promise him what he wanted.

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Silas dragged the sled out of the hedge gap with a steady pull, treating it as weight and nothing more. He kept his shoulders at the angle of a man at work, not the angle of a man carrying something forbidden.

Reni stayed in the gap and watched him step onto the service path.

The grey light showed the line of his limp. It did not look new. It looked like the limp of an old gardener who had taken too many winter falls and too many blows.

The pot scraped once against the stone. Silas corrected the sled angle so the scrape became a dull drag.

Reni held her breath.

No shout followed.

A garden guard stood near a tool shed at the edge of the service run. His uniform was grey and clean. His posture was upright in a way that brought inspection lines to Reni's mind.

Silas approached him with the pot behind.

Reni lowered her head and watched through clipped leaves.

The guard glanced at Silas, then at the sled, then looked away. His eyes did not narrow. His hand did not go to a weapon.

Silas kept his gaze forward and did not stop.

He moved toward the gate.

Reni stayed back behind the shrub line, where the hedge still broke her outline. She held the trowel and tried to make her grip light. Her fingers did not obey.

Exits came to her in the old habit: back into the service run, down to the elevator access.

None of it mattered if Silas failed at the gate.

The sapling's hum strengthened as he neared the bars. The vibration reached Reni even through the hedge gap. It ran through the stone under her boots.

Silas reached the gate and set his cane ferrule down, not tapping, just placing it. He shifted his body so the sled rope lay close to his leg.

A soldier on the courtyard side turned his head.

He called, "Greyth."

The bars did not muffle the name.

Silas lifted his chin.

"Yes," he answered.

His tone held the controlled politeness Reni had heard when Sorn struck him in the hallway.

The soldier's gaze went to the pot. The sapling leaves were visible above the rim, curled and dusted, still green.

"What's that?" the soldier asked.

Silas did not hesitate.

"A replacement," he said. "For the courtyard beds. The roses under the east wall have rot at the base. The General asked for a green showing by next turn."

Reni's stomach tightened.

The words came out of Silas with the sound of work orders.

The soldier frowned, as if trying to remember whether a gardener could speak of orders.

Another shout rose behind him, a count ending.

The soldier glanced over his shoulder. The moment was short.

He looked back at Silas.

"Get it in," he said. "And don't make a mess on the paving."

Silas dipped his head by a fraction.

"No, sir," he replied.

His hand went to the gate latch.

The latch stuck. It moved only after he set his weight into the pull.

Metal scraped against metal.

Reni's hand went to a stone at her feet without her choosing it. Her fingers curled around it.

Her mind supplied the memory of noise: the scrape of a plank in a narrow crawlspace, rod taps outside a linen niche, blast collapse in dust.

She opened her hand again and let the stone fall without throwing it.

The gate opened.

The gap was just wide enough for Silas and the sled.

He pulled the pot forward.

The sled's front edge crossed the threshold and bumped the paving stone lip.

The sapling's hum sharpened. The vibration went hard and tight. Reni saw the leaves lift and then settle again.

The pot shifted on the sled.

A crack sounded.

It was not loud, but Reni heard it because she was listening for it.

Silas's shoulders tightened. He did not stop.

Damp soil pushed out at the base seam and smeared onto the courtyard stone.

Silas stepped closer to the pot and pressed it against his thigh with a brief grimace that he hid by dropping his chin.

He kept it upright.

Reni's throat closed.

She watched his face and saw the tight line of his mouth. His eyes stayed forward.

The soldier's dismissal had left him a route.

The understanding did not soften what Reni carried against him. It did not excuse the Registry. It did not change the fact that he had lived

while others had been taken.

But it shifted her measure of him.

Silas pulled the sled fully into the courtyard.

The gate remained open behind him.

Reni stayed in the hedge gap.

The soldier's gaze moved briefly toward the shrub line where she hid. Reni held still. Her coat broke into shadow and clipped green.

The soldier did not call out.

He turned away and returned to the muster line.

Reni let out a thin breath through her nose.

She moved forward by a half step and stopped at the gate line where the hedge no longer covered her fully. She stayed close to the post shadow.

The trowel lay heavy in her hand.

Silas walked deeper into the courtyard, pulling the pot behind him. His cane struck the paving stones with a regular rhythm. His limp showed more in open light.

The courtyard's centre was empty.

Reni could not see the King's Stone. It was under the paving. She could only see the grid of stone and the lines of guards.

Silas moved toward the centre with the same work pace he had used by the rose beds. He did not look back.

Reni did not follow.

Her body wanted to go after him. Her leg would not allow a sprint, and her mind knew that even a limp into open space would draw guns.

She stayed at the threshold.

Silas crossed another span of paving and did not stop.

Reni held the trowel against her palm and watched until the distance between them could not be closed without ruining the only chance they had carried out of the tunnels.

He kept walking.

She stayed where the gate's shadow fell across her boots.

# Chapter 11

## The Planting

Silas did not hurry.

Reni could have named the pace, if she had wanted to; a gardener's pace on scraped stone, the pace of a man allowed to cross a courtyard because his work coat matched the place. It was the same pace he had used by the rose rows when he tightened a tie while her leg shook under her.

He kept his eyes down.

From the gatepost shadow she could see the line of his gaze, fixed on the mortar joints between the pale limestone blocks. His cane ferrule went down first at each step, not tapping but placed and lifted again. The sound carried even under the Wards. It was not loud; it was regular.

The pot dragged behind him on the plank sled. Damp grit left a thin track where the base seam had opened. The sapling's leaves sat above the rim in a stiff cluster, edges curled tight from heat, dusted with grit. The vibration ran through the stone and into Reni's boots. She had it in her teeth each time Silas crossed another joint.

A soldier in the nearer ring turned his head.

His eyes went to Silas, then to the pot. He did not raise his rifle. He held still, boots squared, as though the courtyard were still a place for clean movement and counted steps.

Another soldier glanced. A third. Their attention broke and then returned to the ring's shape and the shouted counts still echoing from the muster line beyond.

Reni stayed close to the post and kept her shoulders drawn in. The clipped hedge behind her hid the edge of her coat.

She began counting without moving her lips.

One. Two. Three.

A breath between a glance and a decision.

Four. Five.

Those seconds were not kindness. They were habit.

Six.

A shout from the far side of the ring, not alarm but a clipped instruction to keep formation.

Seven.

Reni shifted the trowel in her hand by a fraction and stopped. The wooden handle was worn smooth. Heat from Silas's palm still seemed to sit in it, though she knew that was only her own hand warming it. Her fingers tightened until the knuckles went pale.

Silas crossed another span.

At the courtyard's centre there was a stone set differently into the grid. Not larger, but cut with a rounded edge rather than a straight one, worked to match the rest of the paving.

Silas stopped with his cane ferrule on the rounded edge.

His shoulders drew in.

The pot's vibration was steady; then, as he set the ferrule down again, it strengthened by a fraction. Reni saw the change in him before she heard it. His jaw tightened. His left hand, still stiff from rope burns, opened and closed once.

He did not look back.

He said, very softly, "Here."

The word was not a prayer. It was a placement.

Reni counted again.

Eight.

A soldier's head turned more fully. His gaze held on the pot this time.

Nine.

Silas's hands went to the pot rim. The clay was wrapped in rags and cloth pads dark with soil and blood. The pot had long cracks from rim to base; the seam at the base had already pushed damp grit out onto the stone.

Ten.

From the outer ring, a different cadence entered the court.

Reni recognised it from below ground: heavier boots with a measured pause between steps, the pause of someone who listened through the soles.

An Iron-Eater stepped into the open.

He wore an oilcloth coat that took on a dull sheen in the dawn light. An iron gorget sat at his throat. In one hand he carried an iron rod, longer than his arm, the tip darkened from repeated contact with stone.

The rod lifted.

Reni caught the shift in the sapling's hum before the rod touched down. The vibration sharpened, moving into a higher note that sat behind her teeth.

The rod tip struck the paving a span from the pot.

The sound was a clean metal-on-stone contact, controlled rather than forceful. The vibration in the sapling changed again, going harsher at the edge; the leaves quivered, a brief tremor at their petioles. A faint ozone edge caught at the back of Reni's throat.

Silas did not flinch.

He stopped pulling the sled and set the pot down fully on the limestone rather than letting it hang on the plank's drag. His hands shook as the weight settled. The shaking was visible in his wrists.

He forced it still by pressing both palms against the clay and holding.

Reni could see his fingers spread against the pot's curve, the dirt under his nails, the split skin at the rope burn. He held pressure until the tremor reduced enough for him to lift one hand without losing control.

A soldier's voice cut across the court.

"Greyth. What are you doing?"

Silas lifted his chin by a fraction.

He answered with the tone Reni had heard in the hallway when Sorn struck him and he did not cry out.

"Silas Greyth," he said. "Palace gardener."

The words carried further than Reni wanted.

They were ordinary words in a place built for ordinary orders.

The soldier did not fire.

No one moved for two breaths, the kind of pause a man took before deciding whether routine would hold.

Silas shifted his weight.

He began to kneel.

From the Iron-Eater line, a shout rose; the muster rhythm broke.

"Anomaly at centre!"

Reni did not move.

The trowel handle pressed hard into her palm.

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The courtyard's sound changed.

Muster counts stopped. Boots no longer moved in groups. Voices crossed each other without pattern: questions, clipped orders, a shouted name she did not recognise.

The pylon lamps along the wall line remained out of her direct sight from the gate, but she saw the reflection of pale light shift on the iron grates set into the courtyard floor. It was not a flame reflection. It had the cold edge of the Wards.

Silas was down on one knee by the pot.

Reni saw him turn his head slightly, not back toward her, but toward the outer ring where the Iron-Eaters stood.

Prefect Sorn pushed into view.

He moved through soldiers without needing them to step aside. They made space because the oilcloth coat and iron gorget signalled a different authority. He carried his bundle of rods in one arm and a mouthpiece hung at his throat.

His voice carried.

"Hold the ring. No one steps in without my order."

Reni's mouth went dry.

She had seen him in the hallway of Silas's house. There, he had made the space narrow and personal. Here, he pointed and numbered positions; soldiers adjusted in measured steps.

Silas's hands stayed on the pot.

The sapling's hum had a hard edge now, sharpened by the earlier rod contact. It was still directional, still set into the stone beneath it.

A shout came from above.

Reni lifted her eyes and found a balcony line.

General Valerius Odran stepped into view, gloved hands on the iron rail. His uniform was cut with squared seams. His posture was controlled even as voices rose below him.

He did not look at the soldiers first.

His gaze went straight to the pot and the leaves above its rim.

Reni saw the brass compass at his belt. The iron measuring chain hung coiled at his side. They were small things against the breadth of the courtyard, but he kept them close.

Odran's voice dropped into the court.

"Hold fire." The order came clean and sharp. "Hold for a breath."

Some rifles lowered by a fraction. Some stayed raised.

Odran continued.

"Iron-Eaters: pin it. Do not break it. I want it intact. Rods and bindings."

A cold tightness closed in Reni's chest; her next breath came thin.

He was not calling for destruction.

He was calling for a cage.

Silas's head dipped.

His shoulders straightened; his stance changed. Then he leaned closer to the pot, shoulders rounded, blocking the rim from the ring.

Sorn called out numbers.

"Three points. Triangle. Two spans from the rim, vertices straddling the widened seam. Keep distance from the stem."

Three Iron-Eaters moved.

They did not run. They placed their feet with care, rods held low and steady.

One rod tip came down near the pot's base, close enough for Reni to hear the contact. The leaves trembled once.

Silas cupped the stem base with both hands, fingers pressed into the soil line where the rim had opened. His hands moved the stem by a fraction toward the widest fracture line in the clay.

He was aligning.

He was not presenting.

Reni's jaw clenched. Her teeth buzzed with the changed hum.

Odran leaned forward by a fraction over the balcony rail. His gloved hand shifted along the iron as though he were checking his distance.

She hated the steadiness of his gaze.

It was not the look of a man deciding whether to spare life. It was the look of a man judging whether the thing in the pot would survive transport.

A soldier near the inner ring called again.

"Greyth! Stop."

Silas did not answer.

He shifted his weight from knee to foot and half rose, still bent over the pot.

His right hand came away from the stem base and went under his coat.

Reni's fingers tightened on the trowel again. She stayed under the post shadow, shoulders locked.

Silas's hand came out holding a small trowel.

Not the worn one in Reni's fist.

This was a palace tool: the metal clean-edged, the handle newer, a faint stamped mark near the base where the wood met the tang.

He had kept it tucked under his coat.

Reni's throat tightened at the thought of him carrying a planting tool into a courtyard built for killing.

Odran's voice cut again.

"Bring the cage." Then, to Sorn, "If it roots here, it must be pinned before it takes the seam."

A wheeled iron frame stood ready off the ring.

Two soldiers pushed it in, boots scraping on limestone as they corrected its direction. The frame had bars and straps. Leather hung ready. Iron joints were greased and still made a metallic sound as it rolled.

The sight of it turned Reni's stomach.

The cage was not improvised.

Silas raised the palace trowel.

For a fraction of a moment he held the tool lifted where all could see it.

Then he struck the pot.

The blow landed on a crack line already widened by roots. Clay fractured with a sharp sound. Soil shifted inside. A dark line of damp grit squeezed out and dropped onto the stone.

The sapling's hum did not stop.

It changed, roughening at the edge, and the leaves trembled again.

Reni saw the moment Odran understood.

The General's head lifted by a fraction, and his posture changed. His hand tightened on the balcony rail.

Rifles rose higher in the ring below.

The soldier closest to Silas took half a step forward and brought the rifle to his shoulder.

The ordered pause ended.

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Silas broke the pot.

He did not do it with one clean strike. The clay had held too long under pressure to give that easily. He struck again, the trowel edge catching a fracture line, and a section of the pot wall collapsed inward.

Soil spilled onto the limestone.

The soil was darker than the courtyard's pale stone; it spread in a rough oval, damp at the centre and gritty at the edges where lime mortar dust mixed into it.

The sapling's root mass was visible.

Not a single thick root, not yet, but a dense web at the base, pale and fine, with several threads already pushed out through cracks and into the grit beneath the pot. Reni could see them because the pot was no longer a vessel. It was a broken shell around something that had already left.

Silas dropped the trowel for a moment and used both hands.

He shoved clay fragments aside, fingers cutting on sharp edges. Blood appeared quickly on his knuckles.

He grabbed the palace trowel again and drove its edge into a mortar joint between two paving stones.

The joint was tight, filled and scraped clean by imperial order, but the trowel edge caught a hairline gap.

He levered.

A thin line of mortar cracked. Grit lifted.

He levered again, and the gap widened by a fraction.

Sorn's voice cut across the ring.

"Rods in. Pin the base. Do not let it take the seam."

Iron-Eaters advanced.

Their rod tips came down in controlled contact closer to the spilled soil, careful not to plunge into it blindly.

Silas set his body between the rod line and the stem base.

The nearest rod moved forward.

The tip struck his shoulder.

The impact bunched his coat fabric and drove him sideways by a fraction. Reni saw his mouth open and close without a sound. He did not retreat. He leaned back into place, shoulder sagging slightly, and dropped his head closer to the soil.

He forced the trowel edge deeper into the mortar line.

Then he used his fingers.

He pulled out crumbs of lime mortar and gritty dust and tossed them aside into the spilled soil. He widened the seam with bare hands until the gap admitted root threads.

He pressed the exposed roots downward.

His fingers moved with the same careful pressure he had used in the cellar when he packed spilled soil back into a rim crack.

Blood ran from the cuts on his hands and dripped into the seam.

A soldier's voice rose.

"General, "

Odran's reply came from above, sharp enough to end the hesitation.

"Fire."

Reni did not see the muzzle flashes clearly from her angle, but she heard the shots.

The sound was not muffled the way footsteps were under the Wards. The Wards did not cancel gunfire.

Silas jerked.

A shot hit his torso. Another struck lower, into his leg. His body folded forward.

He fell onto the spilled soil and roots.

The palace trowel skittered across stone and stopped against a mortar ridge.

Silas's hands did not come away from the seam.

As he dragged himself by a fraction, his right hand slipped in the wet soil and smeared a short arc across the limestone before he found the seam again. His movements had direction; he pressed, held, adjusted, pressed again.

Blood spread across limestone.

It pooled at the edge of the soil oval and soaked into it, darkening it further. At the seam line, his blood mixed with mortar grit.

Reni's vision narrowed.

She bit down.

Her teeth cut into the inside of her mouth hard enough that blood came. The taste filled her mouth with iron. She did not cry out.

She stayed under the gatepost shadow, weight locked through her good leg. If she stepped into the open, rifles would turn.

A soldier broke from the ring.

He ran two steps toward Silas and reached down as if to pull him away from the soil.

The sapling's vibration rose sharply.

It was not louder only; it changed frequency again, going tight and hard through the stone. Reni had it in her teeth and in the bones of her jaw.

A root surged into the seam.

Reni saw it because the soil shifted as the root moved: a pale thread thickening by a fraction as it forced itself down, pushing grit aside. The mortar line widened visibly. A small chip of limestone broke at the joint edge.

The soldier jerked back.

He stepped away from the centre by a pace, boots sliding on scraped stone. His rifle swung up toward the paving.

No one stepped in again.

Sorn shouted.

"Rods! Pin it now!"

Two Iron-Eaters drove their rod tips toward the seam.

Silas's body lay across the soil and root mass. His back rose and fell in short movements, then paused, then rose again. His breaths were shallow enough that Reni could not count them reliably from this distance.

He pressed his forehead to the limestone beside the opened joint.

The gesture was not reverent.

It was bracing. He used his head and shoulder weight to hold the root mass aligned with the seam.

Blood ran from his mouth and nose; it left a smear on the stone where his face touched.

His hands stayed at the seam.

His fingers moved once more, pushing a final thread of root down into the crack line.

Then the movement stopped.

His body went still over the sapling.

The hum shifted.

The earlier harshness dropped away into a deeper register that ran through the limestone as a steadier vibration. It was strong enough that Reni had it through the gatepost shadow and into her teeth without needing to lean closer.

No one spoke for a breath.

Then voices rose again, harder now, edged by movement and backs turning.

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Reni stayed where the gate's shadow fell.

Soldiers surged toward the centre and halted short of it, breaking and reforming their ring in uneven steps. Their boots scuffed on limestone. Rifles stayed raised, but the line did not tighten the way it would have if the target were only a man bleeding on stone.

The centre was no longer only a man.

Silas lay over the spilled soil and root mass. His coat was darkened across the torso. One leg lay at an angle that made Reni's stomach tighten.

The sapling's leaves were visible above his shoulder, still curled but upright enough to show green against grey wool.

Reni did not move.

Pain pulsed in her injured thigh in short waves. The sap-sealed wound had held through the night's hauling and the morning's crouch, but holding still here brought its own strain.

The transport cage rolled closer to the centre and then stopped.

A rod struck stone again, nearer the spilled soil. The vibration in the courtyard changed at the edges, but the deeper hum did not break.

A soldier shouted.

"Keep that thing back!"

The cage was pushed sideways.

Its wheels squealed faintly against the stone despite grease. The men pushing it looked down at the mortar joints near their boots, as if expecting the paving to split under them.

Reni saw the seam at the centre widen by a fraction.

It was not a dramatic break. It was a hairline becoming a line that could be seen from this distance. The mortar ridge at its edge crumbled under pressure. Grit lifted.

Two soldiers stepped back in the same moment, retreating by a pace, then another pace. Their boots broke the clean grid of the courtyard with scuffed arcs.

It did not need to be named.

Reni's mouth tasted of blood. She swallowed once and kept her jaw locked.

At the courtyard edges, faces appeared.

A kitchen runner in a linen cap stood at a doorway, one hand on the frame, staring. A stoker or boiler worker in a soot-marked shirt leaned out from a service opening, eyes wide. More shapes at windows above, pale faces behind glass.

They did not shout.

They watched.

Reni was no longer the only witness in the shadows.

The workers who had moved under the palace without being seen were now at the edges of a public court, looking at a broken pot and a man's body over soil.

Reni's grip tightened on the trowel.

The worn handle pressed into her palm, and she remembered Silas's words in the hedge gap. Not as comfort, and not as forgiveness.

Find the hidden people.

Those who knew drains and bolts.

Those who could dig and shore.

The trowel was not a keepsake. It was a task.

A shot rang out again.

The sound snapped across the courtyard and hit stone near the gate. A chip of limestone jumped. Reni flinched without meaning to; her shoulders jerked, her breath caught.

She forced herself still again and kept her gaze on the centre long enough to mark what had changed.

Silas was not going to stand up.

The pot was not going to be carried out in a cage.

Any attempt to run into the open would end with her body beside his, and her presence would give the soldiers a simpler target than the roots under their boots.

She chose her first move.

Not toward Silas.

Toward the service corridors, along the east garden wall.

Toward the places Clem had pointed at without naming them. Toward the under-runs walked in pairs after the second bell. Toward the doors where servants would cluster once boots began to back away.

The deeper hum strengthened again.

Reni had it in her teeth, strong enough to set her jaw buzzing. The vibration ran through the gatepost into her shoulder when she pressed close.

She used it to time her move.

Not to mourn.

To move.

Reni slid along the hedge line, keeping to clipped green and the post shadow. Her injured leg protested when she put weight on it, and she adjusted without lifting her boot too far from stone.

She did not run; running drew eyes.

She slipped away through the garden edge, leaving the courtyard's open lines behind her.

The hum stayed in the stone. It did not fade when she crossed into the service path. It followed through the paving under her boots, a deeper vibration now, and she carried the taste of blood and iron in her mouth as she went toward the places where workers moved unseen.

Behind her, voices rose.

Ahead, the palace's service ways were narrow and full of doors.

# Chapter 12

## The Rupture

The service corridor ran tight between stone and iron frames, with doors set close enough that a man could cross from latch to latch in three strides. Reni kept to the wall where shadows fell from the doorframes. The trowel handle pressed into her palm; she held it low, kept it from knocking the iron skirting.

The hum travelled through the floor. It sat in her boots and moved up through her shins with each pulse. In the courtyard behind her, rifles kept firing in uneven bursts; now and then a shot rang out with no answering volley, and then a cluster followed, suggesting orders came too late.

A service door ahead stood ajar by a handbreadth. Someone had left it in haste; its latch sat half turned. Through the gap Reni caught a slice of the courtyard: pale paving, the uneven ring of grey coats, and at the centre a dark patch of soil that had not been there moments before.

Silas lay over the soil.

His coat spread across the stone, dark at the ribs where the bullet had hit. His head was turned to one side. She could not see his eyes from this angle, only the line of his cheek against limestone, the mouth slack at the edge. She had watched him press his forehead down to brace himself; that pressure had gone. His shoulders sank by a fraction more, and his chest rose once and then lowered.

The next breath did not come.

The weight of his body settled into the soil oval. The roots beneath him did not stop moving. At the edge of the soil, thin threads had thickened into cords no wider than a finger. They pressed into the mortar

joint he had opened, and the dark line of that joint had widened enough that Reni could see it even from the doorway.

Blood ran out in slow sheets from beneath his torso, following the slope of the stone. It gathered at the soil's gritty edge, then seeped into it. Where the mortar seam had opened, the blood found the crack line and ran along it in a narrow stream. The line shone wet for a moment, then dulled as grit took it.

The root mass changed where it touched that wetness. Threads that had looked pale against the soil took on a darker sheen. One root tip slid toward the seam and disappeared into it, and for a beat the hum rose sharp as it had when iron touched down.

Then it dropped.

The change came cleanly, not as a fade but as a shift into a lower register. The vibration through the paving steadied. Reni felt it settle into the bones of her jaw and then stop changing. The pitch fell and remained steady.

At the seam, the soil lifted by a fraction as the root tip pressed down. Something under the paving resisted, colder and denser, and the movement became a stop rather than a slide. The root tip did not buckle. It pressed, and the seam widened with a small crumble of mortar that spilled into the soil.

Reni did not know how the King's Stone looked. She had never seen it. She had only heard Silas speak of it in the under-city, in those careful sentences that made it sound like a thing with a place and a consequence rather than a story.

The root found it, and the hum stayed low.

An Iron-Eater moved into the slice of view. He came from the ring, oilcloth coat flapping at the hem as he stepped back in. His rod was held with both hands now, trying to steady it. He thrust it down toward the seam.

The rod tip made contact near the soil and bounced.

He drove it again, closer. The shaft shook hard enough that his elbows jerked. The sound of metal on stone became a rapid series of strikes rather than a single controlled contact.

Two more Iron-Eaters closed in behind him. They lowered their rods together, aiming for a pattern Reni had watched Sorn lay out with his voice.

The seam shifted.

The mortar line at the centre lifted by a fraction because the two paving stones no longer sat level. One rod tip lost purchase. The Iron-Eater's hands slid down the shaft; his right hand came away and struck the rod head as it kicked sideways. He swore, loud enough that the words carried through the door gap.

His palm opened on the iron.

Blood showed at once on the shaft where his skin had caught. He tried to regrip. The rod shook again and wrenched free, clattering across stone. The man's wrist twisted with it; he dropped to one knee.

Soldiers behind him stepped back in an uneven line. Their boots scuffed the clean paving. Rifles stayed up, but barrels tracked the ground now, following the seam rather than any body.

On the balcony, Valerius leaned forward. His gloved hands gripped the rail. His mouth moved in a shout that Reni heard only in broken pieces.

“Back, ”

“Hold, ”

“Cage, ”

The courtyard noise masked the rest: boots scraping, men shouting to each other, iron striking stone, a rifle shot too close to the gate that sent vibration through the doorframe.

The transport cage rolled into the slice of view, pushed by two soldiers who kept their weight low and watched the stone for movement. The cage looked heavier in motion, iron bars and leather straps shaking with each jolt of the wheels.

One wheel hit a raised edge.

The frame lurched and canted to the side. The wheel jammed against the lifted paving. The men tried to force it forward; their boots slid. The cage did not move. A second wheel lifted off the stone by a finger's breadth, leaving the frame tilted and useless.

Sorn strode into view behind it, mouthpiece at his throat and rods in his hand. He looked down at the jammed wheel and then at the seam.

He pointed.

Reni could not hear his words through the door gap, but she saw the gesture: a command to shift position, to reset the triangle, to regain the ring.

No one stepped back in.

The seam widened another fraction. A pale line showed where mortar had been. Soil ran into it, pulled by gravity and by the pressure beneath.

Reni's mouth tasted of blood from where she had bitten herself in the courtyard. She swallowed once. The trowel handle creaked faintly under her grip; she loosened her fingers by a fraction and then tightened again.

The hum stayed low and steady.

It travelled through the corridor floor as clearly as it did in the courtyard slice. The deeper register did not shift when iron struck stone at the edge. It did not jump with gunfire.

Her boots felt it first. Then her knees did. Then the iron brackets along the corridor wall began to buzz with it, a faint tremor in the metal that made a hanging key ring on a nearby peg rattle once.

Reni stepped back from the door gap. She did not turn her back to it. She slid along the wall until she reached a corner where the stone was bare and the iron skirting ended.

The tremor arrived as a single hard shake.

Dust fell from a high joint above the doorframe. A thin line of mortar grit landed on the floor by her boot.

Reni put her shoulder to the wall and braced. She bent her knees to keep her balance when the next shake came.

She made no sound of victory. She set her jaw and waited for falling stone.

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The next tremor came stronger.

Reni felt it in the wall first, then in the floor. The stone under her boots shifted by a fraction, enough to make her toes scrape inside the leather. Iron brackets along the corridor made a thin buzzing noise. A door further down the passage swung inward a finger's breadth and then shut again when the frame jumped.

She pushed off the wall and moved.

The corridor split: left toward the garden service run, right toward a stairwell marked with a small rose plate, and straight toward doors she did not know. The hum was steady under all of it. It did not point her now the way pollen had. It sat under stone and iron; brackets rattled, and a hairline opened in the plaster.

She turned toward the stairwell.

A grated opening sat at the top of the steps. Through it she saw a lower passage with pipes running along the ceiling and iron housings bolted to the wall. Those housings had been quiet when she came up

through the underworks with Silas, just part of the palace's heat and control.

Now they shook.

The iron mounts holding the housings to the wall jumped against their bolts. A nut spun half loose and then caught. A seam in the pipe lagging opened and closed with each pulse.

The vibration had lost its measured baseline. Instead of the countable grind Silas had followed with his cane, it came in uneven pulses. The hum under it stayed constant; the ward vibration above it broke into shorter, jagged bursts.

A shout rose from below the grating.

Two technicians in grey coats ran along the lower passage, one with a ledger board held to his chest and the other with his hands empty. Both kept their heads ducked and watched the ceiling line. One slipped when the floor jolted. He caught a wall brace and kept going.

Reni took the steps two at a time until pain in her injured leg tightened and forced her into a slower pace. She did not stop. She used the handrail once, felt the iron shake under her palm, and let go.

A door to the left stood open into an engine space.

She did not mean to look, but she turned toward the noise.

Inside, a large gear assembly sat against the wall, iron teeth meshed into a ring that ran into a housing the width of a man's torso. The gear had been turning on a steady cycle when Silas counted the vibrations through stone. Now it juddered.

The teeth met and did not pass cleanly.

A short seizure ran through the assembly. The ring stopped for a moment and then began to move again. Metal met metal and scraped. The sound rose into a high grind.

A tooth sheared.

Reni saw it because the gear jumped as the tooth broke. A small piece of iron flashed across the space and struck the wall, leaving a bright mark in soot. The ring began to turn again and caught on the next tooth.

Men inside the room shouted to each other. One held a mouthpiece at his throat and then dropped it. Another reached for a lever and could not move it.

Reni left the door behind her. She did not go into that room. The air carried hot oil and iron filings. The high grind continued, then broke when the gear lost another tooth and the ring slipped a fraction before jamming again.

The corridor ahead narrowed. Pipes ran low enough that she had to duck.

A boiler service bay opened on the right.

Heat hit her face as she crossed the threshold. The smell of coal smoke and damp wool thickened. A stoker stood at a valve wheel, both hands on the iron, teeth bared as he forced it shut against pressure.

The next pulse ran through the floor.

A steam line along the ceiling split at a joint.

The rupture made a long ripping sound from the joint. A white jet burst downward. It struck the stoker's shoulder and side. He fell back, arm flung up too late, and the steam soaked his shirt in seconds. He made a sound that did not carry as a word.

Two other workers grabbed him under the arms and dragged him away from the jet. Their hands slipped on wet cloth. One shouted toward a doorway.

“Up! Up, now!”

They did not look at Reni as a stranger. They looked past her, counting exits.

The steam continued to vent. The valve wheel jerked and turned a half turn, then stopped when the mechanism jammed. The stoker's skin had gone red where the steam hit. He shook hard, jaw locked.

Reni moved in and took the man's other side, slipping her hand under his elbow to help carry him. The skin of his sleeve was hot and wet. Her own arm stung from the heat through cloth.

They dragged him through the service door into a stairwell.

The stairs shook under their feet. Dust fell from the underside of a landing, peppering their hair and shoulders. The stoker's boots scraped each step.

A kitchen runner came down toward them and stopped short, eyes wide.

"Not down," one of the workers snapped. "Not down."

The runner turned and fled upward.

Reni's leg threatened to fold on the next flight. She shifted weight onto her good leg, kept her grip, and climbed.

At the top of the stairwell, a service passage opened toward the exterior. Light came in through a high window, thin and grey.

Another tremor hit. The windowframe rattled. The stoker groaned and tried to curl inward, but the men carrying him kept him upright.

They laid him on the corridor floor near a wall where the stone was bare and cooler. One worker tore open the stoker's collar to get air to his neck. Another looked around for an officer.

No officer came.

The high grind from below continued, then cut off when another mechanism seized. In its place came a series of shorter impacts, metal striking metal as parts moved without alignment.

Reni stepped away before she stopped.

The corridor led to a side service door that opened into an alley between palace walls and a straight run of iron frames. She pushed the latch and leaned her shoulder into it.

Cold air hit her face.

The alley was usually quiet under the Silence Wards. Smoke from chimneys sat low over the street, trapped close to stone. Now the air moved across her cheek.

Across the alley, an inspection pylon stood beside an iron frame.

Its lamp flickered.

The colour shifted too fast to read cleanly: pale blue, then white, then a weak yellow that lasted only a blink, then blue again. The light cut in quick on-off beats. A soldier in the alley looked up at it and shouted something to his partner.

The lamp went dark.

The soldier stared at the dead glass for a breath too long. His mouth moved again. His partner lifted his own lantern.

Further down the alley, a low grate cover shook in its frame.

The next pulse came, and a section of paving near the grate slumped.

It did not collapse as a hole. The stones tilted. The mortar between them cracked, and water pushed up through the line of the crack.

It came with force.

A fountain of metallic water shot upward and splashed across the alley wall. The spray carried black grit. It hit iron frames and ran down in thin sheets. The water carried a sharp taste in the air. Where it fell back to the ground it ran along the slope and took grit with it.

The paving sank further as the water undercut it.

A second pylon further along the street flickered once and then went dark as well. A sergeant down the alley started using hand signals.

The hum was audible out here.

Reni heard it without needing stone under her boots. It remained low and steady beneath the noise of shouting and breaking masonry.

A door slammed inside the palace behind her. Someone shouted a name.

No. Not her name. A name she did not know.

She pushed through the east service door by the ash chute and limped hard.

A runner had fallen near a doorway where two corridors met.

The runner wore a linen cap and a plain apron. Her forearms were bruised, one purple bloom visible where the sleeve had ridden up. Reni knew those forearms from the inspection line weeks ago, from the moment a hand had pointed without speech toward a drainage cut.

The ceiling above the runner cracked along a mortar line.

A strip of plaster and grit broke free. It fell in a sheet.

Reni grabbed the runner by the upper arm and hauled.

The runner was light, all bone and quickness, but shock made her stiff. Her feet dragged. Pain tightened in Reni's injured leg and nearly buckled her; she kept pulling, teeth clenched.

The plaster hit the floor where the runner had been. It shattered. A second piece struck the doorframe and split.

The runner coughed once and looked at Reni, searching her face.

"Move," Reni said.

The runner moved.

They pressed into a side niche where linen sacks were stacked to shoulder height. Dust fell across the sacks in pale streaks.

Another tremor ran through the floor. The sacks shifted and then settled.

The runner's mouth opened. No sound came at first. Then she said, "Courtyard." It was not a question.

Reni nodded once.

They left the niche and moved along the corridor that ran closest to the courtyard wall.

Through a narrow service window Reni caught the courtyard again.

The paving at the centre had split along old seam lines, cracks following the grid with the mortar joints taking the pressure first. Roots pushed up through those cracks. They did not appear in a single surge. They came in repeated thrusts, each one widening the gap and lifting another stone edge.

Soldiers scattered.

Some tried to keep their rifles up while stepping back. Others turned and ran, boots slipping on the clean stone that had become uneven. An Iron-Eater stumbled when a paving block lifted under his heel. He caught himself on a rod and then threw it aside.

On the balcony, Valerius lurched forward.

The stone under the balcony rail shifted by a fraction; his body pitched. He caught the iron railing with both gloved hands. Something at his belt came loose.

The brass compass fell.

It struck the balcony stone and skittered. The chain at his side flashed as he twisted, but the compass moved too fast. It slid toward a crack that had opened along the balcony edge, a hairline becoming a line.

The compass vanished into it.

Valerius stared down for a beat. Then he lifted his head and shouted again, mouth wide, posture taut.

Below him, no ring held.

Reni's throat tightened. She did not stop to watch longer.

The corridor window rattled in its frame. The runner beside her flinched at each shake and then kept moving when Reni pulled her.

Outside, in the alley beyond the palace wall, smoke began to drift.

It did not sit in a flat layer close to stone anymore. It moved in a thin stream toward the river side. A strip of cloth tied to an iron frame shifted and fluttered against its knot.

Wind had returned.

Reni heard the hum under open air and felt the returning movement of smoke against her cheek as she pushed the runner toward a wider stairwell where workers were already gathering, their faces grey with dust and their hands empty.

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The stairwell Reni chose ran down into a level where the stone felt older. The blocks were darker, basalt under pale limewash that had flaked in strips. The tremors came through here as well, but the sound changed; it was thicker, closer to the breaking of joints than to the ringing of iron.

Workers clustered on the landing below. Some held cloth to their mouths against dust. One had a soot-black smear across his forehead where his hand had wiped sweat and ash together. No one carried a weapon. Their hands were empty or full of each other's sleeves.

The runner Reni had pulled from the corridor stood with her back to the wall, one hand pressed hard to her ribs.

"Go down," a man said to the group. "Not up. Not up."

Another answered, “Up’s where the doors are.”

The first man shook his head once. The motion was small. “Up’s where the stone is breaking.”

Reni did not stop to argue with them. She moved along the landing until she reached a service door marked only by a scuffed plate and a latch worn bright by use.

The hum was louder here.

Not stronger in vibration alone; louder in air. It sat under the shouts, under the grinding and the crack of stone. It kept its low register.

Reni put her shoulder to the door and pushed.

It opened onto a side passage with a narrow view into the courtyard.

She saw the centre without needing to lean far.

Where the sapling had been a stem above a broken pot, it was now a thick column rising from the seam. The change was not neat. The wood expanded with visible strain lines, cambium swelling under the surface. Bark formed in ridged layers, darker than the soil and rougher than the smooth stem she had seen in the cellar.

The trunk rose fast enough that her eyes had to adjust. Leaves pushed upward as the crown lifted, curled edges still tight from heat but carried higher into colder air. New leaf buds appeared along the thickening branch points, pale at the tips.

Roots surged through the paving cracks.

They did not twist toward men. They followed seams and joints. They pushed where mortar had given and where iron grates marked the lattice beneath. Under the east grate toward the drain. Along the conduit bed toward the inner arch. At each grate a root line split and drove down through the opening, using the gap.

The paving could not stay flat.

A line of stones lifted along a crack. The next pulse of pressure broke them. A block snapped at one corner, and the fragment flew outward.

It struck a soldier at the edge of the broken line.

He had been stepping back, rifle still raised. The fragment hit his cheek and temple. He fell sideways, hands flinging up too late to catch himself. Blood showed at once on the pale stone where he landed. The rifle clattered and skidded.

Another man shouted and dragged him by the collar away from the crack line. He did not look toward the trunk; he watched the stones under his own boots as he pulled.

At the centre, Silas' body moved.

At first Reni thought someone had grabbed him, that a soldier had finally pushed into the centre and hooked hands under his shoulders to drag him away from the roots.

Then she saw there were no hands.

The trunk was rising beneath him.

Silas' coat caught on new bark ridges. The cloth snagged and held, lifting his torso as the wood thickened and pushed upward. His body hung for a beat, weight taken by fabric and by the angle of his ribs against the wood.

The cloth tore.

Not all at once. A seam gave in a line. His torso slipped and settled again, this time against the wood rather than on the stone. His head rolled to the side, mouth open. There was no breath.

Blood still ran from him, but now it ran down wood and into the crack lines at the base, soaking into the soil that had been forced outward by the rising trunk.

On the balcony, Valerius leaned forward again.

He shouted.

Reni saw the shape of his mouth and the sharp movement of his jaw. She saw his gloved hand slice through the air in a commanding gesture. She did not hear the words as words. The noise masked them. No officer looked up; each watched his own footing. Stone cracked in repeated snaps along the courtyard grid. Iron scraped as grates bent under pressure. Men shouted to each other too close to hear anything else.

Officers below did not form a new ring. They moved in clusters, grabbing men, pointing, backing away.

Sorn appeared near the edge of the broken line.

He had lost the calm pace he used in Silas' hallway. His shoulders were set hard. He held an iron rod in both hands and stepped in closer than any of the other Iron-Eaters.

He aimed for the base of the trunk.

He drove the rod forward.

The tip met the wood and the vibration travelled up the shaft. The iron bent.

It did not bow slowly. It kinked a span from his hands at the lower tone. The rod snapped sideways as the bend formed, and Sorn's grip slipped.

The rod tore free.

It flew.

A soldier standing behind Sorn took it in the shoulder and upper chest. The man went down hard, knocking another soldier's legs out. Both fell in a heap of grey cloth and iron.

Sorn staggered one pace, recovered, and reached for another rod.

Reni backed away from the doorway.

The floor under her shifted as another tremor hit. Dust fell from the lintel. She did not wait to see whether the doorframe would hold.

The runner on the landing looked at her face.

“What is it?” the runner said. Her voice shook.

Reni tightened her grip on the trowel. The worn handle pressed into the old cut in her palm where rope had burned her weeks ago.

“It’s up,” Reni said.

A man with soot-black hands stared at her. “Up where?”

“In the courtyard.”

Someone swore.

The runner said, “The gate,” and stopped.

Reni did not offer comfort. She did not have any.

She looked at the cluster of workers and at the stairwell leading down.

Silas had told her to find the people who knew bolts and drains. He had named no slogans and no banners. He had given her the tool for work.

Reni lifted the trowel enough that they could see it.

“Who knows the under-runs?” she asked.

A stoker with singed brows raised his hand by a fraction. His fingers were missing at the left. “I do.”

Another worker said, “We all do. We’ve got to. They walk them in pairs after second bell.”

Reni nodded once. “Then we go where they don’t expect. We keep people out from under the walls. We get the burned man to water.”

The words came out flat. She gave only the necessary instructions.

The building shook again.

Someone screamed from above, not in triumph. In fear.

Reni turned and ran down the stairwell, taking the steps one at a time when her leg refused speed, and the workers moved after her in a rush of boots and breath and dust.

# Chapter 13

## The Siege of Roots

Through a broken pane, a strip of cloth tied to an iron frame moved against its knot.

Reni noticed it because movement where there had been none drew her glance. Under the Silence Wards, smoke had stayed low and flat and loose ties had hung without lifting. Now the cloth shifted, twice, and the edge of it brushed the frame before falling back.

The low hum under the paving had not changed. It travelled through stone into her boots and up into her shin; it made iron brackets and latches tremble in a way that did not match any drill count. Dust had turned the air in the passage grey, and the sweat on her upper lip made that dust stick.

She kept moving because stopping in the palace meant joining the still bodies on landings and in alcoves. The stairs under her had already shifted once; the joint line at the third step showed a pale crack that widened with each tremor. She held the trowel low, the handle against her palm, and set her feet with care when the floor jumped.

A service window at shoulder height had lost one pane. Shards stood upright in the putty, points exposed. Through the opening she saw an alley between palace walls and a straight run of iron frames. The alley had been an inspection route in hard times, a place where soldiers could stand in a line and see each door.

The line was broken.

At the alley mouth, the service gate sat half closed. Roots had threaded into the hinge stones where the straps were bolted, packed into

the seam as if driven in by hand. The hinge pin sat skewed in its socket, and the iron strap no longer lay flat against the stone; one corner rode up on a fresh scrape, sap dried in a thin smear along the edge. A soldier had braced his shoulder to it earlier, scuff marks and a torn strip of coat still clung to the latch, yet the gate did not shift.

Beyond the iron frames, a street section had lifted along a buried seam. It had not lifted as a single slab. Blocks had tipped and then caught against each other. Between them, mortar had fallen out in pale grit. The lifted section formed a ridge a span high, stone pushed up across the street.

Roots showed in the cracks.

They followed the lines that had once carried conduits and drainage runs. Reni could not see the conduits themselves from here, only the pattern of the breaking: a regular run that matched the old straight streets and the newer imperial beds. The roots pushed up along those buried lines, thick cords forcing their way between stone blocks where the mortar had already loosened.

A squad of soldiers tried to keep formation on the far side of the ridge.

They marched until their boots met the lifted stones. The front men stepped up and slipped, then backed down. Someone shouted. The line tried to angle left toward a flatter section. Another tremor ran through the ground, and a second ridge lifted in a long curve nearer the iron frames.

The formation stopped being a formation. Men spread into a cluster. One lifted his rifle, then lowered it to use both hands to pull another man upright.

The ridge continued to rise by small increments. Each pulse pushed a block further out of level.

Reni did not stay at the window. She took in what she needed and moved on, eyes tracking the corridor ahead and the ceiling line for cracks. The palace was full of doors, and most of them were closed. The ones that stood open showed hurried movement: a runner with flour on her sleeve, a man with a soot-black face hauling a bucket, a servant carrying a chair held in front of his chest.

The corridor turned toward a junction where kitchen routes met the service ways. The stone changed there: older basalt under pale limewash, the limewash flaked in strips where damp had worked it loose. She recognised the smell before she saw the scullery door. Broth, ash, and wet wool.

The tremor came again. The floor jumped. A ladle clattered somewhere behind a door and then stopped.

At the far end of the corridor, a second window looked out onto the street beyond the alley. This one had iron bars set into the stone. The bars were damp, and a thin line of sap had dried on one of them, a smear where a leaf tip had brushed the cage of the service cage when she and Silas rode up. Pressure tightened behind her eyes; she pushed it down and kept her gaze outside.

Outside, an imperial wagon had tipped.

The roadbed under its right wheels had shifted when the ridge rose. One wheel sank into a new depression and the axle angled. The wagon did not fall cleanly onto its side; it leaned, then the left wheels lifted. The whole frame went over with a slow grind of wood and iron.

Crates spilled from the back.

A sack split on the stone. Grain poured out in a pale stream and scattered into cracks. Another sack landed and bounced once before settling. A box broke open and metal tins rolled, ringing against each other until they hit the ridge.

Soldiers ran to it.

They ran from a point nearer the palace gate, leaving their positions by the frames. They did not run in a line. They scrambled, boots slipping on grit, hands out to catch themselves when the street tilted again. One man knelt and grabbed at spilled grain with both hands, trying to scoop it back into the sack. Another dragged a crate upright. Their rifles hung by straps or lay on the stone.

There was no officer visible in that slice of street, only men trying to salvage what they could before the next shift broke the wagon further.

Reni watched long enough to see the effect: bodies that should have been guarding lanes were bent over supplies. She turned away.

The junction ahead had a low archway with a rose plate on one side. Beyond it lay the kitchen routes: narrower, warmer, full of doors and hanging cloth. A group of workers stood in that junction, pressed close together in the curve of the wall where the ceiling line looked sound.

Fear showed in their hands and shoulders. None of them were fleeing.

A runner with a linen cap had one hand on the wall brace, fingers white. A stoker with singed brows stood with his arms folded tight across his chest. Another woman held a basket with both hands and did not set it down.

Reni came into their line of sight. Heads turned. Someone took half a step back, then stopped.

She lifted the trowel enough that they could see it.

“Don’t go down the boiler line,” she said. Her voice came out rough. The dust in the air scraped at her throat. “It’s already ruptured once. It’ll do it again.”

A man with a soot smear across his forehead stared at her. “Who are you?”

“I’m not the one you need to ask,” Reni said. She heard the flatness in her own words and did not soften them. “The Wards are breaking. The

gates are stuck. There's a window. Use it to move people out from under the walls before they come down."

The runner with the linen cap blinked. "Gates?"

"Courtyard gate," Reni said. "And the service gates."

Another tremor ran through the floor. The wall brace under the runner's hand buzzed against its bolts.

A woman near the back made a small sound, not a word. Flour coated her sleeve. She watched the corridor beyond Reni.

A kitchen runner on the edge of the group shifted her weight. She was small, and her forearms were bruised. Under her cap her hair had been cropped close.

Bera Noll.

Bera's eyes met Reni's.

She did not speak. She gave one nod.

Bera's single nod tightened Reni's stomach. It carried the memory of the inspection line and the drainage cut and the baton strike that had landed because Bera had held her ground. Reni did not answer with a speech. She nodded back once and turned to the rest.

"Move up and out," she said. "If you can get to open air, do it. If you can't, get to older stone. Basalt. The pale lime blocks are cracking first."

The man with soot-black hands lifted his chin. "Where?"

Reni pointed with the trowel, not toward the boiler line but toward a side passage that ran under older arches. "There. It's tight, but it doesn't sit under the pipes. If you hear the high grind again, you're too close to the gear rooms."

The stoker with singed brows, Clem Varr, stepped forward by a pace. His missing fingertips showed when he lifted his hand.

"You're the one from the underworks," he said.

Reni did not answer. Heat and pressure built in her leg under the sap-sealed skin. The wound had closed enough to walk, but it had never been clean.

A tremor hit again, sharper.

The step beneath her left foot buckled by a fraction. The shift turned her ankle and sent a jolt up her thigh. Pain tightened so fast that her leg went weak. Her knee bent.

She caught herself on the wall brace.

Iron shook under her palm. Dust fell from a crack above the arch.

Her stomach dropped. Soldiers with hands on her arms came up in her mind; she tightened her fingers and pushed back upright.

The workers watched.

Reni took the trowel in both hands and set the handle against the floor like a short crutch. Weight went through it as she took one step. The movement looked wrong to her, slow and careful, but it kept her upright.

“No one runs,” she said. “Running gets you under the wrong wall. Move steady.”

Someone behind her laughed once, too high. “What, you’re giving orders now?”

Reni turned her head. The voice belonged to a young scullery hand with wet sleeves. His eyes were bright with fear.

“Take them or don’t,” she said. “I haven’t time to flatter you.”

The hum under the floor stayed low. It made the trowel handle vibrate in her grip.

Clem Varr shifted his stance. “The boiler line will kill you,” he said, speaking to the group rather than to Reni. “She’s right. Take the old passage.”

Bodies shifted. Shoulders turned toward the side passage.

Reni moved with them, keeping to the wall. Bera moved without being asked, slipping through gaps between larger bodies and placing a hand on a runner's shoulder to guide her.

As they went, Reni caught another slice of the outside through a doorway that had been forced open. Cold air crossed her face, and with it a taste of iron.

Smoke did not sit flat anymore.

It moved in uneven bands, breaking and drifting along the palace wall. Two shutters on a nearby building stood open. A civilian leaned out, hair loose, eyes wide.

He threw a stone.

The stone struck an isolated soldier in the shoulder. The soldier staggered and turned his head up toward the window. He lifted his rifle half a span and then lowered it again when the ground jumped under his boots.

A second stone came, then a third.

The civilian vanished back inside. The shutters banged once as they were pulled shut.

Further along the street, another family dragged a child through a doorway and slammed their door. Reni saw it in fragments: a small hand, a skirt edge, the shine of a pot.

Wind meant the Wards had lost grip. Smoke could move now, and fire with it.

Reni did not stay to watch who threw stones and who hid. She followed the workers into the passage.

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The passage narrowed.

It had been used for years and then abandoned. The floor showed scuff marks where feet had dragged heavy loads. A lintel stone over one door had a dark streak where hands had touched it in passing. Those marks helped: the lintel had not moved, the doorframe had not split.

The hum stayed in the stone. When it sharpened under iron, her jaw clenched and her grip tightened on the trowel.

A storeroom door on the left had a simple latch. The latch was bent back. Someone had forced it.

Inside, shelves held sacks, coils of rope, and tools laid in rows. The order had been imperial. The use was not.

Workers went in and took what they could.

A man grabbed a mallet by its head and then corrected his grip to the handle. Another pulled two staves from a corner where they had been used for moving crates. A kitchen hand took a cleaver from a hanging rack and held it tight against his thigh.

No one raised the tools overhead. No one shouted. They chose at once and moved with shaking hands.

Reni stayed in the doorway, trowel in her right hand, left hand on the stone to keep balance. She watched for soldiers.

The first pair came not from the direction she expected.

Two soldiers appeared from a side corridor that should have been watched by an officer. Their uniforms were grey with dust. One had his rifle shouldered. The other held his rifle low, barrel down.

Their boots slipped on grit as the floor trembled.

A worker stepped out of the storeroom with a staff.

He struck the first soldier's rifle barrel sideways, forcing it off line. The soldier tried to correct, but the vibration in the floor shook his arms. Dust fell from the ceiling joint and landed on his cheek.

The second worker, with a mallet, swung once at the soldier's knee.

The soldier folded.

The second soldier tried to bring his rifle up. The action jammed. A fine spray of dust came from the receiver when he worked it. He worked the jam twice, then stared at the stuck action and stopped trying to raise it.

A kitchen hand with a cleaver struck him across the forearm, not the head. The cleaver edge hit bone. The soldier cried out and dropped the rifle.

He fell back against the wall and slid down.

The first soldier lay on the floor with both hands on his knee. His rifle had skittered a pace away.

The second soldier raised one hand, palm out.

“Stop,” he said, voice breaking. “Stop.”

Reni stepped forward.

Someone had already lifted the cleaver again.

The kitchen hand's eyes were fixed on the soldier's throat. His face was wet with sweat and dust. His lips pulled back from his teeth.

Reni put the trowel between them.

She did not swing it. She used the handle as a bar and pushed the cleaver hand down.

“No,” she said.

The kitchen hand jerked his arm. “He'd shoot you.”

“He can't,” Reni said, and she glanced at the rifle on the floor to make the point. “Look at it.”

The soldier on the wall kept his hand raised. His other hand clutched his bleeding forearm.

The kitchen hand's breathing came fast. "They've been doing it for ten years."

Reni did not argue with the ten years. She had only nineteen.

"Time," she said. "You want to spend it cutting him, or you want to spend it getting the scullery girls out from under the boiler pipes?"

A tremor ran through the floor, heavy enough to jar her teeth. The soldier on the ground cried out again when his knee shifted.

The kitchen hand glanced up at the ceiling line.

He lowered the cleaver by a fraction.

Someone behind him spat on the floor.

"Coward," a voice said. It was not aimed at Reni alone.

A worker with a stave stepped back into the storeroom and came out again with rope.

"Bind them," he said, voice clipped. "Tie them to the brace. If they live, they live."

Another voice, older, answered from down the corridor. "Or we end it."

The split began there.

Three workers moved toward the soldiers with rope and staves, eyes on the corridor ends. Two others stepped away and went in the opposite direction, toward the kitchens and the inner halls, holding mallets and knives.

The kitchen hand with the cleaver hesitated and then followed the ones going deeper.

Reni did not call him back.

She turned to the worker who had spoken of scullery girls.

"Where are the worst ceilings?" she asked.

“Boiler line, and the east conduit beds,” he said. “And the stair to the inner store.”

“Then we don’t use them,” Reni said.

A runner coughed hard beside her and bent over. The cough sounded wet and then turned dry.

Plaster dust.

Reni grabbed the runner’s sleeve and dragged him toward an alcove where a column buttressed the wall. She forced him down to a sit.

He tried to speak and only coughed.

His lips were white with powder.

Reni crouched as far as her leg would allow, keeping her weight on the good side. She used the trowel edge to scrape dust from his mouth. The act was awkward; the trowel was not made for teeth. She did it anyway, gentle enough not to cut.

The runner gagged once and spat.

A clump of damp plaster fell onto the stone.

“Breathe through cloth,” Reni said.

He fumbled for his sleeve and pulled it up over his mouth.

The hum under the floor stayed steady. It made her teeth buzz when she clenched her jaw.

A woman nearby, older, with hands red from washing, said, “It’s changing.”

Reni did not ask what she meant. The change now was structural.

They moved again.

Reni did not run. She set her pace by what her leg could hold.

A pattern began to stand out.

In places where the air felt stale and cold, the hum was fainter. Those pockets carried the same stillness she had felt in the dead zones under the city. Her throat tightened there, and the worker beside her began to cough.

She kept them out of those pockets.

Where cracks had opened and air came in from somewhere lower or higher, the air tasted less of old damp. It still smelled of iron and dust, but it moved.

She used those drafts.

A wall ahead showed a fresh crack.

It ran through brick rather than along mortar. The crack widened by a fraction with each tremor. A brick shifted outward and dropped onto the floor, breaking into two pieces.

Workers stepped back.

Reni halted, trowel braced against the stone.

A root cord pushed through.

It was not a fine thread from a broken pot. This one came thick, finger-width at first and then thicker as more of it pressed through. It forced a second brick outward. The brick fell and shattered.

The root cord pressed into the corridor air, damp with sap.

No one touched it.

They watched the gap widen as the brick bond failed.

Then a worker with a stave moved in close and used the stave to lever loose bricks away from the edge, careful not to put his hands into the crack.

“It’s a way through,” he said.

Another worker, younger, laughed again, a short sharp sound. “Of course it is.”

They passed through the new opening one by one.

The other side was a narrower service run with a low ceiling. It smelled of spilled vinegar and old cloth.

Reni looked back once.

Behind the root cord, the crack continued to widen. Brick dust fell in a steady trickle.

New openings cut routes sideways; old doors stuck; paths changed from one corridor to the next.

A mark was needed.

A scullery door stood open on the right. Inside, a slate board had been used for lists. A piece of chalk sat in a tray beside it.

Reni took the chalk.

Dust and dried blood coated her hands, and the chalk left white streaks across her palm.

At shoulder height she marked the stone.

An arrow. Then another.

In the corner of a wall where the plaster had fallen away she wrote: BOILER.

The letters were crude. They would be enough.

A tremor hit again.

Dust fell across the chalk line and dulled it.

She marked the arrow again.

A thought came then, sharp and unwanted.

Silas's body against the new trunk.

The torn coat. The head rolled to the side.

No breath.

Reni swallowed hard enough to hurt her throat.

She did not stop moving.

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The corridor that brought her back toward the courtyard ran beneath an arch of older stone, the blocks cut with a curve that had nothing imperial in it. Reni knew she was near the courtyard by the hum in the floor. It had a strength here that it did not have in the boiler lines.

She heard shouting before she saw anyone.

The sound came in bursts, cut by the crack of stone and the rattle of iron. The old palace had been built to carry voice. The Wards had flattened that into a dull quiet. Now noise carried again.

She kept to a side passage and looked through a gap where two walls met.

Prefect Hadrik Sorn stood in the corridor beyond.

He wore his oilcloth coat. His iron gorget sat at his throat. Dust had stuck to the oilcloth in pale streaks. In his hand he held an iron rod.

Around him, a squad of Iron-Eaters and soldiers tried to form a line.

They had set rods onto the stone floor with tips angled down into cracks where roots had started to press through. The spacing was measured, a pinning attempt with iron.

Sorn's mouth moved as he shouted.

Reni could not catch the words cleanly. The noise of cracking stone masked parts of them. She saw the gesture instead: a chopping motion, a command to hold position.

A root cord pushed up through a seam at the corridor edge.

It lifted a strip of mortar and shifted two floor blocks. The movement was small and then larger.

The rods began to vibrate.

At first the vibration looked like a tremor in the iron. Then it became violent. The shafts shook fast enough that the rod tips blurred.

A soldier tried to hold one down.

His hands clenched around the shaft. His knuckles went white.

The iron jumped.

Heat rose at the point of contact where his palm rubbed against the shaking metal. He jerked his hands back and stared at them.

His palms had reddened. The skin looked raw.

He dropped the rod.

Another soldier dropped his rod a moment later, hands held out, empty.

Sorn stepped forward.

He took a rod from a man who did not want to give it up and forced it into a wall seam where a root cord was emerging. The seam ran along mortar between two stone blocks. Sap showed at the edge.

He drove the rod in.

The iron bowed.

It did not bend in a slow arc. It kinked near his grip. The bend formed sharp.

Sorn tightened his hands.

The seam widened another fraction.

The rod snapped.

The broken end flew sideways and struck his forearm.

Reni saw the immediate damage: cloth torn, blood appearing in a line along his sleeve. He jerked his arm back and clenched his jaw. His posture did not fold, but the injury cost him speed.

He shouted again.

This time Reni heard a word.

“Retreat!”

The squad tried.

They turned toward the stairwell at the end of the corridor.

The stairwell had shifted.

One step sat higher than it should. The next sat lower. The risers did not align. A crack ran down one side where the wall had pulled away from the stairs.

Two soldiers ran onto the first step without looking.

The first caught his boot on the higher riser and pitched forward. His knee struck the edge of the next step.

The second soldier tried to avoid him and put his weight onto the wrong step.

Both fell.

Reni heard the sound of bone.

One man screamed and clutched his leg. The shape of the shin looked wrong under cloth.

The other lay still a moment with his face pressed to stone, then began to move and curse.

Sorn turned back, reaching for them.

Another tremor hit.

A conduit overhead burst.

It was not steam this time. It was hot water, metallic and dark.

The water poured down in a hard sheet from a split joint. It struck the floor and ran along the corridor slope. The smell hit Reni a moment later: iron and hot oil and something sharp.

Men slipped.

A soldier tried to grab a rod from the floor and his hand skidded on the wet stone. The rod slid away.

The corridor became slick.

Sorn stepped back to avoid the water and then lost footing anyway. He caught himself on the wall, hand smearing blood across the limewash.

He reached for the mouthpiece at his throat.

He put it to his lips and blew.

The tone that came out was thin, high, clipped by his breathing.

The hum under the floor did not change.

The rods still on the stone continued to shake.

No stabilisation came. No shift in the pattern of vibration.

Sorn blew again.

The sound vanished into the noise of water and cracking stone.

He opened his mouth and shouted, but his men were already scattering. His orders did not change what they did.

Reni watched long enough to see that the line would not form again.

The distraction was enough.

Behind her, workers waited in the side passage, bodies pressed to the wall. She had seen their faces: fear and the hunger to strike.

Reni shook her head once, a signal.

“Now,” she said.

She moved them through the new gap in the wall and along the chalk-marked route away from the corridor where Sorn's squad slipped on hot water.

No one cheered.

A runner stumbled when the floor tilted. Reni caught her sleeve and kept her moving.

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A side hall inside the palace had once carried officers with clean boots. Its floor had been kept clear of clutter. Now it held fallen plaster and a cracked chair.

Reni followed her chalk marks through two more turns before reaching it, keeping the workers tight behind her.

A door panel on the far side of the hall had split. The crack ran through the wood, and one section hung loose.

Reni stopped in the shadow of a pillar and looked through the crack.

General Valerius Odran stood inside.

His uniform was still neat in its cut, but dust had marked it. His posture was less controlled than it had been on the balcony. He held one gloved hand against his side for a moment, fingers pressing into the cloth; his breathing looked shallow. His other hand gestured at two officers.

His brass compass was not at his belt.

The iron measuring chain still hung there, links dark.

Reni could not hear every word, but she caught enough.

"Containment," Valerius said.

"Sub-basement," he said a moment later. "The chamber."

An officer answered, voice tight.

“Flooded,” he said. “Partly collapsed. The gear room, ”

Valerius cut him off with a sharp gesture.

“You will get me a route,” he said.

Another tremor ran through the hall floor.

Dust fell from the ceiling inside the room. One of the officers flinched and looked up.

“Sir,” the officer said again. “It’s not passable.”

Valerius’s jaw tightened. His mouth moved in a refusal.

“Then make it passable.”

Heat rose behind Reni’s ribs.

The trowel sat ready in her hand. Through the cracked panel she had a clear line at the back of Valerius’s head.

She could strike.

The motion ran through her arm: swing, release, impact.

Then breath sounded behind her.

Workers stood in the passage with her. A stable hand held a child against his chest. An older man had his hand on the wall, fingers spread to keep balance. A woman with straw in her hair watched Reni’s face.

If Reni attacked, Valerius’s officers would turn.

The door crack would widen. The passage would become a line of sight.

The workers behind her would be exposed.

Reni’s jaw clenched.

She pulled back from the crack.

“This way,” she said to the workers behind her, voice low. “Not here.”

A young man with a mallet in his hand made a sound of protest.

“That’s him,” he hissed.

“Yes,” Reni said.

She did not add what he deserved. There was no time for deserving.

“You want to die in this corridor,” she said, “or you want to get them out?”

She pointed down the alternate passage with chalk marks.

They moved.

As they passed the hall, the floor buckled.

A root surge travelled under the stone.

The hall blocks lifted along a seam that ran between Valerius and the officers nearest the door. The crack opened with a sharp snap. A strip of mortar fell out.

Valerius stepped back.

An officer on the other side stumbled as the floor shifted.

The crack widened. A ridge lifted between them; officers on the far side hesitated and moved without waiting.

Down the corridor behind Reni, servants acted.

A door to a side room opened and two servants shoved a table out. The table legs scraped on stone. They pushed it hard against the doorframe of another room where soldiers had retreated.

A bench followed.

They wedged the bench against the table, using the wall brace as leverage.

The soldiers inside shouted.

The servants did not answer.

They shoved a sideboard into place and then stepped back, faces grey with dust.

Reni moved the stable hands past the barricade.

The child pressed his face into the man's shoulder and did not look up. The older man's steps were small and careful.

"Hold the wall," Reni said to him. "Don't go under the cracked arch."

The older man nodded once.

A tremor hit again. A ceiling joint above a side door shed grit.

Reni guided them under a lower arch where the stone blocks looked sounder.

Gunfire sounded in the distance.

Then it thinned.

One shot. Then silence. Then a shout.

Rifles that had been firing across sight-lines in the courtyard and along the straight service runs were failing. Dust and vibration jammed mechanisms. Walls and doors had shifted enough to break the old lines of fire.

The violence did not end.

It moved closer.

A scream echoed from a corridor two turns away. It did not carry as a clean word.

A mallet struck something hard. The sound travelled through the stone and up into Reni's teeth.

Reni kept the stable hands moving.

When she reached a junction where she could send them toward open air, she stopped.

She looked back the way she had come.

Imperial control was gone. So was any other.

The palace had broken into pockets: workers moving people, workers hunting soldiers, soldiers trapped behind furniture, officers separated by cracks.

She could not see the courtyard from here, but she could feel the hum through the stone and she could hear the crack of paving.

That did not mean safety.

It meant the next deaths would come from collapsing ceilings and scalding pipes rather than from an officer's shouted order.

Reni turned toward the courtyard-side route.

She did not say Silas's name.

She did not let herself.

She marked one more arrow with chalk and moved.

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By the time she reached open air again, the light had changed.

Smoke still hung in places, but it no longer sat in a flat layer. It broke and drifted. In some yards it cleared enough to show the full height of a wall. In others it thickened where a fire had started in a kitchen dump.

Workers and civilians had pushed into open spaces.

A side yard beside the palace wall had once been kept empty for sight-lines. It had been a clean run of stone where a soldier could see from one end to the other.

Now the stone was uneven.

Cracks ran across it. Blocks had lifted at corners. A ridge had formed along a seam where a root cord ran underneath.

People stepped carefully, adjusting their feet.

A civilian woman in a patched coat carried a basket and kept her eyes on the lifted stones. A man hauled a sack over his shoulder and moved fast, head low.

A group of workers stood around a supply wagon that had been trapped when the roadbed shifted.

The wagon's wheel had sunk into a depression. The axle sat crooked. Crates lay scattered.

The workers had rope.

They looped it around the wagon frame and around an iron post that had once held an inspection tag. Two men used poles as levers under the wheel rim. Another braced his shoulder against the wagon side.

They pulled together.

The wagon shifted by a handwidth.

A woman shouted, "Again!"

They pulled again.

The wheel lifted free of the depression and rolled onto a flatter patch of stone. The wagon did not right itself fully, but it moved enough to free the crates under it.

No one lifted a crate.

They opened them.

One crate held tins of preserved meat. Another held sacks of grain.

A worker cut a sack open with a knife and began filling smaller cloth bags. A civilian boy held one bag open with both hands.

Reni came into the yard on the edge of this work.

The trowel hung in her hand. The handle had left a bruise against her palm from being used as a crutch.

A worker looked up at her.

“Barracks on the outer street still have a line,” he said, breathless. “They’re firing from the frames.”

Reni glanced toward the wall line where the outer street lay beyond.

She could not see the frames from this yard. She could hear the distant crack of a rifle once, then nothing.

“Don’t go at them,” she said.

The worker’s eyes narrowed. “Then what?”

“Send runners,” Reni said. “Find out where the line is and where the cracks are. If the street lifts under them, they’ll break on their own.”

Another worker, older, nodded. “Runners.”

Two younger men stepped forward. One had a cut on his cheek. The other held a stave.

Reni pointed. “You. Go. Don’t fight. Watch and come back.”

They hesitated, then went.

On the far side of the yard, soldiers stood with their backs to a wall.

Three of them had dropped their rifles.

The rifles lay on the stone, barrels pointed away. The soldiers’ hands were empty.

One said, “We can’t get out.”

A worker with a mallet spat on the ground.

Another soldier tried to climb.

He had found a section of wall where the stone blocks offered shallow holds. He put his boot onto a seam and pulled himself up.

The seam shifted.

His boot slipped. He fell back and caught himself on a root cord that had pushed through mortar near the base of the wall.

Vines had forced through the mortar seams along the wall line.

They were not ornamental. They grew where the mortar had loosened, thin at first and then thicker as more length emerged. They crossed the openings of a cannon port further along the wall.

The port shutters could not be opened.

A heavy weapon inside the port could not be rolled out. The embrasure was choked by vine and by shifted stone.

The soldier dropped back to the ground and stepped away from the vines, breathing hard.

He looked for another way.

There was none.

Reni watched the surrendered soldiers a moment and then turned to the supplies.

“Don’t stack it here,” she said.

A woman with red hands looked up. “Where else?”

“Out,” Reni said. “To the yards that aren’t under the palace walls. To the street where the ridge is already up. If you keep it in the palace, someone will start guarding it.”

The woman blinked. She grabbed a sack and began filling smaller bags.

Workers moved the food in quick loads. They used baskets, aprons, anything that could carry.

No one asked permission.

Reni stepped aside to let a runner pass with a bag of grain held to his chest.

Her leg shook when she put weight on it. She leaned a shoulder against the wall and breathed through her nose.

The wind strengthened.

It moved smoke away from the yard in uneven bands. It revealed, for a moment, the line of the main courtyard wall.

Above broken masonry, a trunk rose.

Reni could see it from here, though the view was partial. The trunk was thicker now than it had been when she last saw it through the service door. Bark ridges ran along its surface. Leaves clustered higher up, lifted into colder air.

Her throat closed.

She did not walk toward it yet.

A movement on the near side of the yard caught her eye.

Bera Noll stood among the workers.

Her forearms were still bruised. Dust had settled in the folds of her apron. She held a small bucket and watched the flow of people with the same quiet attention she had shown at the inspection line.

Bera looked at Reni.

She nodded once.

The nod closed something without speeches. It did not erase the baton strike. It did not make them friends.

Reni nodded back.

A runner came in from the passage. He was panting.

“Outer street,” he said. “The line’s thin. They’re backing.”

Reni did not ask why. The result was the same.

“Keep watching,” she said. “Don’t chase.”

She moved to the wall where she could sit without blocking traffic.

Her body reached the limit it had been ignoring.

She slid down to sit, back against stone.

The trowel lay across her lap. Her hands rested on it.

They shook.

Not only from pain. Not only from fatigue.

Her fingers trembled in small jerks, and she pressed them down harder on the trowel handle to stop the movement.

She breathed through her nose and counted, the way she counted exits, the way she counted boot rhythms.

One breath. Two.

She could taste blood at the back of her mouth from old bitten skin.

The hum under the yard remained low.

No one cheered.

A child ran past with a bag of grain and nearly tripped on a lifted stone. His mother grabbed his sleeve and pulled him upright without striking him.

A worker shouted for more rope.

A surrendered soldier sat with his head against the wall and stared at his empty hands.

Reni did not stay seated.

If she stayed, someone else would decide where the food went, where the people moved, who died under which wall.

She put the trowel handle to the stone and used it to push herself up.

Her leg protested. She kept her jaw locked until the pain settled into a workable line.

Standing cost effort. The courtyard lay ahead.

The route there was not straight anymore. It wound through broken yards and cracked corridors.

Reni held the trowel in her right hand and the chalk in her left.

She walked.

She did not run.

She moved toward the place where Silas had fallen, toward the cost she had kept out of her mind because there had been too many living bodies to carry.

The trunk rose above the wall line in brief glimpses as smoke shifted.

Reni kept her eyes on the ground and on the cracks, and she kept moving toward the courtyard entrance.

# Chapter 14

## The Harvest

The street that led away from the palace side yards had once been straight enough that a man could march it with eyes forward. The direct arch to the courtyard had jammed; the only clear run bent her out along the side yards and into the street before turning back.

Now each slab required testing before she shifted her weight.

Reni walked with her weight kept over her back foot, testing each slab before she committed. The limestone paving had lifted into ridges along seams that ran at angles under the imperial grid. Mortar had crumbled out in strips. In several places the ridge rose to the height of her boot, and she had to turn her foot sideways to step over without catching.

A sharp pull ran through her thigh when she lifted her leg. The sap seal had kept the wound closed, but the skin around it stayed tight and sore, and her leg did not accept a long stride. She kept her pace even, because a stumble on the ridged stone would cost more than time.

The trowel sat at her belt under the edge of her coat, handle worn smooth by another hand. She had kept it there through the palace corridors and yards, using it for pointing and for leverage. The bruising in her palm had darkened into a broad patch. When her fingers began to shake again, she wrapped them around the handle to stop them.

Ahead, a section of barracks wall had come down.

The imperial barracks frames had been set into older basalt with iron bolts and straight plates. The roofline was iron and timber, the walls pale stone. One corner had collapsed outward into the street. The fall had left a fan of broken blocks, splintered beams, and a bent iron brace with rivets

still intact.

People were already at work.

Two civilians in patched coats had a beam lifted on their shoulders, faces clenched, knees bent. A worker with a mallet used the mallet head as a lever under a slab, prising it up a fraction. Another man pushed a wedge of wood into the gap and then pushed a second wedge beside it. The slab rose by a handwidth.

Under it, a body moved.

The man pinned beneath had his face turned into grit. Blood ran from his nose, not fast, and gathered in the dust at the edge of his lip. His eyes were open and unfocused.

“Don’t yank him,” a woman said, voice rough. She held a strip of cloth in both hands, ready. “If his leg’s trapped, you’ll tear it.”

A boy beside her stared at the man under the slab. He was old enough to carry a bucket, too young to understand what he was watching without asking questions he would not ask.

The slab rose another fraction.

The woman pushed the cloth under the man’s shoulder, then pulled it back out. It came away dark.

“Beam,” she said. “On three.”

They lifted again.

The man under the slab made a noise. It was not a word.

No one spoke. The beam creaked, and someone swore under their breath.

Reni kept moving along the edge of the work, staying clear of the broken blocks and the people bent over them. If she stopped, she would be pulled in to lift, and there was no wrong in lifting; but she had other work. There were too many bodies under too many walls. If she took one,

the next would still be there.

A shout came from the corner of a courtyard where the barracks gate had been.

A cluster of people stood around a low wall that had once held a line of potted shrubs for show. The pots were shattered now. Soil and roots lay across the stones.

Three soldiers sat with their backs to the wall.

Their rifles lay on the ground two paces away, barrels turned aside. Their hands were empty. One had a strip of cloth tied around his forearm where blood had soaked through the sleeve. Another kept his chin tucked to his chest, staring at the ridged paving between his boots. The third looked at the crowd with raw fear and something stubborn beneath it.

A worker with a stave stood guard, the stave held across his thighs. Another worker had a cleaver at his side, blade down.

“They shot into the yard,” someone said.

“They can’t shoot now,” someone else replied.

“That’s not the point,” a third voice said, sharp. “They did it. They’ll do it again if you let them walk.”

A woman with flour still on her sleeves pushed forward. “Kill them. Do it now.”

A man answered her, older, face grey with dust. “And then what? You think the outer barracks will fold because you split three throats?”

“They’ll know,” the woman said. “They’ll know it’s finished.”

“They’ll know you did it,” the older man said. “They’ll call it proof you’re animals. They’ll bring wagons and chains from somewhere that still runs.”

“From where?” a young man demanded. He had a mallet in his hand and blood on his knuckles. “The pylons are dead. The frames are broken.

You think there's a clean line out?"

"Someone will come," the older man said.

"Or they won't," the woman with flour said. "We still have to live in this place."

Reni stopped at the edge of the crowd.

She did not lift the trowel. She did not push through.

A soldier looked up, saw her, and then looked at the trowel handle at her belt.

His eyes went away again.

The trowel was not a weapon in the way a rifle was. Workers' eyes went to the trowel handle; a few of them shifted aside to let her through.

Reni spoke to the older man, because his voice had been about what came after.

"Bind them," she said.

The older man's gaze snapped to her. "And feed them?"

"Bind them," she repeated. "Keep them alive. If you kill them, do it later, with someone watching who didn't lose a brother this morning."

A murmur went through the crowd.

"Who are you?" the flour woman demanded.

Reni met her eyes. "No one," she said. "I'm walking."

The flour woman opened her mouth, then shut it.

The street beyond the courtyard ran toward the inspection pylons that had once marked the clean edges of control. The nearest pylon stood crooked now. Its iron collar had pulled away from its mount, bolts bent. The lamp at its top was dark.

Another pylon further down the line was also dark.

A boy pointed at it and said, "It's out."

A man answered him, voice low. “They’re all out. From the river wall to the rose allotments. No pulse. No colour.”

Reni listened without looking back.

In the years under the Wards, smoke had settled low, making a flat band under the eaves. It had stayed in place even when fires burned hard.

Now smoke moved.

Not in a smooth sweep, and not in one direction. It broke in bands and shifted around walls and ridges. It cleared in one yard and thickened in the next. A draught crossed Reni’s face between two leaning frames, cold enough to dry the sweat at her temples.

It smelled less of old damp.

It still smelled of iron and dust. The change was not clean. It was only different.

The Wards were not merely damaged.

The old air had sat still; she had known where it would hold. Now drafts crossed her face in uneven bands, and smoke did not stay put.

Reni passed a break in the wall where a conduit had burst earlier. Dark water had cut a shallow channel through loosened grit and mortar, and the channel still ran, thinner now. Someone had pulled a plate aside, exposing older stonework beneath the imperial line.

The water in the older cut looked clearer than the water in the conduit channel. It was not clear. It carried silt, and it had a smell of wet stone. But it did not carry the strong metal taste that had coated her mouth in the underworks.

A pair of young men stood over it with buckets.

“One bucket each,” Reni said, without slowing. “Mark the route. Don’t drink from the conduit run. Bring it to the yard by the broken gate. Tell them it’s for the burned men and the children.”

One of the young men blinked at her. “Who says?”

Reni kept walking. “I do,” she said.

The other young man nodded once and lifted his bucket.

Further on, near an alley mouth, a stoker sat on a low stone step with his shirt pulled away from his shoulder.

Clem Varr’s brows were singed as they had been before, but the skin at his neck and shoulder was fresh-red in uneven patches. Cloth had stuck to some of it; someone had peeled the cloth away and left fibres behind. His heavy wool shirt had been cut open and hung loose.

He looked up when he heard Reni’s boots on stone.

His eyes went first to her leg, then to the trowel at her belt.

“Still upright,” he said.

“Barely,” Reni replied.

Clem’s mouth pulled into something that was not a smile. “Boilers?” he asked.

Reni stopped. The question was plain. It did not ask whether she had done well. It did not ask whether the palace had fallen. It asked whether the thing that scalded men and cooked them in their shirts would stop.

“Some gear’s seized,” she said. “A line burst. Men are shutting what they can. The worst of it’s already happened.”

Clem looked past her, toward the palace line. Smoke moved above it in drifting sheets. “Will it cool now?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” Reni said.

Clem nodded as if she had given him a number.

Someone behind him started to say, “He,” and then stopped.

Reni knew what the half-word had been. Praise. Gratitude. A story that could be told about a stoker who loosened a bolt.

Clem cut it off without looking.

“Water,” he said. “The metal water’ll make people sick if they drink it. Tell them to take the old cut by the burst plate. The one under the basalt. It tastes less wrong.”

“I’ve already sent buckets,” Reni said.

Clem’s gaze sharpened. “Good,” he said. “Then don’t stand here.”

Reni nodded once.

She stepped around him and kept moving.

The alley that had once connected cleanly to the courtyard service gate now ended in a ridge of lifted stone. A root cord ran through the crack at its crest. It was thick as a wrist, pressed against rubble. The gate itself had been forced open enough for people to slip through, but its hinges were skewed and packed.

Reni watched two men try to lift it further with a pole. The pole slipped. The men swore and dropped it.

The route that used to be open ended at a ridge, and the wall beside it had a gap where bricks had been pushed out by roots. People were already using that gap, sacks on their backs, while a stair nearby ended in a broken drop where the landing had collapsed.

She had marked corridors with chalk in the palace. Out here there was too much open air for chalk to stay meaningful; dust would coat it, rain would wash it.

The city would have to be walked again.

Maps would not match until someone spent days counting ridges and gaps and sound stone.

Reni did not have days.

She turned toward the palace courtyard.

Silas’s body was still there, unless someone had already claimed it.

In the tunnels she had watched people strip hair and buttons from the dead; she would not leave him for that. Ysolde's people had talked about pits and charms and relics as if they were wages. If his body stayed lodged in the tree, someone would build a story that suited them.

Reni adjusted the trowel at her belt so it would not snag if she had to climb.

She set her foot on the next ridge and kept walking.

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She cut through the gap where the wall had sheared and stepped into the side yard.

A side yard lay between the palace wall and a service block that had once held stores.

It had been used for barrels and crates and for the slow movement of labour. Now it was filled with debris and with men who had stopped running because there was nowhere left that ran true.

Reni stepped through a broken doorframe where plaster dust had settled in drifts.

A man raised a stave at her, then saw the trowel and lowered it.

"Over there," he said, voice hoarse. "He's over there."

Reni followed his gesture.

General Valerius Odran lay half-sitting against a cracked wall, forced into the yard when the hall buckled.

His uniform was torn at the side and dusty. One glove was gone. Blood had dried along the edge of his jaw. His iron measuring chain still hung at his belt, links dark, and it had caught on something, pulled taut.

Roots had grown around him.

Not around his throat. Not through his mouth. They had grown where gaps existed: along mortar lines, between fallen blocks, across the seam where wall met ground. They had thickened into a brace that pinned his legs and held his torso against the wall. One cord crossed his hips. Another ran under his arm and up along his ribs. The pressure of them kept him from slipping fully down.

It was a restraint built by growth and by the shape of the broken yard.

Valerius turned his head when he heard boots.

His eyes fixed on Reni.

For a moment he stared at her face as if he were trying to match it to a file. Then his gaze went to the trowel handle and the dirt at her knee.

“You,” he said.

Reni did not answer.

A worker beside her spat on the ground.

“There he is,” the worker said. “There’s your measure-man.”

Another worker pushed forward with a mallet.

His hands were raw. The mallet head was chipped. He lifted it with both hands and stepped toward Valerius.

Valerius’s gaze flicked to the mallet and then away, scanning the roots, the wall, the angle of his own legs.

He tried to move.

The root brace did not allow it. His shoulder shifted a fraction. His breath caught, and his mouth tightened.

He looked down at the root cord at his hip as if it were a beam laid badly.

“Load-bearing,” he said, not to anyone in particular.

The worker with the mallet laughed once. “Hear that? He’s still counting.”

Valerius lifted his head. “You are in a collapse zone,” he said. His voice was dry. “If you strike the wall, ”

“Shut up,” the mallet worker said.

Others shouted.

“Do it!”

“Split his skull!”

“Make him watch it end!”

“Now!”

Reni stepped forward.

She did not lift the trowel. She lifted her hand.

“Stop,” she said.

The mallet worker’s head snapped toward her. His eyes were bloodshot. Dust coated his cheeks in pale lines where sweat had run.

“What?” he demanded.

Reni moved between him and Valerius.

The distance was small. The mallet’s arc would have taken her head as easily as Valerius’s if he swung without thought.

She did not flinch.

“Not here,” she said.

A woman behind her hissed, “Let him.”

Reni kept her eyes on the mallet worker. “If you kill him in this yard,” she said, “they’ll use it. They’ll say you took a bound man and beat him to death for a crowd.”

The worker's jaw clenched. "What do I care what they say? He killed us."

"They'll send another commander," Reni said. "Another chain. Another mouthpiece. If you want him dead, let the city decide. Not you with a mallet while everyone's watching."

A man at the edge of the group shouted, "The city? What city? The pylons are out. The frames are down. We're standing in rubble."

Reni turned her head slightly, enough to answer without losing sight of the mallet.

"That's still a city," she said.

"You're soft," a young man said. He had a cleaver. He kept his thumb on the back of the blade as if he meant to use it.

Reni looked at him.

"I'm not soft," she said. Her voice stayed low, because loud voices made people into crowds. "I'm tired of people using bodies to make speeches."

The young man's eyes narrowed. "He's not a speech," he said. "He's him."

"He's both," Reni replied.

Valerius drew breath.

"I can offer," he began.

"Don't," Reni said, without looking at him.

Valerius's mouth closed.

Reni faced him then.

He was close enough that she could see the fine grit caught in his eyelashes.

He tried to straighten, and the root brace stopped him again. His breathing was shallow. His hand twitched near his belt where the chain hung.

“I can offer safe passage,” he said, forcing the words out. “A withdrawal order. Rations. A written,”

Reni shook her head once.

“No bargains,” she said.

Valerius stared at her. “You don’t understand what you’ve done,” he said. “This is structural failure. This is not,”

“It’s done,” Reni said. “And you don’t get to buy yourself out of it with words in a yard.”

The mallet worker made a sharp sound of frustration.

Reni turned back to him. “Lower it,” she said.

He hesitated.

His arms trembled with the effort of holding the mallet up and the effort of not bringing it down.

A woman behind him called, “Coward.”

Reni watched the mallet worker’s eyes. At the word, his shoulders jerked.

He lowered the mallet by degrees.

It was not a clean surrender. It was a decision made with clenched teeth.

Reni nodded once.

She pointed at two people in the crowd. “You,” she said, to a woman with a bucket and to a man with a pry bar. “Stay. Watch him.”

The man with the pry bar frowned. “With what?”

“With tools,” Reni said. “Not a knife. Not a mallet. If the wall shifts, you move him enough that it doesn’t take you with it. If he faints, you give him water. If someone comes to kill him, you stop them and you shout.

“And if he tries to get out?” the woman demanded.

Reni looked at the root brace. She looked at the cracked wall.

“If he gets out,” she said, “you’ll hear it.”

Valerius’s eyes followed her gaze to the roots.

His mouth tightened.

He looked as if he wanted to speak again, to start naming loads and spans as if the right terms would change the hands around him. His throat moved with a swallow.

There was no solution that did not require other people to act for him.

Reni stepped back.

The mallet worker shifted as if to block her path.

Reni met his eyes. “Save your strength,” she said. “There are people under walls.”

His face tightened. He looked away.

Reni turned and walked out of the yard.

Her hands began to shake once she had cleared the doorway.

Her breath came shallow, and her jaw stayed tight.

She pressed her fingers around the trowel handle at her belt until the tremor eased.

Then she kept walking toward the courtyard.

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The palace courtyard had been built for flatness and for sight-lines.

It was not flat now.

Reni stepped through a gap where the gate had once stood straight. The iron posts leaned slightly. One hinge strap had pulled away from the stone and sat at an angle. The paving inside rose in ridges that ran toward the centre, and roots crossed the surface in cords, some half-buried in mortar lines, some exposed where blocks had lifted.

The young World-Tree stood at the centre above the King's Stone.

Its trunk had thickened again since Reni last saw it close. Bark ridges ran up the trunk in uneven bands. New growth had packed into cracks in the paving around it, forcing stones apart and leaving a ring of broken limestone.

The low hum underfoot remained.

Not sharp, not high. It ran through her boots and into her leg. It ran under the paving with each step.

A soldier's transport cage lay canted near the edge of the courtyard where it had jammed. Its wheel was wedged against a lifted stone. Leather straps hung loose.

No one was trying to move it.

People stood at the edges of the courtyard in uneven groups.

Workers with mallets.

Civilians with sacks.

A few soldiers, disarmed, held in a line near a wall.

No officer voice carried over the noise of cracking stone and distant shouts.

Reni did not look long at any of them.

Her eyes went to the trunk.

Silas's body was not on the ground.

For a moment she could not see him.

Then she saw the cloth.

A strip of his coat had snagged in a fork of bark and root where the trunk split into a thick branch low to the ground. The cloth was torn. His body lay slumped into the fork, chest turned outward, legs hanging. It was not a display arranged by human hands. It was a consequence of rapid growth and of fabric catching on ridges.

Reni stopped.

Her throat tightened. She swallowed hard enough to make her jaw ache.

A worker near the edge of the courtyard murmured, "Look."

Another voice answered, "Martyr."

Reni turned her head sharply.

"Keep back," she said.

A man with a mallet lifted his chin. "We're not touching," he said.

"Then don't stand here talking," Reni replied. "It's not stable."

The man's eyes narrowed. "It's a tree."

"It cracked this yard," Reni said. "Stay back."

She did not give them time to argue.

She walked toward the trunk.

The ground between her and the tree rose and dipped. Roots formed ridges that offered holds, but they also offered traps. Her leg pulled with each step. She placed her foot against a ridge, tested, and shifted her weight over it.

At the base of the trunk, she put her hand on the bark.

It was firm.

Sap had dried in some grooves. The surface had a dampness in others where growth had pushed recently through split stone and mortar.

Reni set her other hand higher, fingers finding a ridge.

She began to climb.

She used the root ridges and bark bands as holds. She did not move fast. A sharp pull ran through her thigh when she lifted her leg, and she kept her knee close to the trunk to reduce strain.

A man at the edge of the courtyard called, "Let us, "

"No," Reni said, without turning. "If it shifts and someone falls, you'll land on roots and stone. Stay back.

She climbed higher.

Silas's body hung in the fork, head turned to the side.

His face was slack.

The calm in it was not peace. It was the absence of breath.

Blood had dried along the bark grooves beneath him. It had run in thin lines and then stopped. Dirt and grit had stuck to it.

Reni reached the fork and braced herself.

Silas's coat had snagged on a bark ridge at his shoulder. The cloth had torn but not enough to free him. One sleeve had twisted around a root spur.

She took her knife from its sheath.

She cut the cloth.

The blade moved through wool and linen with a dull resistance. The cut was clean enough.

Silas's body shifted.

Reni caught him under the arm and pulled him toward her, holding him against the trunk so he would not drop.

His hands were still stained with soil.

It was under his nails and in the creases of his knuckles, as it had been in the cellar. Seeing it made her blink and hold her breath.

She drew breath through her nose, slow.

“Rope,” she called down.

A stable hand below, a broad-shouldered man with straw still caught in his hair, looked up.

He had a coil of rope over his shoulder.

“Here,” he shouted.

He threw the coil. It hit a root ridge, then slid.

Reni reached down and caught it on the second throw.

She looped the rope around a thick root spur below the fork and tied it off with a knot that would hold under weight.

She did not trust her leg to carry his full weight down the trunk without help.

She threaded the rope under Silas’s arms and around his chest, keeping it tight enough that his body would not swing.

“Two on the rope,” she called. “Slow.

The stable hand and another worker took the rope ends below.

Reni began to lower Silas in stages. The rope’s fibres bit into her palms when his weight shifted a hand’s width.

She guided his shoulders away from snag points. She cut another strip of cloth where it caught. The rope took the weight. The men below kept tension.

Silas’s boots brushed bark.

Reni watched his face as it passed her level.

His mouth was slightly open.

His split lip from the beating had healed into a pale line, not fully smooth.

She swallowed again.

When his body reached the lower ridges, Reni climbed down beside him.

Her thigh shook when she stepped onto the ground.

The stable hand and the second worker eased Silas onto a patch of broken limestone where the roots had lifted the stones but left a shallow basin.

Reni knelt.

She did not touch his face.

She touched his shoulder instead, through the cloth, and then took her hand away.

A soldier at the edge of the courtyard took a step forward.

Reni looked up.

“Don’t,” she said.

The soldier stopped.

A worker behind him said, “He’s ours.”

Reni stood.

“Two of you,” she said, to the stable hand and the second worker. “Help me carry him.”

The stable hand nodded.

They lifted Silas by the rope sling and under the knees. His body was light in a way that made the act worse.

Reni walked at his side, keeping her eyes on the ridged paving.

They carried him out of the courtyard.

They did not carry him toward the tree.

They carried him toward the palace wall's outer line where, beyond it, a remnant of orchard still stood in a strip of ground the Empire had not fully scraped and paved.

At a store room door along the way, Reni stopped.

The door had been forced earlier. Inside were shelves of folded linen. Clean.

The palace had kept its cloth clean while Sector Four had used boiled strips until they tore.

Reni pulled out a length of linen.

A worker beside her hesitated. "That's theft," he said.

Reni looked at him. "They kept this stacked while he bled on stone," she said.

The worker's mouth tightened. He did not argue again.

They wrapped Silas in the linen.

It was not ceremony. It was containment. It kept his arms from flopping as they carried him. It kept his blood and soil from smearing into every hand.

When they were done, Reni tied the linen with a strip torn from an imperial apron.

Then they carried him onward.

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Beyond the palace wall the ground changed.

The stone gave way to a strip of thawing soil where grass grew in patches. A few old fruit trees stood there, cut back hard years ago and

then left to fend for themselves. Their trunks were rough. Their lower branches had been stripped of bark in places, either by hunger or by spite. One still held buds at its tips.

The soil was damp.

Reni knelt and pressed her fingers into it.

It gave under pressure, not deep, but enough.

A shallow grave would be possible.

Workers arrived with spades taken from somewhere behind the palace stores. The spades were chipped and notched.

Reni used the trowel.

She scraped at the tight edge near a root of one of the old orchard trees, careful not to cut it. The trowel's edge bit into soil and small stones.

A man with a spade drove his blade down and levered up a wedge of earth.

The work was slow.

Thawing soil still held winter's stiffness beneath the surface, and the ground resisted in layers.

They dug until the hole was long enough and deep enough for a wrapped body.

Not deep.

Reni's shoulders ached. Her thigh burned with each shift of weight.

She did not stop.

A voice called from the path that led toward the broken outer walls.

"Easy," it said. "Easy there."

Reni looked up.

A small group approached.

They carried bundles of cloth and bags tied with cord. One man carried a sack that bulged with what looked like seed. A woman at the front wore a faded green scarf wrapped around her hair.

Her hands were stained with fruit tannins so deeply that the colour had settled into the lines of her palms.

She stopped at the orchard edge and looked first toward the palace.

The World-Tree's upper growth was visible above the wall line, leaves lifted into the open air.

Then the woman's gaze dropped to the wrapped body on the ground.

"Who's that?" she asked.

Reni stood, trowel in hand.

"Silas Greyth," she said.

The woman's face stayed still.

"Greyth," she repeated. "The rose man.

Reni nodded once.

The woman stepped closer. Her boots were muddy. She moved with the caution of someone who had slept outside and learned to keep weight under control.

"Seret Wain," she said, by way of introduction, as if names still mattered enough to be exchanged.

Reni did not give her own name. It did not feel useful.

Seret's eyes stayed on the linen bundle.

"Who was he?" she asked.

A worker behind Reni answered too fast. "A martyr."

Another voice spat, "A collaborator."

Reni lifted her hand.

“Both,” she said.

Seret looked at her. “That’s a convenient answer,” she said.

“It’s not convenient,” Reni replied. “It’s what he was. He gave them the Orchard Registry. He fed the sapling with his blood. He walked into their courtyard and broke the pot himself. They shot him. He kept his hands in the seam until he stopped moving.

Seret listened without changing her expression.

When Reni finished, Seret nodded once.

“His sacrifice doesn’t cancel the apprentices,” Seret said.

Reni’s throat tightened.

Seret’s voice stayed level. “People will try to make it cancel them. They’ll try to tell a clean story. A man redeems himself and the debt is paid.

“It’s not paid,” Reni said.

“No,” Seret replied. “And if you bury him under a banner you help the lie.

A worker behind Reni said, “He deserves a mark.”

Seret turned her head. “He deserves memory,” she said. “Not a shrine.

Reni looked down at the linen bundle.

Silas’s cane lay on the ground beside him, metal ferrule marked with dust.

Reni had carried it out from the courtyard along with his body. She had not thought about what to do with it until now.

Seret’s gaze followed hers.

“Do you know their names?” Seret asked.

“The apprentices,” Reni said.

Reni swallowed.

She had known there had been apprentices. Silas had spoken about them in fragments, in words that came out when he was pressed and when he had no reason to defend himself with silence.

Reni had never demanded their names.

She had been busy surviving. Busy moving. Busy making the next turn.

Now her tongue stuck to her teeth.

“I know some,” she said.

Seret waited.

Reni spoke slowly.

“Joryn,” she said. “And Kel. There was a girl, I think, Ma... Maera. He said a name like that. And Tomr. He said Tomr once when he was half out of breath in a dead zone.

Her mouth went dry.

“There were more,” she said. “He didn’t say all of them. Or I didn’t ask.

Heat gathered under her ribs. She swallowed twice before she could go on.

Seret nodded. “Say what you have,” she said.

Reni forced herself to continue.

“Brann,” she said. “Ari. Those might be wrong. He spoke fast when he spoke at all. I didn’t,”

Her voice caught.

“I didn’t ask until it was too late,” she said.

No one filled the silence with comfort.

The workers shifted their weight. A spade blade scraped lightly on stone.

Seret did not look away.

“That’s how it happens,” she said. “People talk about resistance and forget the names of the dead unless they can be used.

Reni’s fingers tightened around the trowel handle.

Seret turned her head toward the palace wall again, toward the leaves above it.

“That tree,” she said. “It will be guarded.

Reni lifted her chin. “Yes.

Seret’s eyes narrowed. “By whom?” she asked.

Reni hesitated.

The easiest answer was to say, by her.

It would have made her important.

It would also have made her a target and a tyrant in another shape.

“By people,” Reni said. “Workers. Exiles. Whoever stays.

“A council,” Seret said.

Reni nodded once. “Shared watching,” she said. “Yes.

“And no cutting,” Seret said.

Reni’s jaw tightened. “No cutting,” she agreed.

A man behind them, one of the workers who had carried Silas, said, “A branch would feed a hundred charms.

Reni turned sharply.

Seret spoke first. “And it would feed a hundred lies,” she said.

The man’s mouth tightened. “It’s power,” he said.

“It’s a living thing,” Reni said.

The words came out in Silas’s cadence, and the similarity in cadence made her flinch.

The man looked away.

Another worker, younger, said, “We could hang his coat on the courtyard gate. Let them see what it cost.

Seret’s head snapped toward him.

“No,” she said.

The young worker blinked. “Why not?”

“Because opportunists will kneel under it,” Seret said. “Because someone will start charging for the privilege of touching it. Because boys will line up to swear at cloth while their sisters have no bread.

The young worker flushed. “It’s respect,” he muttered.

Seret’s voice stayed level. “If you want respect, take two spades and shore that wall by the path. Bring water from the old cut, not the conduit. Then come back and help plant.

She pointed at the grave.

“Unmarked,” she said. “For now. Let the ground take him without a sign. If someone wants to remember, let them remember in their own head.

Reni breathed out.

Her jaw clenched.

A clean marker would have given her something to point at.

An unmarked patch of soil meant she had to hold the memory without help.

Reni crouched by Silas’s cane.

She lifted it and laid it beside the linen bundle for a moment.

The ferrule touched the cloth.

Then she picked the cane up again.

She tucked it under her arm.

“I’m not burying it,” she said.

Seret watched her. “Why?”

“Because it’s a tool,” Reni said. “And because I’ll forget if I don’t carry it.

Seret nodded once.

From her own bundle, Seret pulled out a small sack tied with cord.

She held it out.

Reni took it automatically, then paused.

“What is it?” she asked.

“Seeds,” Seret said. “Greens. Fast ones. And beans if the thaw holds.

Reni’s fingers tightened on the sack. It was heavier than it looked.

Seret’s eyes stayed on her. “Plant greens and beans that could be eaten within a fortnight,” she said. “If the thaw holds, plant more. Don’t waste ground on show.

Reni nodded once.

“I will,” she said.

Seret stepped back and looked at the grave again.

“Put him in,” she said.

The workers lifted the linen bundle.

Reni took one end, despite her leg. A sharp pain ran through her thigh, and she kept her jaw locked.

They lowered Silas into the grave.

The linen scraped against damp soil.

Reni's breath came short. She did not look at his face again. There was no need. The shape of him was enough.

They pushed soil back in.

Spadeful by spadeful.

The earth was damp and heavy. It thudded onto the linen and then softened as it settled.

When the grave was filled, Reni and Seret knelt.

They pressed the soil flat with their palms.

Damp loam stuck under their nails. Cold held in the soil through the thaw.

No one spoke a rite.

No one made a vow.

They pressed until the soil lay level with the surrounding ground.

Seret stood first.

"First task," she said.

Reni rose, cane under her arm, trowel still at her belt, seed sack in her hand.

"Routes," Reni said.

Seret nodded. "Map them again," she said. "And find the missing. Before anyone starts arguing over titles.

Reni looked toward the palace wall.

Leaves moved above it in the open air.

Smoke drifted in thin bands beyond the wall line.

Stair landings had dropped, and gate hinges sat skewed.

It still had to be walked.

Reni tightened her grip on the seed sack.

“Now,” she said.

Seret’s mouth tightened; she gave a small nod.

“Now,” she agreed.

# Chapter 15

## The First Fruit

Wind crossed the broken streets in uneven gusts.

Reni had learned, in the first days after the courtyard split, to judge where it would touch her face and where it would not. Between two collapsed frames the air came through cold and clean; in a lane where fallen lime blocks lay stacked at a slant the air barely reached her, and smoke from a cooking fire stayed close to the ground until someone walked through it.

Weeks had passed since Silas Greyth died on the Stone, but the streets still met at angles that did not match what her body expected. Thresholds sat too high or too low. Steps ended where floors had dropped.

Sector Four kept its old basalt where it could, with pale limestone patched over it in the ways the Empire had favoured. Those pale slabs were now out of level. Some had cracked into three or four pieces. Mortar had crumbled into grit that rolled under boots. Ridges ran through streets where straight lines used to be used for inspection and marching; people moved along those ridges because the stone there had already lifted and settled again, and because the low channels between them sometimes ran with dark water from burst conduit beds.

Reni walked with Silas's cane under her arm and the trowel at her belt, though she used the cane less than she had in the first days. The sap-sealed wound in her thigh had stopped bleeding quickly when Silas had torn a leaf for her, but the tightness had stayed. When she took too long a stride the seam pulled. She had learned to step with the leg slightly bent and to put her weight down carefully. She did it without thinking

now, and that fact made her watchful.

People walked routes that had not been there before.

A hole broken through a brick wall by a thick root cord had become a passage between a scullery yard and a street corner. A stair that once rose to an officer's landing ended in a broken drop, and someone had set a plank there, tied with rope to an iron strap that no longer sat flush in its stone. At the mouth of an alley, a service gate stood half closed with its hinge pin skewed; nobody forced it anymore. They climbed through a gap in the wall two paces away.

Chalk arrows marked the turns.

Some were Reni's, made with a scullery chalk stub that left a pale line on stone. Others had been added by different hands with different pressure: a thicker mark, an uncertain mark, a mark made too low where dust and boots rubbed it away.

Rope ran along the safer edges.

It was tied to iron posts where the posts still stood, and looped around the base of a broken frame where a hook had once held an inspection tag. In one place it was tied around the trunk of a stripped fruit tree in the orchard remnant beyond the palace wall, and from there it led back toward a distribution yard where water buckets stood in a line.

Reni followed the rope line toward the old stone cut.

The conduit water still ran in places, dark and metallic. People who drank it too quickly ended with stomach cramps and a grey film on their tongues. The old cut had been exposed by a burst plate and a section of undermined paving, and the water in it looked clearer, though it carried silt. It smelled of wet stone rather than iron.

Two boys were there with buckets when she arrived. One held a stick with a strip of cloth tied to it, a marker for those who did not read chalk. The other boy watched the street behind him, head turning to follow any sudden movement; his shoulders stayed lifted, ready to jump.

Reni stopped beside them.

“How many?” she asked.

The boy with the cloth marker said, “Four so far. Three went to the kitchens. One went to the burned man by the stair. Same two-bucket run.”

“Let it sit thirty breaths before you lift,” Reni said. She pointed with the trowel handle at the shallow edge where silt gathered. “Give it time to drop. Don’t stir it. Stand with it while it settles.”

The second boy frowned. “Why?”

“Because if you stir it, you carry grit into children; and if you leave it sitting unwatched, someone will decide it’s theirs,” Reni said.

The boy looked down at the water and then back up. “Soldiers?” he asked.

“Anyone,” Reni said.

They nodded as if that was not new information, and carried the buckets on.

“Two spans of the low bell, then trade off,” Reni called after them. “No one stands here until their arms shake.”

The cloth-marker boy lifted his stick once in answer.

Reni turned back along the rope line toward the palace.

The palace complex still stood in a shape that could be walked through, but it had changed into a place of gaps and ridges. Doors that once opened onto straight corridors now opened onto a step down where a floor had dropped. In some passages, plaster lay in sheets on the ground; in others it had been swept aside into corners, kept for later use in patching holes.

Hammering carried from a yard where people were shoring a wall with scavenged beams. A woman’s voice carried too, sharp with

instruction. Reni could not tell what district she had come from, only that she was not an officer and she was being obeyed.

Near the kitchen-service junction, Clem Varr stood with his shirt cut open again at the collar, the skin on his shoulder still raw from steam burns. He held a wrench in one hand and a length of rope in the other.

He saw Reni and lifted his chin.

“You’re still upright,” he said.

She looked at his burns. The skin was red and blistered in patches.

“So are you,” she said.

He made a short sound that might have been agreement.

“Boilers?” she asked.

Clem shook his head once. “The worst seized and split in the first hour. They’ve been bleeding heat since. We’ve shut what we can. The line’s unstable. Don’t send people down there.”

“I haven’t,” Reni said.

His eyes went past her toward the rope line.

“Good,” he said. “And don’t send them to chase the last soldiers in the outer barracks. I’ve heard that talk. They’ll die for a rifle that jams.”

Reni’s jaw set. “They’re talking,” she said.

Clem’s mouth tightened. “Of course they are. There’s nothing else to do with your mouth when you can’t sleep.”

Reni moved on.

At a service passage off the kitchens, a storeroom door stood half open.

It had been forced at some point, the latch splintered. The shelves inside were still stacked with sacks and tins, though the neatness had gone. Rope hung in a coil from a peg. A pile of folded cloth sat in a basket.

Voices came from inside.

Reni slowed.

“We found it,” a man said. “We cleared the door. We took the risk. That’s ours.”

A woman answered, “It’s palace stores. Palace stores fed the officers while my child ate peelings.”

The man’s voice rose. “And now you’ll take it all to the kitchens and it’ll vanish. Everyone takes a handful and no one sees it again.”

Reni stepped into the doorway.

Three people stood between the shelves and the door. One had a mallet tucked into his belt. Another held a length of rope in both hands, twisted tight as if he meant to use it to bind someone or to bar the door.

On the floor, a sack had been cut open. Grain had spilled in a pale spill across the stone.

Reni looked at the grain first.

“Don’t waste it,” she said.

The man with the rope stared at her. “Who are you?”

“No one,” Reni said, and stepped in.

She bent, scooped the grain back into the sack with both hands, and tied the mouth of it as best she could with a strip of rope.

The man with the mallet shifted. “You’re the one with the trowel,” he said.

Reni did not correct him.

“What do you want?” the rope man demanded.

“I want it moved,” Reni said.

The rope man shook his head. “It stays. We’ll ration it ourselves. We’ll feed our own.”

“And who is that?” Reni asked.

He opened his mouth and then shut it.

Reni waited, and in that pause the hammering outside kept going.

A second voice came from the passage behind Reni.

“Move,” Seret Wain said.

Reni stepped aside.

Seret entered, scarf tied over her hair, hands stained with tannin as if she had pressed fruit all her life and then rubbed her palms raw. She looked past the people in the doorway to the shelves.

“Grain,” she said. “Tin meat. Dried beans. Cloth.”

“It’s ours,” the mallet man said.

Seret turned her head toward him. “No,” she replied.

The mallet man’s face flushed. “You didn’t clear it,” he said. “You didn’t break the latch. You didn’t stand here when the soldiers were still in the yard.”

Seret’s gaze did not move.

“I stood in hunger outside your wall while you were inside it,” she said. “Don’t tell me what risk looks like.”

The rope man stepped forward, and Reni watched his feet on the spilled grain. He would slip if he lunged.

“Everyone’s talking about the kitchens,” he said. “It’s a good word. It makes you sound clean. But I’ve seen kitchens in this city. They’re a place where women work until they drop and men argue over the pot. I’m not giving my child to that.”

Seret nodded once. “Then stand in the kitchen and watch,” she said.

The rope man’s mouth tightened. “That’s not an answer.”

“It is,” Seret said. “You’re afraid it will go out the back door because you won’t be there when it’s ladled. So be there.”

The mallet man lifted his chin. “And if we refuse?”

Weight shifted onto Reni’s good leg.

“You can refuse,” she said. “Then you can sit in this room with sacks while people outside get pulled from walls. When they find you, they’ll take it anyway. And they’ll remember you held it behind a door.”

The rope man’s eyes went to the corridor.

“You threaten us,” he said.

Reni kept her voice low. “No,” she said. “I’m telling you what happens.”

Seret stepped closer to the shelves.

“We’re taking it because the kitchens can keep count,” she said. “Weigh it. Mark it. A pot can serve more mouths than this room.”

The rope man’s hands tightened.

Reni saw his knuckles whiten.

“You talk like you own it,” he said.

Seret’s mouth tightened. “No,” she replied. “I talk like I’ve buried enough people to stop pretending a locked door keeps anyone safe.”

Reni stepped past the group and took a tin from the nearest shelf. She held it up.

“What is it?” she asked.

The rope man’s mouth worked. “Meat,” he said.

“And where do the burned men eat?” Reni asked.

No one answered.

Seret looked at the rope man. “Open the door,” she said.

The rope man shook his head. “No.”

Seret did not raise her voice. “If you bar this room, you bar the kitchens,” she said. “Then you use food to make people beg.”

The mallet man’s eyes flicked to the passage. There were footsteps now, not soldiers’ cadence, but the uneven sound of civilians moving with loads.

Reni reached behind her and took the cane from under her arm. She did not lift it as a threat. She set its ferrule on the stone and used it to step further into the room.

“I’m not here to fight you,” she said.

The rope man let out a harsh breath. “Then leave.”

Reni looked at the sacks.

“No,” she said.

The footsteps in the corridor came closer. Someone called, “Reni?”

She did not turn. Her eyes stayed on the rope man.

“Bring the cart,” she called back.

The rope man flinched. “You’re taking it.”

“Yes,” Reni said.

Seret stepped forward and pulled a sack off the shelf with both hands. Her shoulders tightened with the weight, but she did not pause.

“Help,” Seret said, to the people in the doorway.

The mallet man hesitated.

The rope man’s gaze dropped to the spilled grain. His hand went to his rope, then loosened. He let it hang. His thumb pressed once against the cord, then he released it.

Finally he bent, picked up the sack, and lifted it with a grunt.

“Not because you told me,” he muttered.

Seret did not answer him.

Reni stepped out into the corridor.

A cart had been pushed up by two workers. One of them had a cloth over his mouth against dust. The other had a bruise across his cheek.

The cart's left wheel caught on a lifted slab at the threshold. The bruise-cheeked man swore under his breath and jammed a pry bar under the rim. The wheel rose with a scrape, then dropped into level enough to roll.

Reni pointed toward the storeroom. "Load it," she said. "Kitchens first."

The bruise-cheeked man frowned. "Then where?"

"Old cut after," Reni said. "Then the orchard strip. Same order each time. No arguing in the corridor."

Seret stepped beside her.

"And it gets measured," Seret added. "A ladle per bowl at the first pass. Then we see what's left."

The workers nodded and began to load, passing sacks hand to hand; each transfer made shoulders jerk and boots adjust on grit.

As Reni turned away, raised voices carried from the side yard ahead. She caught a glimpse between two frames of a cluster of bodies and the watchers' stiff stance at the entry.

She walked toward the side yard where Valerius Odran had been left under guard.

The route had changed since the first days. A corridor that had been usable now ended in a crack wide enough to catch a foot. Someone had bridged it with two planks, tied to a brace with rope. Reni stepped over it and listened for any shift beneath her boot. Nothing moved.

In the yard, the cracked wall still stood. The root brace still crossed Valerius's legs and torso, thickened cords pressing him into the stone. The roots had dried in places where bark had formed along their surface; in others they remained damp where they ran close to the ground.

Two watchers were there, as she had ordered in the first days. The woman with the bucket sat on a low block and kept her eyes on the yard entrance. The man with the pry bar leaned against a post and held a rope coil at his feet.

Valerius's uniform was torn at one seam. One sleeve was darkened with dried blood. His gloved hand rested on the ground by his hip; the glove was missing from the other hand, and his bare fingers had grit in the lines.

He saw Reni and shifted his eyes, nothing more.

The woman with the bucket stood.

"He drank," she said, and nodded toward the bucket. "Not much. He asked for more."

"What did you do?" Reni asked.

The woman's mouth pulled tight. "I gave him a mouthful. You said water if he faints. He didn't faint."

"All right," Reni said. "Same as before. Two spans of the low bell, then swap. Sit on the ridge by the post so you can see the yard mouth."

The man with the pry bar said, "Someone's coming."

Reni turned.

Three exiles entered the yard, boots muddy, bundles on their backs. One was a man with a thin beard and a knife at his belt. Mud had dried in a seam on his boot; his head kept turning, checking corners.

He saw Valerius and his face changed.

"There," he said.

The watchers stiffened.

Reni stepped forward. “Stop,” she said.

The bearded man’s eyes narrowed. “You’re the girl,” he said. “The one who stopped them.”

Reni held his gaze. “Yes.”

He stepped closer. “My sister went into the inspection lines last winter,” he said. “She didn’t come out. I’m not waiting for a council to decide whether this man dies.”

Valerius’s mouth moved slightly.

Reni kept her eyes on the bearded man.

“Where are you sleeping?” she asked.

His brow furrowed. “What?”

“Where,” Reni repeated, “are you sleeping?”

He stared at her. “In a lean-to by the broken wall,” he said. “What does that matter?”

“It matters because you’ve come back,” Reni said. “And you’ve come back into a city that has people missing under walls and in collapsed runs. If you kill him now, you’ll draw a crowd here. You’ll keep them here. That’s not what we need.”

The bearded man’s hand moved toward his knife.

The watcher with the pry bar shifted his feet.

Reni took the cane from under her arm and set its ferrule on the stone between herself and the bearded man. Again, she did not lift it.

“I’m not defending him,” she said. “I’m delaying it.”

The bearded man’s lips curled. “Delaying,” he repeated. “So he can be traded. So he can write another order. So he can crawl away.”

“No bargains,” Reni said.

The bearded man's eyes flicked to Valerius. "Then why is he alive?"

Reni's mouth went dry. Her tongue pressed against the back of her teeth, holding the first sharp answer.

"Because we're finding the missing first," she said. "Because if we start killing prisoners in yards, we start making crowds again. Because the city needs one decision, not ten knives."

The bearded man shook his head. "What city?" he demanded. "Look at it."

Reni glanced past him at the cracked wall, at the root cords, at the shifted stone.

"It's still streets and people," she said.

The bearded man took another step.

"What if he dies by accident?" he asked. "What if the wall drops?"

The woman with the bucket snapped, "It hasn't yet."

Reni looked at Valerius.

His eyes were open. His breathing was shallow. The iron measuring chain still hung from his belt, pulled taut where it caught.

Reni looked away.

"To kill him," she said to the bearded man, "you'll have to push past the watchers. You'll have to do it in front of their faces. Then you'll have to answer what you do when someone else comes with a knife for someone you want alive."

The bearded man's jaw worked.

One of the exiles behind him, a woman with a bundle tied tight at her shoulders, said, "He deserves it."

Reni nodded once. "Yes."

The bearded man blinked.

“And he can wait,” Reni said.

The bearded man’s fingers closed around his knife hilt, then loosened. He took a breath that stalled halfway, and his shoulders shifted back as if he had to make room inside his own coat.

“Your sister,” Reni said, “might be under a wall. She might be in a locked room. She might be in a run that collapsed when the gears seized. If you spend today killing him, you don’t spend it finding her.”

The bearded man’s eyes widened for a moment and then narrowed again.

He swallowed.

Reni did not offer comfort.

His head turned slightly, away from Valerius, away from the watchers.

“We’ll talk again,” he said.

Reni nodded once. “Yes,” she said.

The exiles left the yard.

When they were gone, the woman with the bucket let out a breath and sat again.

The man with the pry bar said, “He looked like he might do it.”

“He might,” Reni said.

Valerius’s mouth moved.

Reni heard him, but she did not grant him a place in the conversation.

She turned and walked back toward the courtyard.

The courtyard gateposts still leaned. One hinge strap sat at an angle where it had pulled away from stone. The transport cage remained canted near the edge of the paving, wheel wedged against a lifted slab, leather

straps hanging loose.

The World-Tree rose from the centre.

It no longer looked like the sapling Reni had seen in a cracked pot in a cellar. The trunk had thickened again since she last stood close. Bark ridges ran up it in uneven bands, and sap had dried in some grooves where growth had pushed and then slowed. Leaves sat high above her head now. The crown was not wide, but it carried a density of new growth that did not fit the season.

Reni stepped over a root cord that crossed the paving. The cord was thick enough to trip someone who did not watch their feet, and the stone beneath it had cracked at the edges.

She knelt near the base and looked at the exposed roots where they had forced through mortar seams.

The roots were not hidden. They lay against stone and dipped into cracks. Some were covered in a thin layer of bark now, a rough surface that caught dust.

Reni traced one section with her eyes, not her hands.

A scrape mark showed on a root near the edge of a lifted slab. It was fresh enough that the darker outer layer had been cut away to pale tissue beneath.

She took her knife out.

She did not cut. She used the knife tip to point, to mark where the scrape began and ended.

Someone had tried to pry.

Reni looked around.

People moved at the edge of the courtyard. Two workers carried a plank. A woman with a sack of flour walked slowly over ridged stone. Nobody looked at Reni as if she were doing something sacred. They looked at her as if she were checking a brace.

That was what she was doing.

She stood, her thigh pulling sharply as she straightened. She braced with the cane for a moment and then shifted her weight.

“Don’t cut at it,” she called.

A man at the edge of the courtyard looked over. He had a bundle of rope in one hand.

“Wasn’t me,” he said.

“I didn’t say it was,” Reni replied.

He frowned. “Someone will,” he said.

“Yes,” Reni said. “That’s why I’m saying it now.”

She walked toward a service doorway at the courtyard edge.

Bera Noll stood there.

Her linen cap was gone. Her hair had grown out in uneven tufts. Bruises still marked her forearms, faded into yellow-brown.

She saw Reni and nodded once.

Reni stopped.

Bera’s gaze flicked to the cane under Reni’s arm, then to the trowel at her belt.

“You’re still carrying it,” Bera said.

“Yes,” Reni answered.

Bera hesitated.

Reni waited.

Bera’s voice lowered. “Is his grave safe?” she asked.

Reni’s throat tightened. She did not look toward the orchard strip beyond the wall. She kept her eyes on Bera’s face.

“It’s unmarked,” Reni said. “It’s not in the courtyard. It’s not near a road. People who were there know where it is. People who weren’t can’t find it by walking.”

Bera’s mouth tightened. “And if someone tries?”

Reni’s hand closed around the cane ferrule for a moment, feeling the cold metal through her palm.

“They won’t do it alone,” she said. “And if they do, they’ll be seen.”

Bera nodded once.

She did not ask for forgiveness.

Reni did not offer it.

After a moment, Bera said, “I was the one who showed you the drain cut.”

“I know,” Reni said.

Bera looked at her hands. “I didn’t do it for you,” she said.

“I know,” Reni replied.

Bera let out a breath; her shoulders dropped a fraction, and she stepped back into the corridor.

Reni turned toward the courtyard centre again.

A small child stood near the edge of the broken paving. He held something in both hands.

He approached slowly, eyes on Reni.

Reni waited.

He held out a piece of clay.

It was cracked, jagged at the edges, with a smear of dried soil on the inner curve. A bit of rag was still stuck to it, fibres stiff with old damp.

Reni recognised the curve.

The child spoke quickly. "I found it by the stone," he said. "Where it broke. My brother said they're taking pieces to sell. I didn't. I took this."

Reni looked at his hands.

His nails were black with grime. His fingers were chapped.

She held her hand out.

The child placed the shard into her palm.

It was cold.

Reni closed her fingers around it.

"Don't take more," she said.

The child's eyes widened. "I didn't mean, "

"I'm not accusing you," Reni said. She put the shard into her inner coat pocket and pressed the pocket flat with her hand so it sat against her ribs.

The child watched her.

"What is it?" he asked.

"It's a pot," Reni said.

He frowned. "Just a pot?"

"It was," Reni answered.

The child looked past her at the tree.

Reni followed his gaze.

"It broke," she said, "and people died, and the city changed."

The child's mouth worked. "My mother says it's a god," he said.

Reni shook her head once. "It's a tree," she said. "And it needs feeding."

The child stared.

Reni stepped past him.

She did not touch his head. She did not tell him not to be afraid.

She went toward the kitchens.

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In the courtyard, the first argument about cutting began while the light still came in from the west.

Reni heard the sound first.

A short rasp against bark.

She turned and saw three men near the base of the trunk. One held a small saw. Another held a knife with a broad spine, the sort used in butcher work. The third held a sack.

They were not palace soldiers. Their coats were patched. One had a strip of cloth around his wrist where skin had been torn.

Reni walked toward them.

She did not run.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

The man with the saw looked up.

He did not look ashamed.

“Taking a shaving,” he said. “Small. Just bark. People want it.”

Reni stopped two paces away.

“Put it down,” she said.

The man with the knife snorted. “Who are you to tell us?”

Reni kept her voice level. “Put it down,” she repeated.

The saw man’s eyes narrowed. “It belongs to everyone.”

“Yes,” Reni said.

The saw man blinked, as if he had expected refusal.

Reni continued. “That’s why you don’t get to carve it up because you got here first.”

The man with the knife shifted his grip. “We’re not taking the trunk,” he said. “We’re taking a strip. There are exiles coming in every day. They’ve got nothing. They’ll trade for it. They’ll pay for luck.”

Reni looked at the bark where the saw teeth had touched.

The cut was shallow, less than a finger-width. Sap had begun to bead at the edge, a clear drop no bigger than a seed.

Her mouth pulled tight.

Reni stepped forward and took the saw out of the man’s hand.

He did not let go at first.

Reni did not yank. She held it steady and stared at him.

After a moment he released it.

“You think you’re the gate now,” he said.

“No,” Reni said.

The man with the knife laughed once. “That’s what they all say.”

Reni shifted her weight, careful of her leg.

“Cutting living tissue weakens it,” she said. “This ground is still out of level. The root set is new. If you open it and it dries or rots at the seam, you’ll get a drop. Another ridge. Another collapse. Someone will be under it.”

The sack man frowned. “It’s a tree,” he said.

“It’s a tree that forced a palace apart,” Reni replied. “You’ve seen what it does in mortar seams. You’ve seen what happens when stone shifts.”

The knife man's eyes went to the ridged paving.

He did not answer.

Reni lowered the saw to the ground and set her boot on it.

"This isn't a market," she said.

The saw man's face flushed. "You talk like you own it."

Reni shook her head. "No," she said. "I'm telling you what damage looks like when you start cutting."

The knife man lifted his chin. "It belongs to everyone," he said again. "You agreed."

"Yes," Reni said. "So leave it for everyone."

A voice came from the courtyard edge.

"Leave it," Seret Wain said.

Reni glanced toward her.

Seret walked in with two workers behind her. One carried a bucket. The other carried a coil of rope.

Seret stopped beside Reni and looked at the bead of sap on the bark.

Her mouth tightened.

"You can't stop hunger with a rule," the knife man said, to Seret this time.

"I'm not trying to," Seret said. "I'm stopping you from selling scraps of it."

The saw man's shoulders rose. "People want it," he insisted. "They'll pay. They're already paying. Someone else will cut if we don't."

Seret nodded once. "Then we build a way that doesn't need saws," she said.

The knife man narrowed his eyes. "Such as?"

Seret pointed toward the base of the trunk where leaf litter had begun to gather in a damp ring.

“Leaf-fall,” she said. “Small prunings when they happen. Not saws. Not knives. We collect what comes off without cutting. We take it to the kitchens. It goes into broth. It gets measured and shared.”

The saw man stared. “You want to feed it to people?”

Seret’s voice stayed level. “Yes,” she said.

The knife man snorted. “And what about the ones who don’t want soup? What about the ones who want a charm? What about the ones who want to believe it means they won’t lose their child under a wall?”

Seret’s gaze stayed on him.

“They can believe while they eat,” she said.

Reni watched the men’s hands.

The knife man’s grip had loosened.

The sack man shifted his weight as if he wanted to leave.

The saw man swallowed.

“You’re making rules,” he said.

“Yes,” Reni replied. “Because if we don’t, the first hands to grab will take it to pieces. Then all we’ll have left is bark in pockets.”

The knife man’s eyes flashed. “You’re the girl who stopped the crowd killing the General,” he said. “Now you’re stopping us. I keep running into you.”

Air held under Reni’s ribs.

“I’m here,” she said. “Right now. Put the knife away.”

Seret looked at Reni then.

“You need watchers,” Seret said.

Reni nodded once.

Her gaze went past Seret's shoulder, checking the gateposts and the service doorway.

"Who's doing night watch already?" Reni asked.

The worker with the rope frowned. "For the children," he said. "And for the grain."

"Good," Reni said. "Add the courtyard. Two on the gateposts, on the high ridge so they can see the paving. One by the service corridor."

The knife man made a sharp sound. "So now you're making a militia."

Reni's mouth tightened. "No," she said. "I'm adding a watch span. Two spans of the low bell, then swap. No blades for it. A mallet for stone shift. Rope for pulling people clear. A bucket for water."

The rope worker nodded slowly.

Seret turned her head toward the men with the saw and the knife.

"You can be part of it," she said. "Or you can walk away and try again later."

The knife man's lips curled. "Don't speak to me like I'm a boy," he said.

Seret's voice did not change. "Then don't come at it with a knife," she replied.

The knife man's eyes flashed.

For a moment Reni thought he would lunge.

He did not.

He turned and walked away.

The sack man followed, but he paused at the courtyard edge and shifted the sack's weight higher on his shoulder. His head turned back once, eyes on the trunk, before he moved on.

The saw man hesitated, then spat onto the stone near his boot and left.

The courtyard did not empty. People moved through it because it was a passage, and because their eyes kept going to the trunk, whether they spoke of gods or of roots.

A woman approached from the courtyard edge.

Her scarf was tied in a style Reni did not recognise. She carried a bundle at her back and a small child at her hip.

She stopped two paces away, eyes on the trunk.

“Can it give dreams?” she asked.

Reni looked at her.

Seret’s gaze stayed hard.

Reni kept her answer plain.

“It can give maps,” she said. “And cravings.”

The woman blinked. “Maps?”

“Routes,” Reni said. “Water. Where you can walk without getting pinned under stone. It can do that, if you take it into your body.”

The woman’s grip tightened on her child. “That’s a dream,” she said.

“It isn’t,” Reni replied. “It’s useful. And it can become a habit. If you start chasing the relief, you stop watching your feet.”

The woman stared.

Seret spoke then. “You want dreams, sleep,” she said. “If you want a city, work.”

The woman’s mouth tightened.

She nodded once, stiffly, then turned away.

Reni watched her go.

Seret looked toward the men who had left with the saw and the knife.

“They’ll be back,” Seret said.

“Yes,” Reni replied.

Seret’s eyes remained hard. “Then we’ll still be here,” she said.

Reni’s hand went to the inner pocket where the clay shard sat against her ribs. The edge pressed through cloth when she moved.

She did not take it out.

She watched the courtyard and the people moving through it.

The next fights would not be against uniforms.

They would be against hunger, against panic, against the urge to cut anything living into a token that could be carried.

Reni felt her thigh pull and adjusted her stance.

She picked up the saw and handed it to the rope worker.

“Put it in the kitchens,” she said. “If someone needs it for wood, they can sign it out. Not here.”

The rope worker nodded.

Seret turned away. “Come,” she said. “There are sacks to move.”

Reni followed.

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By late afternoon the light had gone pale and flat.

Reni sat on a block of broken limestone near the base of the trunk.

She kept her boots clear of the root cords that crossed the paving. She had seen too many people trip in the last weeks, their palms torn when they caught themselves on grit and broken mortar.

Voices carried from the streets outside the palace wall.

Someone shouted a count as they lifted a beam.

Hammering sounded in a steady rhythm.

A child cried and then stopped. Reni did not move to check. There were people closer.

The courtyard remained broken, but it could be used.

That was what mattered.

Reni looked up.

The crown of the tree was higher than the palace wall now. Leaves moved in the wind in small shifts that showed which branches were still soft and which had begun to stiffen.

Buds sat at the ends of new growth.

They should have belonged to later seasons.

Reni did not have Silas's full orchard training, but she had watched enough rose rows and street fruit trees to know what belonged where. The growth did not match the month.

It was still spending the surge that had broken the Wards.

She had heard old workers try to explain it in different ways.

One called it a debt being paid.

Another called it a boil after poison.

Seret called it stored force going into leaf and root until it ran out.

Reni watched without naming it.

A small sound came from above.

A dull knock on stone.

Reni's head turned.

A fruit had fallen.

It hit the paving near her boot and rolled a short distance until it lodged against a ridge of mortar.

It was not large.

Its skin was pale gold with green veining, the veins running in irregular lines from the stem end to the base.

Reni stared at it.

No one else in the courtyard spoke. People passed at the edges, carrying rope and boards and sacks, but no one came running to see.

Reni reached down and picked it up.

It was cool in her palm, the skin firm against her fingers.

She held it close to her face and breathed in.

Ozone and loam.

The sharp edge she associated with iron rods and Ward flicker. The damp note of soil that had been in the cellar pot, pressed down with blood.

Her mouth pulled tight.

Her pulse kicked once in her wrist. Breath held, then went out slow through her nose.

Take it.

Use it.

Let the ache in her thigh blur.

She thought of pollen without wanting to. She remembered Silas's nostrils dark with blood when he craved it and refused it.

Reni's fingers tightened on the fruit.

She sat still.

Hammering continued outside. Someone counted again. A cough answered from somewhere in the corridor.

The courtyard stayed in front of her: ridged stone, bark, sap.

Reni brought the fruit to her mouth.

She paused, then bit.

The skin broke with a small snap.

Juice ran along her tongue.

The taste was sharp, then sweet, then bitter at the back of her throat. It carried the same metallic edge she had tasted in conduit water, but it was lighter, mixed with something that tasted of wet soil.

Her stomach tightened.

She swallowed.

No vision came.

No old street rose in front of her.

No lost face appeared.

There was only the courtyard, ridged stone, bark, sap, and the sound of work outside.

Reni took another bite.

Her hand shook slightly.

She held the fruit steady.

She ate until half of it was gone.

Then she stood.

Her thigh pulled as she rose, and she pressed the cane ferrule to stone for support without thinking.

She turned toward the service corridor that led to the kitchens.

A worker near the edge of the courtyard called, "Where are you going?"

"To the kitchens," Reni said.

He looked at the fruit in her hand.

Reni did not hide it.

She walked.

The courtyard ridges forced her to place each step with care, but she did not slow beyond what was needed. She kept the half-eaten fruit in her hand and the cane under her arm, and as she passed through the service doorway the cooking smells thickened and the voices changed from shouting to the low argument of people deciding who ate first.

Reni did not stop at the threshold.

She went on, into the work, still tasting loam and ozone, still present in her body as it moved through a city that had to be rebuilt by tired hands with grit under the nails.