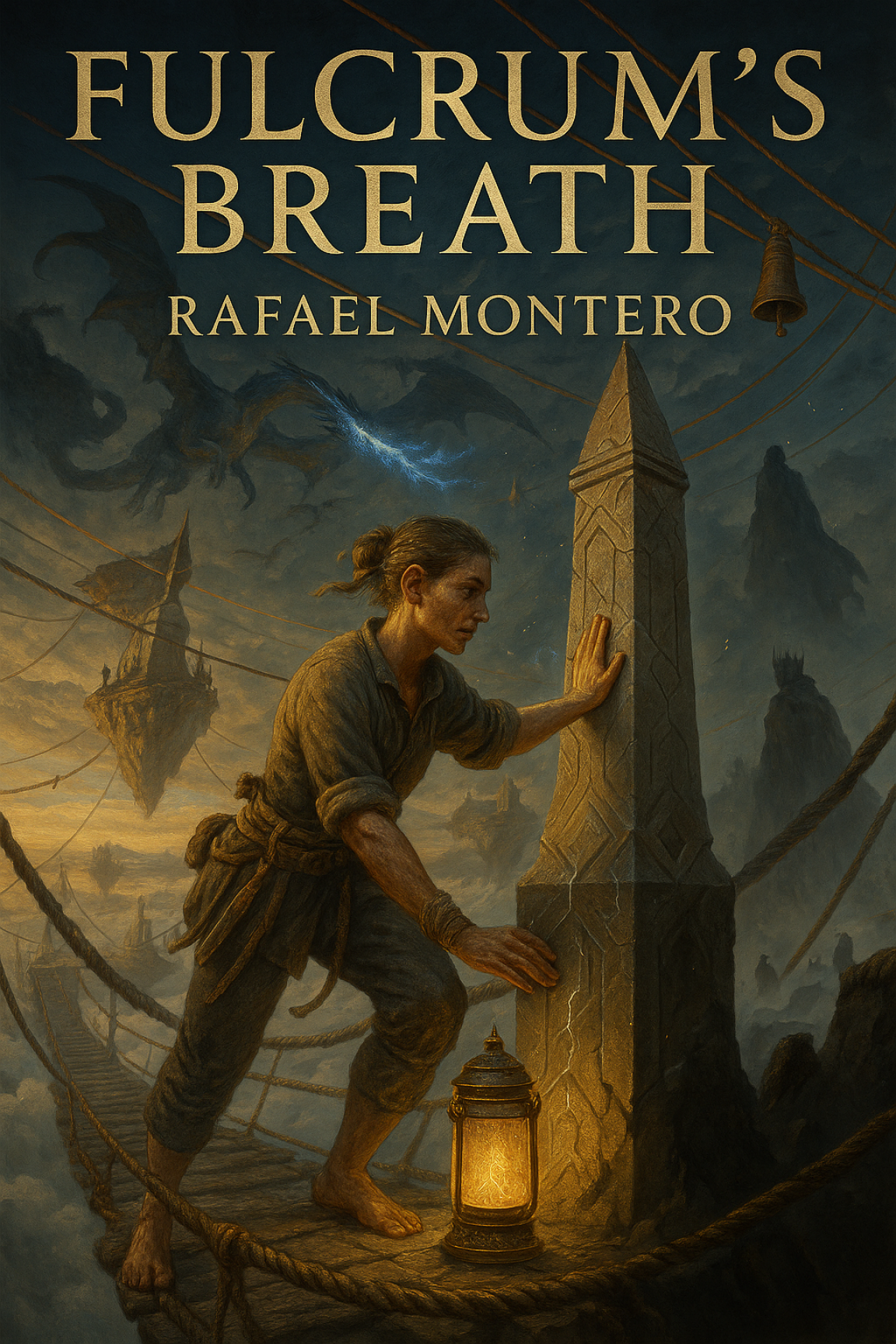


# FULCRUM'S BREATH

RAFAEL MONTERO



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by Rafael Montero

Chapter 1: Bells in the Rain

Chapter 2: The Lantern's Choice

Chapter 3: Frost-Heights Crossing

Chapter 4: Rimespan Holds

Chapter 5: The Senate's Rope

Chapter 6: Thunder-Reef

Chapter 7: Siege at Rimespan: Return

Chapter 8: The Sky-Senate Closes Its Hand

Chapter 9: Eight Breaths

Chapter 10: The Line Remembers

Chapter 11: The Harbour at Windharp

Chapter 12: Cables and Banners

Chapter 13: The Hollow Zenith

Chapter 14: The Spire of First Weight

Chapter 15: Unmaking the Null

Chapter 16: The Age of Binding

# Chapter 1

## Bells in the Rain

Wind veered and the bells of Vael broke their note. The first peal shivered across the market span and slid, a long smear of sound with no centre, and in that slip the cable hummed wrong underfoot. Tar smoke and wet brass hung in the rain. Ropes ran to their anchors with a fretful tremor that climbed the soles and settled in the teeth.

Tamsin put her toes to the main line and tapped once. The hum answered, lower than it should have, depth without bite. She shifted weight, her breath falling to the old count that sat in the chest and steadied the hands.

“On my voice,” she said to no one and everyone. “Count your breath. No running. Keep one hand to the line. If you grab a body on the sway, you both go.”

People had already started to run. The span had a long belly and the rain sharpened its slope. Carts creaked and skated, wicker rattled, and a mesh of fish on wet reed slithered past boots. Two barrels banged together and jammed against a stall frame. A goat screamed and went still. A woman clutched a sack to her breast and slid on one heel toward air, eyes open and fixed on nothing. The stallkeepers had lashed their canopy lines quick this morning, not neat. Knots that would have held overnight pulled loose in the wet.

“Hold the uprun!” someone shouted from the left. The same voice started, “Hold the.” The tower above the market released a half□measure of slack. The call died in a judder of bell□gut.

The main hawser took it, accepted the new load, and sagged. The world tipped. Bodies and carts slid again. The boards under her feet gave little clicks. Tamsin planted both boots, felt the give, and let her knees go soft to take the drop.

The shard warmed against her thigh.

It had slept cold for two days at her hip, a fragment of etched stone wrapped in oilskin and bound to her belt with a whipcord stitch she trusted. Now heat crept through the oilskin and the cloth to her skin, not burning, insisting. The warmth angled across her right leg into the bar of her hip. She turned her head and the breath count reset without her consent.

One. Two. Three.

“Brace on three,” she called. “Heel to toe, left to right, take the diagonal. You, with the green cap, clip that child. You, red scarf, get your knife ready. On three.”

The woman with the sack took a breath on the wrong number and slid. Tamsin fished for her rope, found the loop, threw without looking at the ground. The loop took the woman under the arms. The jerk shoved Tamsin’s shoulder back under the weight and burned a line across her palm. Skin split; chalk white turned pink along the crease. She let the burn live, kept her feet set, and drew hand over hand until the woman’s boots met wood again.

“Let the sack go,” Tamsin said. “Hands free. Now.”

The woman’s mouth opened on a protest that did not find air. She hugged the sack. Tamsin saw the weight and heard the hum thin at her knee; she cut and let the splices go, then set the woman’s hands on the rail.

“Grip there. Two breaths. Look nowhere else.”

A child’s cry ran along the span against the rain. Tamsin turned on it in time to see a boy no older than seven clinging with both hands to a side

hawser whose sheath had abraded to the inner whorl. Filaments rasped and furred under his fingers. His heels pedalled on nothing; he hung a handspan off the boards, the hawser above him sawing its own skin against a bolt eye with each sway. Half a crate slid toward him, the stencilled marks on its side smearing under the wet.

“Red scarf, that cut,” she said. The scarfed rigger had already moved, saw the crate, saw the boy, and hesitated a heartbeat between line and child. Tamsin’s voice took the decision.

“Cut the crate. Cut now.”

The knife went in and the lashing snapped loud. The crate slithered over the deck and jammed against the rail, teetered, and went. The boy’s fingers slipped one by one and caught again. Tamsin crossed the boards in three steps on the shard’s heat. Her front foot took a board’s bite wrong by a finger; she tapped, shifted, and kept the line. Her belt loop came up and over him; she set it under his arms, braced, and worked him in.

“Breath with me,” she said, and her chest did the count so he could borrow the rhythm.

One. Two. Three.

He weighed almost nothing when he came free of the hawser. She held him in the loop against her hip and he shook without moving. His knuckles left little white spots where the rope had pressed. She set him behind a stall frame where there was some shelter from the rain.

“Stay with the woman in the blue wrap,” she said.

“I dropped the splices,” the woman who had kept her sack said as if to the weather.

“And you did not drop your son,” Tamsin said, not looking at her.

Men and women slid past on poor boards, making their own hazards. A fishmonger stumbled into a coil of loose dropline and took three others down with him. Two made it back to knees. The third slid as if the boards had been oiled and went over on his side, hands flapping at the rail that

flirted with his fingers and kept nothing. The red-scarved rigger was there, grabbed the collar, and leaned his whole body back until the man came up and rammed into the rail with his ribs. A small cheer broke and died as the span sagged again.

The bells changed a beat as the tower took more slack.

“On three,” Tamsin said. “Brace at the third, not before. Green cap, you’re my counter on the west. Red scarf, east. Meet me on the diagonal across the belly. We do not stand and wait on the line. We choose. We go together. Under oath and under sky.”

Something gave in the tower above them; the groan travelled down the main hawser and set the boards shuddering. The rain thickened to a sheet and then thinned to strings. Tamsin took the first step into the sway and the shard’s heat pulled her left. She went with it, a slant movers’ path the eye did not find on its own because the span’s force trained the body to go straight for the anchor and safety. Straight work failed on sag. Slant work took the weight off what was failing and put it where it could be held.

“Heel. Toe. Heel. Toe,” she called, and the first six near enough to hear echoed her without thinking. A young rigger moved on two. “Not yet. Three,” Tamsin snapped, and he caught the proper beat.

They made their chain with their hands to the line and their feet to her count. They took in three elders and two children on the first run, set them against a stack of vegetable crates that had found a corner and decided to stay. Each arrival left wet rope-marks on cheeks and wrists. Faces went from chalk to coloured with the work.

Copper and boiled pitch thickened the air. She breathed through it and kept the count. The wind shifted from west to south and the bells above them, the ones that had been rung by hands until hands could not keep pace, thudded wrong. She waited for the shard. It kept its heat steady on the line she had chosen.

“Again,” she said. “Then cut.”

“Cut what?” red scarf said.

“The second starboard stay, three fathoms short of the cap. On my call. Don’t blink and cut too soon. It’ll take the sag for us. We throw weight to save lives.”

Her hand went to the stay in question and felt the thrum. She set the plan and held to it.

“On three,” she said, and kept the count with the bones in her chest.

One. Two, she dragged the breath long to check a twitching hand, Three.

The red scarf’s knife flashed and bit. The stay snapped; the crack carried the held strain. The span lurched. Two stalls lurched with it and spilled their wares. A coil rattled and fell in a long bronze hiss into the drop. The main hawser jerked and then came up one palm’s breadth. The diagonal path they held went from treachery to something with numbers a body could bear.

“Again,” she said.

They moved. The woman in the blue wrap went under a big man’s arm and held with a steady spine. The boy she had pulled from the hawser held her belt. The rigger in the green cap offered a wordless thanks every time their hands met the same knot and moved on.

On the left□hand tower a neat oval opened where stone had been and took the space with it. Not a crack and not a chisel’s bite. A clean absence, featureless, appeared and moved the world around it to fill the shape it had made. The stone rim powdered and then the powder did not exist enough to fall. The rain threaded through the hole into nowhere and never came out.

“No,” someone said in a child’s voice, and then did not say anything else. No one spoke for a count of five. The bells kept pealing but it was not a song anyone recognised now.

“Eyes on the line,” Tamsin said. “We don’t watch sky□tricks.”



The shard ticked against her hip with her movement. It was an annoyance, a pressure. It kept her in the diagonal. She let it push without admitting that she took guidance from a stone. The rain hissed along the ropes in long threads that ran to drips.

They made the third crossing and the rail on the far anchor came up with the weight of seven bodies flung against it in a row. For a breath there was safety, the kind that comes in a corner from which the drop was momentarily not obvious. It was a small, borrowed hold; knots across the city were slipping. They panted there, hands on knees or knuckles white on a post. The boy's breath squeaked like a wet pipe. The redscarved rigger went to an old woman and took her hand and found that his own hand was shaking. He laughed once and then did not do it again.

"Your count held me," a trader gasped, then bent over his knees.

"Don't stay here to die of the next failure," Tamsin said, because rest on a bad anchor becomes a trap. "Get into the court. Keep the path clear. You two, get the ropes off the deck. You there, pull the canopy lines tight, leave slack to none. If you leave it, it will take a foot later."

She turned back to the span. It had that look from bad nights, a system near failure. The main hawser held, but the sub lines that kept the boards from rolling clacked against the underslung ribs under load. She set her hand on one, low between calls. The hum came up a shade. Maybe it was contact; either way it steadied her.

"Tamsin of the Lines," a rigger said with no formality and a great deal of urgency. "Your call saved me when the Night Span went years ago. Say again how you want this."

She faced him. His beard had rain caught in it. His eyes belonged to a man who knew what a drop did to a body and wanted to trust someone to keep him out of it.

"Line rules," she said. She had been waiting to set them all morning and had not said them yet because the street had been ordinary at dawn.



“One: No running unless called. Two: Brace on three. Not on two because your nerves want it. Three: Elders and children clip first. Four: If I say cut you cut, and we argue when we’re all on rock or brass. Five: We do not keep a span by pretending it isn’t failing. We hold what can be held and throw what must be thrown. Under sky.”

He nodded and the nod travelled to those within sight. Hands stayed at work as it passed across faces. A coil slipped into the drop and hissed.

“On three,” she called again, because the line rules had to stand up inside the count or they were a song and not a law.

They made two more crossings. The shard stayed warm and pulled before her eyes would have chosen that path. The oval in the tower grew and then slid along the stone, left a smooth edge where it moved. No one touched that place.

The last of the traders at this end, a man bright with brass rings in his ears and a counting habit in his mouth, stayed too long, trying to find a way to set his remaining wares onto a hooked rope. The rope led nowhere useful. Tamsin put a hand to his shoulder and turned him by force.

“You get one more breath for goods,” she said.

He stared at the loose ties that marked his inventory and she watched the war in him between coin and the finite number of breaths left on this board. He blinked once slowly, turned, and put his weight where it belonged. She did not praise him; time and breath had work.

They went to the anchor court at last and she let her shoulders notice that they belonged to her. The bells above kept their ruined peal, now and again stitched by a single true note that did not hold long enough to mean. From high on the city’s outer pylons, smaller bells began to fall in their casings, bright in the rain. They hit the boards near the tower and rolled until a lip took them, and then they took no more space in the world.

“It’s not only this span,” the green□capped rigger said.

“No,” she said.

“What is it?” Someone else spoke softly.

“Something that bites law,” she said. “We’re not just heavy on a bad day. We’re unthreading.”

Rain blew into her face; she closed her eyes a moment and opened them. There were more people to move.

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She took the count to the next pylon under the market tower; the work shifted to triage. The staggered bells carried through the rain.

The rope□market had never been quiet on any day she could name, but the noise had rules once, auction calls and the friendly theft of stories, saw rasp, fish slap, the brief curses of a rigger with a splinter in a place he could not reach with dignity. Now those sounds were gone or wrong. Cables groaned and then went shy of their own voices. Stalls swung on stays pulled too tight or knotted bad. A hammock of seed bags hung from three points and made its own small disaster with each sway as people stumbled into it and were caught and hampered. The rain changed direction and made a new mistake with the sound.

Tamsin moved through a passage that had been an aisle and was now a chance, her palm turned toward lines, back of the hand for faces, so her tools could answer faster than her voice. Cross□ties that did good and stays that could take a man off the board had to be marked. Three lines would give time if cut and four she could shore if she had the bodies. She chose. The ones not chosen became losses she accepted.

“You,” she said to a pair of riggers whose hands did not shake and whose boots went heel□first in weight, not toe□scared. “You’re my left and right. Cut here and here.” She put her knife tip to the two ties that had been set in a hurry and bit into the wrong grain. “You,” she said to a

third who wore a tool roll like someone who used it. “Wedge that under the drum and shift by a handspan. On my voice. Brace on three.”

The two cutters nodded and went. The third looked at the drum as if it were an animal. He licked rain off his lip and nodded.

They worked at her count. She triaged with her eyes and the old habit that had saved her life and cost a cousin when she was ten. She adjusted the old ledger of the market in her head, wrote out of it the places that could no longer hold weight and borrowed from places that had been thought too fine to cut because the owner cared more than the span.

“Cut.”

A row of goose-fat lamps in a brass frame dimmed and then went dark as they rocked and fell. A woman shouted in a voice that had sold onions for forty years. She heard the shout become a sob and then grit and then the onion woman started throwing her onions onto the deck for counter-weight before Tamsin asked; she had done this before.

She saw the stair up to the next court, the one with the brass plates and the weather cover. It wavered and then it was gone. The air where it should have been had a wrong shine to it that could not catch the rain. A shape slid through that place without detail, a long absence with edges that undid what they passed. People on the stair lost stair and air and the sounds they made cut off like ropes. No bodies fell. There was no there to fall through yet. The next breath there was, and sacks, and a man’s hat came down alone. A high pitch pressed against her ribs; a brass tang hit her tongue and then vanished.

No noise came for any of that. Sound had thinned. A dropped hook’s clatter cut off mid-ring. Tamsin put her teeth together and her jaw hummed and the note belonged to bone, not to air. Her eyes watered and she was not crying.

“Keep moving,” she said. Her voice came out low. It carried.

An elder slid under a stall and stopped there, turned into a small animal in a place not built to shelter animals. Tamsin reached for him and he flinched because he had been taught not to be moved by strangers. She set her hand on the line instead of on him and he put his hand on the line where hers had been, because he had learned the other lesson, the one bridges teach, which is that the line is the friend and not the face.

“Sling relay,” she told the two riggers she had taken for left and right.

They got it without further words because they had eyes and had done this work. One cut the sling from a butcher’s stall. The other anchored it on the lantern post and braced his feet without telling them he did. Tamsin checked both knots, the one that would carry the weight and the one that would take the strain if the first failed. They did the work between breaths and the world’s speed made the two knots one knot in her head.

“Elders first,” she said. “Children next. The rest of you on my call. No talk of whose coin paid what. We don’t count coin in a slack.”

“I will,” a voice said behind her, fatter than the day, with the skin of a man who had done well selling small things dear to those who wanted them. “I will count coin. I will give you a fist of it and the bigger hand after if you count me first in your breath.”

Tamsin turned. The man’s rings were gold gilt on brass. Water beaded on his cuffs in neat lines because he had paid to have them treated. His eyes weighed her and found her cheap. He raised the purse; the mouth gaped.

“Elders first,” she said again, and looked past him to the sling. “On three.” She slowed the count for the elders who took the sling. When she sent riggers to clear a line, she clipped the beat sharp.

“Do you know who I am?”

“On the line, we’re all the same weight,” she said without voice for more.

The rigger in the left position snorted once and then stared at his knot so no one would call it mockery. The man with the rings held the purse half□open while the sling came back empty for the next elder. No one reached for his offer. Rain beaded on his cuffs and on the coins.

The shard pulsed in her pocket once and a little to the left. Two spans reached the same court a dozen paces apart. Her eye liked the right; the shard's heat pressed left. She set her feet left and resented it. One had always been the better kept. It showed the better brass, the sharper engravings, the fresh tar. The other had been maintained by stubborn men with bad wages and better pride. The shard warmed toward the stubborn men's span. She set her feet that way without admitting that the shard led.

"This one," she said.

"Why?" said the left rigger, not grieving, curious as to craft.

"Because this one holds," she said, and counted three, and took the first step.

A heartbeat later the better span released its plates in sequence. The first plate whanged off the deck and took two boards with it. The span rolled and turned half over. Half the crowd made a sound that had no word.

The two riggers looked at her and then back to their work, faces set.

"You felt that," the left said.

"No," she said. "I looked."

They got the last elder over and three children. The void shape passed again high up and did not touch the decks below. Someone near the butcher's stall breathed one word that carried through the rain: "Wyrn." The stair that had not been was still not. The rain shifted with the wind and the gust came hard. The drum at the base of the pylon shifted an inch on its seat and the pylon torqued against the bolts that held it. The drum made a low, wet metal grind. It blew its side. The bands gave. The line

gave a single sharp report and went slack.

“Throw weight!” Tamsin shouted, and the stallkeepers who had not forgiven the day for taking their stock threw anyway. Bales of seed, sacks of pepper□dry pods, two frames of drying fish, went to the wrong side to save the right. The weight took the torque and the pylon came back a degree. The wedge the third rigger had set under the drum bit at last.

“Hold it, hold it,” the right rigger said and would have put his back under the pylon if that would have mattered. It did not. But the faith in backs travelled into hands.

“Worth the stock,” a stallkeeper said, tight, and no one argued.

Tamsin looked up to the posts where wardens should have stood, brass armlets ready, hook□staffs cinched, faces bored and eager both for something to do. The posts were open. The hooks leaned against the wall. The armlets were neat on their pegs. Heat rose under her skin that was not the shard’s, and the rain hid the colour in her face.

“Where are they?” the left rigger said as if the answer would come in a reasonable voice.

“Not here,” she said. There were a hundred good reasons that could be true on a bad day. None of them helped her now. She had trained to their drills on this ring since she was twelve; open posts meant she cut them out of her plan.

They got the last of the elders to the platform and the sling’s knot trembled but held. Her hands had rope dust in the lines of the fingers and the tar had left patterns on her palm like writing she did not have time to read. The bells took a new cadence. Not the urgent roll of a fire in a rope□house or the warning of a stripped anchor. A staggered code reached across Vael, one□two, and then a pause too long for comfort, and then a long three. She had heard it once in practice when she was twelve and the wardens laughed and said the bells would never be used.

System failure. Not a span. Not a ring. Not a ward. The city.

Tamsin took three breaths.

“Again,” she said.

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She reached the steadier court by a path she would not have drawn on any map. The staggered bellcode still ran over Vael. The small gods of the market had been led away by their shrines on handcarts and did not seem to know who to bless. Men and women came like rain into the court and made their own weather with their bodies. She stood where the line that needed her most passed closest and checked her belt. Her chalk had gone soft with damp. Her splicing knives were wet and honest. The shard sat warm under oilskin. She glanced back toward the empty warden posts above the last court and let the breath count steady again. The near line’s hum wavered, then steadied a shade as a new lanternlight approached through the wet.

A man stepped out of the crowd with a lantern on a staff. The lantern’s brass had old scratches filled with black; its glass had been cleaned with the care of a ritual. The staff had inlays that were not ornament. The lantern’s light did not pierce rain or burn fog; it steadied. The line nearest to him steadied; its hum came closer to proper.

“Keep to her count,” he said to the riggers around her, not looking at her as if that would make his praise any easier to bear. His voice sat in the air where emptiness had made air shy. He believed rules still held.

“Aldren,” someone said and the name moved through the group. It did what names do when a child speaks the syllables of a tool he has been told to wait to touch.

Aldren set the staff butt to the deck and lifted two fingers to touch the lantern frame at two points that bore old wear. He did not turn any catch. He breathed on the glass and said a thing that was not a word and not a sigh. The lantern took a little more of the day and persuaded it to hold. A



cable vibrated, then settled on a steadier note. Aldren's eyes ran water that was not rain. He wiped it away with his wrist and made no ceremony of it.

"You spoke Law into the sway," he told Tamsin, now looking.

"I spoke count into fear," she said, because pride in the wrong place is a poor anchor.

"Fear slacks a line faster than any failed anchor. Your count set a new hold," he said.

He put his palm to the line and his eyes shifted focus the way a man looks through a thing to the thought beneath it. He spoke in a cadence older than his face made him look.

"Tension held by covenant. Load shared by willing hand. Anchors answer to oath."

He did not say more than that. He placed the phrases where they had to go. The cable shifted its pull. The strain spread. The near knots cinched without cutting. The far bolts groaned and then settled. His hand trembled once on the staff; he braced one breath and went on.

Aldren looked older for a beat and then steadied. He gripped the staff not as if he were old but as if he were lending the day a hand and the day had taken it too hard.

"You have a name in you," he said to Tamsin. He had not given names out loud since before she could count; those who carried his praise whispered about it in lofts and crews for years after they heard it.

"I have one already," she said, reflex hard in the gut, because names from elders carry claim and she had spent a life staying too light to catch.

"You have a name for work, then," he said. He did not smile.

Rain misted. The lantern's light made no friend of it and no enemy.

"Walker between laws," Aldren said.

The nearest rigger made a small sound he would not have made before the day's weather had taken his voice. The name sat on Tamsin's shoulders where a hand might have sat. Her chest wanted to tighten and she would not give it permission. She took a breath instead and it fit in her chest in a way that required her to choose whether to accept being made a thing by others for their comfort. Her count stalled at two and held. The knot at her belt pulled the skin at her waist; she left it.

"I'm not anyone's banner," she said. It came out quiet.

"No," Aldren said.

He took the shard from where it lived at her belt without asking. He did not pull at the knot. He put his fingers under the oilskin and the shard slid into his hand as if it had been waiting for a polite hand for years. He weighed it. A man who had weighed stones and apples all his life would have been irritated by how precise the weighing was. He closed his eyes and opened them and handed it back.

"This one listens to you," he said.

"It's a shard. It's a piece of a rule, not a pet," she said.

"And you are the only one in a day's reach who can speak law in motion and be obeyed by more than a line," he said in the voice he used when telling truths that would cost him friends if he told them in a hall but might save the span if he told them on a deck.

He angled the lantern so its light laid across the faces nearest them without shining in anyone's eyes. The light did not change the faces. It made their work evident to each other.

"Vael unthreads," he said.

"I know," she said.

"Not from load only. Not from neglect. Not from politics. From an unbinding. That is work with intent behind it, not weather bored of its task. You saw it."

“I saw a hole in a tower,” she said.

“Don’t teach me caution with words,” he said without heat. “The Null King works. He wants law without witness. If no one speaks the count, the count is gone.”

The name hit the deck and faces showed it, then smoothed. The riggers in earshot stiffened at it and then pretended they had not heard because pretending has uses when you are out of hands and need one more.

A lower neighbourhood made of boards and cheap brass tore slowly from where it had been attached to a pylon since a generation before she was born. It did not break. It peeled. Nails with good heads and bad shafts drew themselves out of wood. The decking lifted and slid and then lay down to rest a little way from where it had called itself a home. Someone shouted a prayer and all that carried to Tamsin’s ears was the list of names at the end of it.

Aldren watched without hurrying to name what they saw. He measured his words and cut them where they had to be cut.

“We carry shards,” he said.

“We?”

“You. Those you will agree to walk with. I’m an old man. I’ll say the names and you can shake your head or not. Ori, who puts clouds in their places on maps and makes them stay. Brakka Copperweft who knows the temper of cable better than the men who draw it hot for him. Sir Garin Cloudfall who fell when he should have flown and got up anyway to learn better grips. They come. Others will answer the bell if we set the call proper. We bear what we find to the Fulcrum Spire.”

A woman gasped at the Spire’s name. Others stared.

“That talk about the Spire came off work done with rope and brass once,” Aldren said.

“And you want my hands on that work,” Tamsin said.

“I want you to fix a rule the world forgets how to keep when men like him,” he tilted his chin toward the place where the air did not hold a stair, “ask for a world without rules.”

She woke the knot at her belt, the one her fingers untied and tied when she could not get a thought to sit still. The knot had never lied to her. It had allowed her to lie to herself by being something she could do with her hands until her head agreed. She worked it once and let it lie, flat and sure, closed without struggle.

“No crowns,” she said.

“None to give,” Aldren said.

“On any span, my word holds,” she said.

He nodded, a small motion that old bones can make without telling on themselves.

“On any span, your word holds,” he said.

“Under sky,” she said into the rain, because someone in the court had to say it like that for the oath to settle in more than one chest. A few mouths spoke the words without wanting it known they did. This is how alliances begin when the bell has already rung.

A column of figures in sea□green, Windharp colours, came around a far pylon across a thin pale span. They moved with the discipline of people who had been told since breakfast that they would be watched. Rope□laminate bows showed above their shoulders. Hook spears glinted. A standard with a braided tassel lifted in the wind and did not dip. To Tamsin’s eye it was harbour green. Her jaw set because soldiers are weight, and weight is both help and demand.

“Guests,” Aldren said, the old word for a party that might be friend or trouble.

“I’m not taking orders from a ribbon,” Tamsin said.

“No,” he said, and swung the lantern so the light fell in a lane for the next group, who ran it eager and sure.

“The Spire answers Law, and the asking is heavy,” he said then and looked not at her hands but at the space around them where her answers usually lived.

She swallowed because the rain had put grit at the back of her throat and because the truth had stuck there too. Her breath stuck on the third count and she forced it through. She flexed her fingers; the chalk stain on her palm had gone pink and twinged when she shifted her grip on the staff.

“I’ll get them across,” she said and put her hand flat on the line.

“That’s this hour,” he said.

“It’s the hour I have,” she said.

He nodded again and looked to the worst of the work and stepped toward it. The lantern shed steadiness. He bled a little from the nose and wiped it away with the side of his hand with no drama. A rigger near him tightened a knot and did not look up. Another set a wedge and kept count. No one broke cadence.

The bell cadence shifted. The stagger held. In the space between two beats, the lower deck peeled and left a new edge that looked neat and wrong. A dog ran along it and stopped, baffled. It sat down and made a small sound.

“The Null King isn’t throwing stones,” Aldren said almost to himself.

“He’s unbinding holds,” Tamsin said.

“And he’ll cancel any rule left to cancel,” Aldren said.

“Then we bind what we can with hands and law,” she said.

He put his palm to the lantern. It did not get brighter. He measured how much steadiness the day could take. He looked older by one breath and then he was himself.

“Say yes,” he said.

She tied and untied her knot twice, felt the blade of her splicing knife under her palm, and let her shoulders settle into the place her body had known was waiting since first bell. Her breath caught on three again; she eased it and found the word.

“Yes,” she said.

“Under oath and under sky,” he said.

The lantern hummed; the near line under her boots steadied for a breath. A bead of water tracked down the lantern’s brass frame.

“Under sky,” she answered, because oaths deserve to be said once plain and once in full, and once is enough in rain.

They moved. He took the right and left the centre to her. The riggers looked to her face first and the lantern second, which told her what she had known and not wanted to say aloud. The sea□green column moved on another span and would arrive whether or not Tamsin had time for soldiers. The bells above Vael kept their stagger. Little bells fell and made a ring no hand had intended. Somewhere a child laughed and stopped and no one blamed him. The shard warmed, not in a hurry, insisting that there was a route no one else could see without it being shown.

She lifted her chin and made a call, and the court answered in the voices of people who knew what a line did when a line had been respected and who had the hands for it. For elders in the sling she gave the numbers slow; for riggers on a bad board she snapped them clean.

One. Two. Three.

They braced at three and the line held because the work had been done when it had to be done. She took the breath it bought. The next hour would set a new line to cross. The rain eased and lifted to a high mist through which the bells carried poorly. She counted her breaths and did not stop. Pressure dipped; the pull on the nearest line shifted a shade toward the south□east. Her palm left a thin streak of blood and chalk on

the steadied line. Sea□green crests, Windharp colours, came into view on the far approach. She would hold the court until Windharp tied in, then take the count to their muster at the sky□dock.



# Chapter 2

## The Lantern's Choice

Wind held in the cables as evening settled, not steady, not lost. The bell-code still reached them in a broken cadence that put space where sound ought to sit. Rain weakened to mist. The boards underfoot drank it and turned dark. Tamsin stood with one boot heel on a fast-tied cleat and one toe upon the near hawser to feel the hum where her bones could read it.

Windharp had tied in an hour past; instead of taking the count to their sky□dock, she kept the court, and they brought their muster up to her.

A figure shouldered through the press of bodies at the edge of the steadier court. He wore a coat too thin for the wet and had oilskin tucked under his arm. Ink stained both wrists in bands. He was taller than the riggers by a head and thin under the coat as if he had traded breath for watch-hours at a desk he did not own. He stopped at the line rather than at Tamsin's face and that marked him as teachable.

"Ori," Aldren said from where the lantern-staff stood against a post. He spoke the name with a simple relief that did not make a festival of it.

Ori placed the oilskin on a crate and cracked it open along a fold polished by years, not days. Drafts unrolled: cloud-edges marked in a tight hand; arrows that meant wind by weight and not merely direction; small squares for posts and rings, their bells annotated in a code Tamsin did not know and did not need.

"Wind out of the north-east sets helpful and then veers at the frost mark," Ori said. His voice had a flat steadiness. It had been trained by

rooms and then forced to earn its place here. He tapped the margin with a knuckle. "There's a leave-window on the northern run this hour. When the cross-wind eases, the line goes back to honest pull. If we catch it, we clear the widest void pocket before it settles near the docks."

Tamsin put two fingers on the near hawser to feel the note. The hum shifted when a squad of runners crossed at the far edge of the court. Weight passed through in a way that said the hawser still knew its work.

"Lines with wind in them, not ink," she said, not to shame him but to make the demand plain. "Show me how your line sings in the body."

Ori did not argue. He lifted his hands, palms up, and closed them as if on a rope that was not there. He set his stance, one foot slightly forward, and breathed through three. "When the cross-wind dips, the hum in your toes goes off the half tone it's been sitting on. The range becomes smoother. The left-hand ties carry an honest half-share. You'll feel it as soon as the bells on Green Pylon catch the cleaner air."

"If Green Pylon's bells are still there to ring," a woman muttered, wrapping a blanket round a child whose hair stuck up in dark points.

"We'll hear them as a change in weight even if the sound fails," Tamsin said, because comfort is a kind of lie unless it tells you what your hands can do.

"He's right enough," Aldren said, touching the lantern's frame with two fingers. "We move on the wind's change, not on any man's permission."

Another presence entered the court with the weight of iron and heat. Brakka Copperweft's beard ties had gone green under years of sweat and smoke. The hair had been laid flat once and had risen again with the mist. He came straight to the failing hawser and pulled a short tool from his pocket that had burned edges.

"Who put this splice in?" he said, cutting a frayed bundle to see the core. "This was done in fear or for coin. Wrong lay, wrong binder, wrong

patience."

"Hurry," a rigger said without adding defence to the word.

"Hurry makes funerals," Brakka said. He did not raise his voice, and it reached every ear that chose to listen. He looked at Tamsin and then past her at the crew who would put their hands on what he told them to touch. "Cut this one. Shore there with a double pad. You have one more hour of hold if you do nothing. Two if you do what I say. If you wish three, I'll need hands and heat, and we don't have either to spare."

Tamsin nodded once and did not tell him she had said the same in another tongue. She did not own his pride and would not try to borrow it for her speech.

"You're Copperweft," she said instead.

"Aye," he said. He did not offer his hand. He tested the hum with his burned palm and winced when the note ran up into scars grown old enough to pretend they did not hurt.

A man in a pauldron bent by an old fall appeared at the edge of the court with a ring of guard beside him. His face was calm with a layer of exhaustion that had learned not to ask for pity. He paused where the board gave a little and adjusted without thought. The guard behind him failed to adjust with him and jostled. He turned and looked without anger until their bodies remembered the lesson and fell into his set.

"Sir Garin Cloudfall," Aldren said. There was respect in it. No apology.

"I'm a better blade on air than I was last year," Garin said. There was no claim in it above that truth. "I'll take flanks on your call. If you want a knot chopped loose when everyone freezes, I'll do that."

He did not list the fall that had left his wing bent or the names that had gone when it happened. Those were only coins when the man you owed them to had already paid.

"No excuses," Tamsin said. "No speeches. This isn't a hall. You'll take point or flank as I say. When I call three, you brace at three, not at two."

Garin looked at her in the way of a man who had been on the far side of orders that made no sense. He measured what she had said against the work, not against his pride, and he nodded. "On three," he said. "I'll stop the ones who are too ready to prove themselves."

Aldren lifted the staff to a position between them. The lantern's steadying did not brighten, but every face took notice when it touched the wood. He lifted his chin to all three of them and then to the men and women whose hands would hold more weight than any speech could.

"We go north," he said. "The frost line stands open if we take it now. We keep to the higher connectors when the void pockets slide along the lower courses. We make the Frost-Heights bridge by the second hour of night if the wind favours. We stop when Tamsin says stop. No private heroics."

He looked at each by name. "Tamsin calls on the sway. Ori reads the sky and the wind first and the map second. Brakka minds the cable and the temper of metal and will not spare your feelings if you do a bad job. Garin, hold the flanks and keep the eager from getting us killed."

He lowered his voice and it carried the way rope does when pulled against weight. "I spend light when hands and craft cannot. Not before."

Tamsin did not care for speeches, but this was list and load. It was what a good board needs.

She touched the knot on her belt as if to wake it and left it fast. "On the line, my word holds," she said. "This is not pride. It is order. If I say cut, you cut. Argue later when your boots are on rock. Elders and children clip first. Brace on three. We don't count coin in a slack."

Aldren nodded without taking her words for his own. "On any span, your word holds," he affirmed. His staff hummed a fraction and the near tie settled the width of a breath.

"Under sky," Brakka said, and the rigger to Tamsin's right echoed. Garin spoke the words. Ori's mouth formed them and he did not blush for it.

Ori slid a fresh sheet free. "Here," he said, pointing. "Northern span twelve, she has kept pitch. The hum here held steady through three bells with a slight lowering at the second. The Green Pylon chimes answer slow, so the load is shared farther north." He tapped a faded arc. "Frost-Heights is still white across the top. It will be rimed hard."

Tamsin toed the near hawser. The note changed when a gust crossed the court and then corrected. The shard at her hip gave a small warmth without push. She nodded.

"We take your northern run," she said. "We make Frost-Heights before the ice grows teeth."

A runner with a warden's toggle at his throat shouldered in, soaking, eyes wide with the duty of the message pushing the fear it rode on.

"From the ring-hall," he said, breath short. "Senate patrols are closing upper lanes. All travellers to High Aerie for assignment and escort by order."

Aldren took the strip he held out. It bore the tight banded script of the Senate clerks. He showed it to Tamsin and then to Ori, not because Ori could countermand it but because seeing helps a crew accept that a refusal is not mere pride.

"We're not going to the Aerie," Tamsin said. "We're going to the frost line."

"The order says," the runner began. He had a good face for a boy. He had not yet learned the stones you keep in your words when people older than you have told you your mouth is theirs.

"The order isn't keeping anyone from falling," Tamsin said without bite in it. She turned her head to Aldren.

"We move on the wind," Aldren said. "We'll send a message back in a short hand."

He pulled a small brass token from his coat and pressed it into the runner's hand. "Tell them: work first."

The boy looked at the token and then at the lantern and he nodded because the lantern steadied something his words could not.

Tamsin raised her hand. "Knot-song," she said.

The crew picked it up. It was a short piece, three lines sung under the breath without flourish. It named the basic bindings: loop, hitch, bend. It set the breath and the call: one-two and the hold at three. It turned strangers into a rope without loving them or asking them to love each other.

Garin hummed the ground line. His voice did not waver. Brakka did not sing; he drove a wedge and the wedge kept time with the count. Ori's voice joined at the second line, unsure for a beat and then sure. One of the riggers came in one beat late, then clean. Shoulders along the court settled on the beat.

When the song ended, hands checked belts and chalk and blades. Feet found the balls instead of the heels. The knot at Tamsin's waist sat proper. The lantern waited.

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They reached the north rim of the court when sea-green colour lifted through the mist on the far approach. Rope-laminate bows showed in a neat line. Hook spears faced out. The standard carried a braided tassel that did not dip in the wet. The front rank came to a stand without telling the boards they had done so, which Tamsin respected without liking what it meant. It spoke of drill that had earned a place on spans.

Prince Cael Aeronar came forward with a cloak that had seen spray before rain, braids undone by the day rather than by carelessness. He set his weight right on the deck, not fighting the sway. His jaw had a tightness that belonged to someone measuring loss in units that could not be hidden with ceremony.

"Count Tamsin of the Lines," he said. He gave a title she had not claimed. He meant respect in the only language he had.

"Tamsin, without ornaments," she said.

His gaze slid for a beat to the oilskin-wrapped shard at her belt. He did not lean toward it as if it were a treasure. He drew a breath as if a burr lay in its groove and braced for the catch.

"Fragments of Law fall under state custody," he said. "There are claims and duties that bind me to safeguard them. Windharp's harbours take in water through cracked plates. Grain barges wait for rope we cannot spare. Sandbags sag on wet rope we cannot replace." Garin's hand hovered near his hook-knife until Tamsin's slight shake checked him.

Tamsin's hand found the shard and left it. "Spans heed cadence, not ribbons," she said. "If I hand this over to a ribbon, the line doesn't care. It won't correct because a clerk wrote a mark and you wear a colour. It will correct because a count is said and hands move right. While people cross and the route needs a walker, it stays on me."

Behind Cael a lieutenant shifted, the look of a man who had written many orders for others to fulfil.

Aldren set the staff in the narrow space between them. He did not raise the lantern because it did not need height to command.

"There is a division that holds both truths," Aldren said. "On the sway, Tamsin commands. The shard remains with the one who can speak to it in motion. Off the sway, your marines guard the approach, the flanks, the posts. You will receive permission from no one to do what you must on boards and platforms. But the line has one voice."



Cael held Aldren's eyes and then looked to Tamsin. He did not look past her to Ori or Brakka. He did not move his chin to suggest any private deal. His eyes tracked his marines, then Tamsin, then the trembling boards; his hand eased on his belt. He nodded once.

"On the sway, your word holds." He nodded. "Off it, mine does, and I'll spend it to keep us alive."

He stepped half a pace closer. "There are dock mothers in Windharp who sent sons to haul nets this morning and haven't heard our bells since. A harbour wall is giving, and we have men there with sandbags who can't reach a supply span. If Law can be steadied, I mean to help bind it. If it cannot, we will feed those we can and bring others home fast."

Tamsin did not soften at mothers mentioned in speeches. Plenty had named mothers and then bought their own safety with the breath it won them. But his jaw had the set of someone who had stood on a dock and been counted on. He understood how lines take weight and how that can be put on a back until the back fails.

Garin's hand slid near a hook-knife when a marine moved too close to Tamsin. She lifted two fingers and he checked, the knife forgot because her hand had spoken.

"On three," Garin said to himself and meant it for the first step they would take together.

Brakka made a noise that might have been a laugh if the day had permitted it. He scraped tar on a pad with a short blade and did not look up when he spoke. "Every hour you argue takes two hours from something that's holding by habit, not by craft."

Cael turned to him with the respect of a man who knows the sound of a workshop that makes what can't afford to fail. "How many hours have we?"

"For this court?" Brakka said. "Two, if I shore. For the city? I've no sum for you that will make you sleep."

"Then we go," Cael said.

Ori lifted two fingers. "Cross-wind eases in ten counts and keeps a soft shoulder for maybe a quarter hour. If we use it, we're out of the worst pockets, the ones that have been sliding beneath the lower runs."

"On his count," Tamsin said.

Cael drew up a sergeant whose kit had no gloss, just clean fittings. The man's eye moved ahead of his feet. "Rell," Cael said, "keep to Tamsin's shoulder when we're not on open sway. Repeat her count down the line. Don't improve it. Don't shorten it."

Rell nodded. "Yes, my prince."

Tamsin gave Rell a hard look and got the face of a man who would not argue with her in a pinch because he did not need to be in charge to keep his oath.

"Ten," Ori said, voice low. He began to count in the rhythm he had set on his draft. "Nine."

The court breathed on his count, not because his voice had power but because the line needed everyone to be one body for a breath.

"Three," he said.

"Two," Tamsin said to catch the downbeat before the brace that mattered.

"One," Ori said, pausing the length of the cross-wind's hitch.

"Three," Tamsin called, and they stepped off.

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They took the boards to the north tie on a slow three. The northern connector was a thinner song than the market span had been. The boards were narrower; the side rope had a taste of salt and a slickness under the

tar that could betray a hand. The fog thickened in breaths and then broke across the faces of those who led, leaving beads on lashes and oilskin both. Lanterns were hooded to keep hands free and sight honest. The shard warmed against Tamsin's thigh without tug. It had no need to insist. The way was the one chosen.

They made a third of the run and the hum lowered without warning. Tamsin's toes felt the change before her ear. The cable under the boards did not sing its accustomed note. The rhythm of steps behind her hiccuped.

"Hold," she said, and the word did not mean stop. It meant keep your body honest. It meant let the sway take you and return you without flinching.

Aldren came past Rell without asking for lane. He set the lantern-staff into the base iron of a tie that held the connector to a post. The glass did not flare. He laid his palm flat and closed his eyes and spoke.

"Tension held by covenant," he said, voice pitched for the bolt rather than the men. "Load shared by willing hand. Anchors answer to oath."

The lantern's heart flickered once; the air prickled over knuckles. The lantern dimmed to a duller amber for a breath.

The words did not perform any trick. They reminded a made thing what it had been made to do. The hum shifted up the width of a fingernail. The seesaw of the boards eased by a degree that mattered to hearts. Aldren's mouth tightened and he drew his palm away. He wiped it on his coat as if it sweated. It was not sweat that left the smear. He put his thumb to the lantern's frame and steadied it because it had given more than it should have in a short hour.

Tamsin raised her hand. "Staggered file," she said. "Three-count spacing."

Cael swung his arm and his marines adjusted. One corporal bunched his squad. Cael stepped into his space without bark and moved them out again, repeating the count with the clean speed of a man who had taught drills. Rell echoed the numbers without adding any flourish; his knuckle tapped the rail at two to check a brace, and he let it go at three as ordered.

"Pads," Brakka called, kneeling near the rail. He pulled a roll of old cloth and tar and pressed it to the cable where the outer wires showed a thin bloom. "Heat took here when the Law spoke. It's honest, but it will cook your hold if you feed it after. Give me cloth."

A woman from the court gave her shawl without asking for a return. Brakka cut it in two, soaked the halves in his tar pot, and wrapped them back on the cable. He pressed with thumbs that bore scars of old burns. He hissed air through teeth without drama.

Ori had his grease pencil in one hand and the oilskin half-open with a knee to hold it. "Circle for Law-steady," he said, marking the range it had settled. "Not a circle, then. Lens-shaped. Pulls harder toward the tie. I can scale that. I'll count the veer in tens."

"You'll tell me when it makes a difference to feet," Tamsin said.

"I will," Ori said. He kept writing.

A rigger on the rear line swore in a whisper when his body remembered what had almost happened in the market. Tamsin's mouth counted under her breath without making song of it. One. Two. Three. She let those nearest her hear the rhythm but not the fear.

Aldren leaned the staff toward her so that only she would hear him. "I can't hold every cut and shudder for you. If I spend at each, the lantern will give and so will I. Call me when hands and craft cannot."

She glanced at the smear his thumb had left on the brass before the mist washed it. "I will," she said. She meant it.

They moved through the soft place at the stagger, the sway carrying them in a rhythm past the honest danger now kept to human scale. Rell

repeated her count down the line until it struck the last rank and came back in a way that affirmed the first call had travelled clean.

When they set boots on the next platform, men and women let shoulders drop a fraction. Tamsin did not give them long. She put chalk back into her palm and clapped once to keep the powder ready in her lines. The shard cooled a little, no longer warning but not at rest.

"Drink," she said. "Then we go."

No one argued. Brakka finished his pad. Aldren cleaned the glass with a square of cloth kept in the staff's cap. It was care a tool deserved so it could do its work again.

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They held a short count on the platform. Breath steadied.

A small brass-winged courier, one of the Senate's brass bell-larks, with a band on one leg fluttered out of the fog and caught the staff's haft with a small whirr of wings. It bore a strip under its band. Aldren eased it free and read it by the lantern with the care he gave all cut things.

"High Aerie offers escort to supervision," he said. He did not add the word 'orders' even if it sat inside the strip as plain as a bolt sits inside a tie. He handed the strip to Tamsin.

She read it once and let the paper go to the oilskin at her belt. So they wanted eyes on them now. "We're not detouring to be told what we already know."

"We'll reply," Aldren said. He took a charcoal stub from his coat and marked the band with a code that would return a meaning through clerks faster than words could travel on an open sheet. He wrote 'work first' in that tight hand that had not always belonged to a man on spans.

The courier darted away, a spot of moving brass swallowed by the mist.

Cael's lieutenant touched two fingers to the edge of his jaw. "We should take escort. It puts us on the right side of the Senate."

"There's one side worth the name," Cael said. "The side where people don't fall." He turned to Tamsin. "Your run. I'm with it."

Tamsin did not give him praise or the relief he might have been owed. Men who made good choices kept making them better if you left them hungry for that small food.

Brakka opened a roll and counted nails, wedges, pads. He had a way of speaking numbers as if they were steps on a span. "Sixteen nails fit for work. Nine wedges not yet crushed by hurry. Five pads and two I can clean and pretend they're new. Three splices honest and two held by hope and hands. That's enough to get us onto the Frost-Heights if the god of fools wants to favour us."

"We'll not ask that god for anything," Tamsin said. "We'll make our own favour."

Ori knelt and held up two threads, one greasy, one dry, and watched how they lay over his knuckle. He read the air with no ornament. It was how a man reads salt and ice when the fog carried both.

"There's a window across the heights floor," he said. "Ice film thickens in the third hour if we wait. If we go now, we cross a cleaner skin with better purchase. If we miss it, the rime grows teeth and takes boots."

Tamsin looked at Garin, who had already placed himself where his body filled the space a risk would try to take. "We move as one. No scouts beyond the reach of touch."

"I can range," Garin said, because skill should be offered even when refused. He did not insist.

"You'd go alone and bring back a report with no hands to match it," Tamsin said. "We're not making a song about you. We're crossing a bridge. Lead point. Stay in sight."

Garin made a choice that would set how the guards moved for the rest of the hour. He took point and stayed in a line where Tamsin could see him and where the marines could mark his feet. He set a pace that left breath for those who had less to spare.

Aldren lifted his chin and pointed with the staff. Through the mist there was a pale smudge that was not cloud and not sky. It was the Frost-Heights arc catching star and the faint glow of cities beyond.

"Five miles of rime," Aldren said. He did not tell the tale of crews who had failed there when they pretended they could keep a spring pace on ice. He knew the pace would write itself on their bodies soon enough.

Rell checked his harness. Cael tightened a strap without letting a sergeant do it for him. Brakka tied his tar pot to his belt with a knot Tamsin recognised as one he trusted. Ori rolled his maps in tight against his ribs.

They lit small war-lanterns that had cowls meant to throw steadiness at feet rather than at eyes. The column stretched in a clean line: Tamsin in front with Rell half a pace behind, Aldren with the staff a few steps back and to the right so his light could touch the line and not blind the feet, Ori to the left with drafts, Brakka near the middle where tools could get forward or back as needed, Garin at point, Cael bringing marines who kept the column's edges honest.

A sound reached them from the south-west through ties and through the boards of old runs rather than through air. A deep groan carried from a shifting pylon. Then the sound failed, not fading in the usual way, but ending with no edge. Tamsin's chest tightened because silence of that kind meant the world had lost a rule. Garin's grip eased on his hook-knife; Brakka checked the nearest splice.

"We're not going back for that post," Brakka said. He did not make himself hard to prove his courage. He stated a truth. The path behind had become a worse gamble than the path ahead.

"Forward," Tamsin said. She put weight on the line. "On my count."

She drew a breath, felt the wind skim the skin of her face, and listened for the ready hum in the cable underfoot. Ori gestured with his hand to show where the cross-wind eased.

"One," Tamsin said.

The column caught it.

"Two."

Garin's shoulder dipped with the sway and returned. Cael's jaw loosened a fraction as he let the line set his body rather than the other way around. Rell repeated the numbers without stealing them.

"Three."

They moved onto the northern run toward the frost line. The lanterns made small circles of steadiness around boots. The fog closed over the rear ranks and then opened again in slow measures. Bells far behind failed and then resumed in broken code. The hum under their feet sang truer where Aldren had spoken and stubborn elsewhere where Brakka had padded. The shard at Tamsin's hip warmed again and then settled, content with the course.

Under oath and under sky, the company went north. Rime scraped under boots.



# Chapter 3

## Frost-Heights Crossing

Rime had taken the cable in a white skin that feigned strength and hid cold bite. Five miles of it lay ahead, a long arc across the cloud-chasm. The Frost-Heights bridge kept pitch because some oath still sat in its iron, but the day had been hard on holds, and the night showed where the world had been chewed.

Tamsin set her feet on the near boards of the run and tested with the toe. The hum came up through leather and bone, a half-tone lower than it should have been. Her cut palm woke at the cold and the old burn pulled. She shook chalk into that hand and the powder clung in the grease she could not scrub out between crossings. The shard at her belt gave a brief warmth without push. The way ahead was already chosen; it assented.

"On my count," she said. Her voice carried to a distance a span allows when the wind is honest. "One. Two. Three."

They moved. The boards were narrow, the side-rope slick under tar. War-lantern cowl threw steadiness at feet rather than at eyes. The marines learned to keep their hands in open work rather than fists. The court folk mirrored them. Rell walked half a pace behind Tamsin and sent the count cleanly along the file without showing the pride of a man who likes command. His knuckle tapped the rail at two, and he let it go at three, as she had ordered earlier.

Fog lapped and lifted. When it thickened, boots sought the balls and not the heels. When it cleared in three careful breaths, they saw the cable ahead bearded with ice where vapour froze and did not fall as it should. The bearding added weight where you would not choose it. Each beard had its own small hum. Tamsin listened through them for the main line.

She felt the lift of the sway under her. The company took it rather than fought.

Ori came up on her left, long and thin, oilskin half-rolled. The damp got at the sheets even when he kept them under his ribs. His ink bled and the grease pencil would not bite as it should. He swore once, soft and without show. He rolled the oilskin tight, slid a thong through it, and turned his wrists to show their bands where he had drawn clean lines and arrows in thin black, the ink set into skin by old habit. He checked one line against the edge of the world and marked a notch along his thumb where wind sheared two ways.

"Drafts fogging," he said. "I go to wrist ink."

"You mark clean," Tamsin said. The words did not praise. They assigned weight.

Prince Cael's sea-green showed dull in the night. Cael raised two fingers to his standard-bearer. "Unstring it," he said. "No tassel on a bridge." The sergeant stripped the braid and furled cloth in three turns so it would not catch air. Cael took two packs off a back and moved them along the file to balance a soldier who had the wrong lean, then tightened a strap at the man's hip himself. He seated the buckle with a firm tug. A glance to Tamsin, no request, none needed, and then he fell back to his place.

The hum lowered a note and then corrected, as if the span had coughed. Bodies behind her shifted. Tamsin lifted a palm without turning.

"Hold," she said. "Not stop. Let the sway carry and return you. Bunching kills."

A little laugh leaked from someone new to the night, the kind that comes when fear is too sharp and must find air. Rell's hand found the rail at two. Tamsin lengthened the beat to keep the eager from stealing a brace. "One... Two... Three." The little laugh died back into breath.

Aldren came up on her right, lantern-staff under his hand. The glass did not flare; the heart of it held a modest, steady amber. Stitched lines on his coat caught the small light. Tonight he looked used, not old. He walked as if the boards had brought him to many places where care counted more than any name.

"You can steady this much," she said, meaning with the lantern, and meaning also he should not.

He shook his head once. "I cannot hold more than twelve heartbeats without burning the lantern's wick of me," he said. "Hands first. Cadence first. The light when the choice is fall or hold for many. Call me then."

"Under sky," she answered. It was not a bargain; it was order of work.

Brakka Copperweft was three lengths back with the tool-roll slung from a broad belt so that the weight hung near his centre. He kept his steps small and quick because that kind of pacing preserved strength on ice. He grunted his way up to her shoulder when the boards widened enough to allow it.

"Cold-seize here," he said. His beard ties had gone darker with wet. He thumped the cable with his thumb and held there. "Hear the dull patch? Outer wires slick without give. She'll shear if a sudden load takes her."

Tamsin crouched, touched with her toes, and heard the deadness in the hum. The frost there had a fat look, as if it had drunk up thin water off the air and then sat on it. "Detour," she said. "Older side-rope. We go single clip. Three-count spacing. Rell, send it down: 'On three we take the old rope; no heroics.'"

Rell said the words and the file eel-slid to the left without a tangle. The side-rope they moved onto had been laid before her birth. It had varnish and grit from four different crews, each with their own way of showing care. Its hum was thin but honest. It would take them over the seized place and back onto the main within a dozen careful steps.

"On three," she called. "One. Two. Three."

They moved. A woman new to the line set her hand in the wrong place and corrected without shame when a rigger touched her elbow. The set of the company's shoulders shifted as the count took hold.

Far to the east where the cloud lay darker in a trench, an oval absence opened in a clean cut. It did not show teeth or any beast's throat. It took away sight and sound in a neat hole. For a breath the world had no tone beyond it, and then it closed with a dry snap that was not any wood or any rope. People flinched. One marine swore at a whisper under breath. Cael's jaw tightened once and then eased because nothing could be done about a hole that far away except count better here.

"Eyes on your feet," Tamsin said. "The road remembers. Our count holds us."

Boot soles found places that had been chosen by other boots. The file straightened. The fog thinned and the line felt the wind's edge go from wet to dry as they gained another degree of height. The cold came cleaner. It would be worse for hands and better for rot.

They were halfway to the first pylon when frost cracked underfoot in a sound that did not belong to living things. The board had ice hiding under its grain and the cold had tightened it to the point of protest. A boy behind her lifted his heel too quick and then fixed himself.

"Do not brace early," she said, and lengthened the count so that bodies hungry to make themselves safe did not snatch at a hold that was not theirs to take yet. "One... Two... Three."

Boards held. They moved past the crack's reach. Breath came out cold enough to make steam and then the steam lay thin and unhelpful.

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The void slit opened along the underside of the span without warning. It was as if a knife had laid itself where the cable wanted to be and told it to consider absence instead. The hum under their feet died in that reach. The cable sagged to a lower song. A row of bodies pitched forward while their feet were still behind them, and a child near the centre made a shape with his mouth that had no sound because sound had been removed from that narrow air.

"Freeze," Tamsin said. "Spread your stance. Brace on three." She called without a tremor, though everything close to her throat wanted to speed. "Brakka, heat on the main."

"On it," Brakka said. He clipped his belly strap to a loop he had put there for this work years ago. He strapped his thighs to the rail so that when strength went out of him he would not add a fall to what he meant to correct. He pulled copper clamps from the roll with his teeth when his burnt gloves would not open right. He fastened the clamps onto the cable with movements that wasted nothing and turned his tar pot so that it sat within reach of his right knee.

"On three," Tamsin called. "We take the sag without fighting it. One. Two. Three."

They let the sag take their bodies and then brought their weight back with the sway rather than against it. People want to lock their knees when fear takes them. She would not let them. Rell tapped the rail at two and released at three, and the small discipline caught across ten bodies, then twenty.

Brakka set the clamps and drew heat from a coil pack that had kept under his coat. The stench that rose was tar and old rope-fat. Steam came off the cable in little spurts. He hummed through his nose, not making a song of it, making a working sound to keep his breaths even and his hands steady. The frost steamed and fell in a run of water that turned back to thin white along the edge of the world. The hum of the cable lifted in a sliver as the steel remembered that it had a shape to keep. Two files

steadied, the child at centre still clipped.

The clamps bit through the first layer of rime and found honest metal. Brakka pressed with his palms because that is how you tell heat to seat where it needs to. The glove on his right hand charred and smelt of old leather and cooking. He hissed air like a man putting his wrist into cold brine, and then the hiss cut because his breath had gone to his work. His palms took the heat through the gloves and then the gloves had no meaning. The cable creaked. A woman two files back threw her weight the wrong way. Garin moved without looking to Tamsin for leave and planted himself as a brace in her path with body and hook-staff, turning the bad angle into a set place to lean against.

"Hold," Tamsin said. "On three."

Aldren held the lantern-staff hard enough that the brass left a mark in his palm. He did not raise it. He watched Brakka for the moment when hands could hold no more and Law would have to be asked to remember its oath. That moment did not come before the cable found its bite again.

Ori's hands flicked in front of his chest. He marked his wrist band in three short lines, then one longer, then a dot. He held that hand to the wind, counted to himself, and nodded into the cold without speaking his sums aloud.

"Three tens between snaps," he said after breath returned to those near. "Drift under colder air by three body-lengths. It likes the lee of the ties."

"Say when it matters to feet," Tamsin said.

"I will," he said.

Brakka wrenched the clamps free when they had done their work. He put the back of his left wrist against the rail because he could not bear to touch with his palm. The skin of both hands had blistered and split through old scars. Tar had gone into the cracks and would stay there until someone set to it with old cloth and patience later. He looked at his hands

and then at the cable. He nodded once, not to himself, not to anyone, to the work.

"You held it," Garin said, not as praise, as measure.

"Heat holds when courage won't," Brakka said, and let a thin breath through his teeth because his own courage had been honest but he liked to spit on pretty talk. The breath came out clean anyway and put a crack in the fear around them so it could bleed a little.

The slit of absence closed under the span with that same dry finish. Sound returned as if they had taken wool from their ears. There was a clatter from a dropped hook somewhere down the line, and then someone caught it with their boot so it did not roll into the dark. People looked at Brakka's hands and did not know where to put their eyes next. One rigger went as if to take those hands and then stopped because there was nothing in the world that would make that right now except time and balm and no more heat for a day. Brakka tucked his hands into his coat and the movement cost him and he let it show so others would not think less of themselves when they could not hide everything.

"Forward," Tamsin said. She did not ask if they wanted to. "On my count. One. Two. Three."

They went because there was nothing behind that would be kinder to them than what lay ahead. The hum stayed a shade higher for twenty paces, then settled where it had been before the void took its bite. The wind ran colder. The fog went away for a while and gave them a sky laid in slate.

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Tar-sweet from Brakka's work hung in her mouth; the hum held a shade higher. Ori had named three tens between snaps. By his wrist marks, two tens remained; she kept the cadence inside that measure.

A coil had torn free ahead of them and taken a section of board with it. Where the boards should have been, there was only a maintenance strand, narrow as a wrist and bowed under the new weight of fear. The strand had old varnish under the rime and grooves where boots had told it the truth of need in other years.

Garin reached the edge of it and set his foot to move and did not. He stood with his heel off stone and his breath stalled. The scar along his back pulled where his pauldron never sat right. Tamsin could see the step he kept seeing; it was not this one but it was the same shape of choice.

She went to him, not at his side but in front, and put her heels to the strand as if she were about to take a dance she did not care for. She clipped her belt to the line. The chalk in her palm made new white along the webbing where she had drawn count more times than she cared to remember.

"Look at me," she said. "Not at it. Count with me."

He looked at her as if that order had pulled his jaw up by the hinge.

She spoke in the rope-chant voice that carried weight into bodies without becoming music that would call anything else down. "One. Two. Three." She took three careful steps backward across the strand, breath matched to each. Her knees had give and her core held, the craft she had learned from women whose names did not end up in any hall. She kept her eyes on his. She made herself the safer place to look because the place underfoot would not offer safety to anyone tonight.

"My fall started on a step like this," Garin said. The words came out flat. There was no excuse in them. There was only a picture and the price paid.

"Not this one," she said. "This one is ours. On three."

He set his foot where she had left space for it. Eyes stayed level. He matched her breath because she had told him that was the only thing he had to do. The strand bent a degree under his weight and then held. His



face went the colour of ash even under lantern cowl. He moved his weight over the rope's say of itself, not forcing it to carry him like a bridge. He let it be what it was. Another step. Another. The pauldron dragged at him and he corrected the angle by a thumb's breadth. She saw the correction and kept her count steady so that the file behind would not borrow fear from his small fight.

"One," she said. "Two. Three."

They came to the boards again. Garin's heel found wood and then his whole foot. He did not sigh. He put a hand to the rail to thank it and then took it away because the rail had not asked for thanks. A single knuckle-rap passed down the rail.

"Thank you," he said to her, too low for anyone else but Brakka, who stood near with his hands in his coat, to hear.

Brakka laughed once, the sound that had no softness in it but made space anyway. "Say it louder next time so the line hears it. She likes to be thanked."

"Lines don't like anything," Tamsin said, and then allowed herself a single breath that refused to be steady. "Move."

Cael raised his hand to Rell and then to the rear. "Mirror the cadence on your strand," he said under breath. Rell took the chant cleanly and sent it to the marines on their parallel passage. The military count bent to the rope-chant without argument. It was a small thing that would live under skin and show later as better choices at the right hour.

They consolidated beyond the gap. The company was not the same shape as it had been an hour earlier. It was tighter. There were fewer noises that did not belong to the work. The rope-chant sat in bodies now without being called up. When the wind flinched, knees knew what to do without any head giving orders.

The first northern pylon came up in the dark like a thing that had forgiven the world for its mistakes and stood anyway. Its metal had frost

along the edges where temperature refused to be friendly. The ties at its base had been rubbed with old fat until that hard skin turned from white to a dull sheen that threw lantern back at a man's boot.

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Boards returned underfoot and the hum eased; their knees kept the cadence as they stepped onto the platform. They reached the pylon under a sky like slate and a wind that bit fingers through cloth. The platform held a scatter of old crates and a drum that had been rolled here to be useful and then forgotten. The marines set their backs to the outer edges so they could be the first to feel any unevenness in the hold if it came under them.

"Drink," Tamsin said. "Eat what can be eaten standing." Eight meals for ten mouths.

They had hard bread and dried fish in wraps. The bread learnt the taste of rime when it broke. Tamsin chewed until her jaw reminded her that hunger was not the only thing a person could feed. She looked along the file to count heads. She always counted. She touched her belt knot and left it tied because the hour did not want the comfort of uncoupling.

Brakka tried to open a pouch with his fingers and failed. He took a breath that was too fast and then made it slow. Tamsin went to him and took the pouch without asking and opened it and handed it back. He nodded once, angry in the way a good craftsman gets when his hands betray him. He did not make the anger into a play.

"You don't lift, you don't tie," she said. "You tell me where hands go that are not yours."

"Aye," he said. He set his teeth into dry fish with care not to tear new skin on his own pain.

Aldren stepped aside and turned the lantern so the back of the cowl gave him cover. He unlatched the frame and checked the wick with two careful touches and a glance he had practised so many times it was part of him. Wick at a fingernail's breadth; oil at a finger in the base. He examined the smear on the brass from earlier where his thumb had left cost on the metal. A wipe with the square of cloth from the cap cleared the glass. He did not feed the lantern more oil. Latch set, he held the staff a longer moment before returning to the group.

"We conserve again," he said. "There may be a place where the light is the difference between many and none. This was not it. The lantern waits. So do I."

No one answered with complaint. Hunger made wise men foolish sometimes. Tonight hunger did not get its way.

Ori crouched near the inner tie and used a stub of grease pencil on an oiled slate he kept in the tool-roll pocket because paper had betrayed him hours ago. He drew a straight line and then three dots at intervals where the void had opened. Distance he measured against breath counts, and he marked a small cross at the place where cold air had dropped with weight rather than speed. Ink on his wrist had blurred on the inside of his left arm where sweat had met wet, and he redrew the most important arrow in a darker line.

"Three tens between snaps," he said for those nearest. "Longer when the wind veers warm for a breath. It likes to work under ties where sound is already complicated."

"Noted," Tamsin said. "Feet will follow the note when it comes to it."

Cael took three men from his rear rank and two from the middle. "You carry tools now," he said to them, handing over wedges and pads that men would trust if a soldier carried them like he cared about them and knew their names. He set two more to the edge near a narrow gantry that ran off the platform toward a higher approach. "Maintain a quiet watch on that upper strake," he said. "It's reserved for a specialist. No

passage without the line-boss saying so." A long case lay under a tarp on chocks by the inner rail, roped off and left untouched. He did not say more because giving the shape of a future to men who wanted a present could make them lean the wrong way.

Garin rolled his shoulder as if something had tried to sit there without leave. Tamsin saw it. She pointed to his other side.

"Favour it," she said.

"I can carry," he said.

"You can carry better if you put the weight where you have it," she said. "That's an order."

He nodded once and moved the strap without further remark. He did not look relieved, and that was proper for a man who wanted to prove more than he should. He would be useful longer this way.

Out over the cloud a long thread of cloth lifted once and dipped. It had colours that belonged to Rimespan. The pattern had held through wind and rain, and the frayed ends still told the story of that keep's pride. A spotter at the edge lifted two fingers toward the east. Ori, eyes on his slate, said, "Leave-window narrows by a tenth." Rell held the count true.

"Hope isn't a keeper knot," Tamsin said. "We move when the bridge says so."

A shuffle of feet came at the edge of the platform. Three figures huddled under a tarp that had done as much as it could do. A woman with cracked lips and a boy with cheeks raw from wind and a man who had the shape of someone who had done good work with his hands until the world took his tools and left him with only his name.

"Please," the woman said, and then shut her mouth on any more. She had learnt in the last days that pleas made some men kinder and some men worse. She did not yet know which kind these were.

"Clip them," Tamsin said to Rell. "Elders and children first. Brace on three. No coin buys place."

Rell ran the spacing in his head and widened the file by half a pace. "Two breaths," he said, so the delay was owned and not guessed. A marine at the edge glanced once at the bearded cable, then at the boy, and tightened his strap. No one argued.

The man had his hand in his coat before she finished the rule. He took it out. Rell put a clip on the boy's belt while the boy stared at the frost in a way that did not yet contain fear because he had not spent enough years to name what he was looking at. The man swallowed without noise. The woman did not thank anyone loudly, which fooled no one. The thank-you sat in the way she moved her shoulders so as not to be a burden even when a soldier took half her weight.

"We take them," Cael said for his men, not as a question, as order to keep their hands honest with strangers.

They waited for Ori's hand to signal the small ease in the cross wind that would give their feet that tiny advantage honest men earn by paying attention. He lifted two fingers, then one, then a flat palm for the hitch, then turned his hand the way the wind had turned.

"One," Tamsin said.

"Two," Rell murmured with her.

"Three," she called, and they stepped off the Frost-Heights and onto the staging platform beyond with a weight in their limbs that came from work done and not from fear. "Count held," she said, low. The next route showed itself in a line of darker iron leading to a rope-road that split three ways. Ori checked his wrist marks against the split and lifted two fingers toward the eastern bend. Every face knew another hour lay in that iron and those ropes. None of them bent under the knowing. They adjusted belts, spat once for luck because someone always did, and set themselves to be used.

The wind turned a shade colder and dragged a smell of copper from somewhere under cloud. Dawn had not come, but the night's black had softened to a kind of grey the body knows even with eyes closed. Brakka

cradled his hands as if they were a thing that belonged to him again, not a price he had paid and lost. Aldren lifted his chin and looked once at the lantern and not at the men. Ori tied the oiled slate into his roll so the notes would not slide away. Garin's shoulder sat easier with the strap moved. Cael's men watched the reserved approach with care that did not come from pride.

"Under oath and under sky," Tamsin said, not loudly. "We go on."

She took a breath and counted in it, and those who heard it took the count for their own.

# Chapter 4

## Rimespan Holds

Wind came narrow off the heights and cut the tar smoke to threads. Bells at Rimespan spoke the brace cadence over a deeper groan that lived in the cable beds. Frost lifted along the shaded ropes and fell in pin□white crumbs that stuck to boots. The fortress stood on a web of lines that had known siege and wedding flags and now knew neither comfort.

Tamsin took the near rail with her left hand and set her stance to the sway. The Frost□Heights were at her back, their rime still in the seams of her boots. Ahead, Rimespan's outer strakes arced over a chasm that held cloud and the smell of hot copper from engines out of sight.

"On three," she said. Rell breathed the number with her. The file moved. The new recruits on the deck took the count into their legs. Marines kept their banner furled. Cael's jaw had a new set that belonged to hours like this, not to hall talk.

A drum of metal far out found its answer in a clack at the inner posts. Something had started to work against them with intent.

"Tethers," a spotter hissed from the east tower. His hand, lifted, cut down twice.

The first cannon fired with no smoke, only a shove of air and a high hum that fought the cable's own song. The hook tipped over the edge of cloud, barbs catching light, wire unspooling clean from a barrel. It bit into a side□rope in mid□air as if it had been invited. Reel took hold. The live rope jumped, sang a wrong note, and spat a fringe of snapped fibres. The hook's weight and the engine's pull cut through varnish and honest hemp in a blink.

"Hold your knees. Brace on three," Tamsin said. The line obeyed her voice, not the air's shove. She marked the cut with her toes through board and hum. "Left□diagonal counter. Pads and a double. Rell, send it."

Rell sent it down the line without trimming the words. Bodies moved, not fast, but true. The shock that would have torn a man from his clip became a sway that gave and took back.

Another hook came fast toward a tie where a boy in a too□big vest had been set to watch and not much else. The hook's throat would have taken his clip and the bit of him that knew the weight of a wrench. A shape moved above them on the reserved higher strake, lean and steady.

Her throat bore fine silver threads that caught what light there was. The coil□harp at her hip sat ready, wires strung with care and work□scars dark on the wood. Lethriel Rainvein came to the rail and drew a dull iron pin from the harp's cheek as if waking a companion. She set her left hand in a frame on the strings and her right on the throat, and the sound she took out of the air was not pretty, only right.

"I ask for a held breath and a cutting wind," she said, a craft□prayer shaped for work. Her voice bore rain from other seasons.

The air over the approach shifted. Heat moved along the cold in lines that could be seen only when they moved; edges sharpened where the wind had been soft. Ozone licked the tongue. A pale net showed in hair and cloth when it brushed. The next hook crossed that net and spun once without choice. It turned where it had meant to bite and went over the edge with its line hauling after it until the reel complained and the crew on the far engine had to cut their own pull or lose the barrel.

The first tie they had to save smoked at the throat. Brakka Copperweft stood with bandaged hands at a crate that a quartermaster's boy had pushed under him as if to say he now lived here. He did not sit. His eyes were narrow from glare and old work. He pointed with his chin.

"Four men on the inner pads. You, and you, no, he's got more sense in his knees. That one. Make your double with a clean lay. No flourishes.



Bring the tar kettles forward; do not tip them at the first shout."

A girl who only yesterday had sold salted pears in Vael showed him her knot so that he could spit if it was wrong. He grunted once. She grinned without any teeth and went to her place.

Another engine fired. Ori stood on the low step left of Tamsin and tilted his hand, feeling for the edge of the eddy where wind shifted. The ink on his wrist had run in the last hours and he had cleaned it and struck new lines in a careful hand with grease pencil. He rested thumb against the band to measure a short count.

"Two breaths until the next pull," he said into the wind, just loud enough for the ones who needed it. "Three tens between cycles. The fourth is short."

Tamsin took it in and let it into the count before she spoke. "On his two, we shift weight and eat it."

The next hook flew over the ledge and would have taken a hung chain of boards and the men on them. It entered the edge of Lethriel's charge and snapped to the side as if a bad splice had been forced to unlay. The barbs scraped iron. Sparks fell in a soft drift and died. The hook hit nothing that would carry force. It spun and went over.

"Net holds," Lethriel said. She did not sing any louder than she needed. Her breath shortened and she swallowed, then placed a lower pattern that held the edge of the charge under the next tie to her left.

From the far edge of the fortress, the first cheer came and broke quickly as a ring□post rang a different tone. Garin Cloudfall moved past Tamsin with a picked file of rope□fighters and three of Cael's marines who had learned in an hour how to carry hook□staves without jabbing their own men. Garin's back pulled where the old scar caught on his pauldron. He carried his weight on the good shoulder. He touched the rail once with two knuckles and said, "On your three."

"On three," she said. "No heroics. Cut only on my call."

Garin went over the outer strake, a narrow strip with no rail at the height they had. He moved as if each piece of wood had told him it would hold until he was done with it. The marines behind him took his pace and stopped when he stopped without asking why, because on wood, why's too slow.

Cael held his marines on the inner court and pointed with two fingers at the places they would be. "Shields to repair," he said. "The banners don't come out. If you draw a line, you draw it over a copper man's back and you get wet to do it."

A corporal started to say a word that lived in halls, not on rope. Cael stopped it with a hand set on the man's chest. He didn't press. He didn't need to. The corporal set his mouth to work and nodded.

Hooks came again. The third cycle was short, as Ori had said. The barbs took at the edge of a pad and the pad smoked but didn't slide. The smell climbed and set itself in teeth. Brakka's voice cut through it.

"Turn the pad. No, not that way. You must feel where the heat wants to lie and force it flat. Tell the heat where it serves. Then leave it alone."

Brakka watched the men's fingers and called a cut when a lay looked wrong. He could not do it himself. He would not ask anyone to feel what his palms still carried.

The small engine on the nearest enemy tower had a young crew. They had speed and not much patience. They reeled a hook in hot so the line whined in the air. Garin's file got under the strake where the line would pass if he counted wrong. He did not count wrong. He set his hook□staff, bit his breath against his teeth, and yanked the wire under a brace so that when the engine pulled at a wrong angle, its own line tore into the barrel throat and the barrel sang once and stuck.

Tamsin took the moment. "Counter on my three," she said. "Two pads on that tie; three on the other. Weight to the inner two men. On three we cut the outer hold."

"On three," Rell echoed, tapping the rail at two and letting it go at three as ordered.

She took the count with her breath and stepped into it. The cut on the outer hold tore fast and clean. The weight went into the braces and the ties and the two pads that had wanted the work. The engine on the far tower tilted half a man's height before the crew there threw weight at a wheel.

"Again," she said. "On three."

Before they had taken the second pull, the barrel's throat on the far engine spat shavings and ceased its song. It would spin again, but not now.

The boy at the tie she had looked at first was still there with his clip. He looked at Lethriel's hands without any of the half-fear his elders had and then back to his job. She dipped her chin once to him so that his chest would not burst with pride.

The first wave broke there. It did not go away. It changed from rush to stubborn. Smoke rose from two plates and lay in a shallow dish over the inner court. Tar ran slow from a kettle that had been set too near a hot tie. A rigger's glove stuck to a cable and smoked while his hand trembled inside it from strain and all the other hours he had not slept.

"We are not done," Tamsin said. She did not let the air go slack around them. Slack cut lives. "Drink and stand. Ori, your count to the next. Brakka, call crews where you want them. Cael, "

"I keep them where the tools are," he said. "They're there already."

Lethriel had been still for a count longer than a span could allow during work. She drew new breath and set a lower mesh over the approach nearest the worst barrel. The net took shape without any pretty light, only a nudge of hair and a taste of iron on the tongue. Hooks came. Crews moved to the inner courts; they took harness and went to posts.

A woman in a dock cloak clutched two small bodies under the inner stairs where the tar cooled and let out a sound when a hook struck the rail above them hard enough to make the boards speak. She did not move. Someone had told her to stay. She obeyed what had been asked and the bridge kept her.

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The repair hall sat above the inner court on struts that had been rubbed with fat until they shone dull as old brass. Tar kettles smoked in troughs. Crates had been made into a table by the act of leaning on them and talking over them. A cracked plate carried up from the inner anchors smoked at the table's edge, a split board propped beside it. The quartermaster wore a coat cut for lift at shoulder and elbow. His fingers had brass stains where he had handled fittings for years.

"You want more men on your outer lanes," he said, not sparing anyone the bluntness. "I will give them. I want docking preference for Rimespan ships at Windharp when this turns to trade again."

Cael did not answer at once. He looked at the map that was not a map, only Ori's slate with a grease line and three dots for cannon cycles and a couple of arrows where the wind tended. Then he looked at the men behind the quartermaster whose mouths were straight. They were men who had not seen their bed for two days and who would call a lie what it was even if a prince told it. Two fingers set on the slate's rim, he held a breath and let it go.

"Under sky, you will have preference," Cael said.

"Three seasons," the quartermaster pressed, "and a tariff clause on allied hulls at Windharp."

"Two seasons, measured by the bells when they ring honest again," Cael said. "Preference goes to commons' goods over houses' for the term. No tariff. I do not make a play with words here."

"Dock preference dies when bells go to failure," Tamsin said. Her voice carried no heat. "On failure, you pull when I call it."

"You trade away your own house's dock for us," the quartermaster said.

"He trades a piece of painted wood for hands we need now," Tamsin said. Her voice was flat as the board her hand sat on. "We count lives on spans, not ribbons in halls."

The quartermaster looked at her belt and the knives at it and then at the chalk marks on her fingers. He saw how she counted and what she counted. He nodded once with his mouth shut.

"Copper," Brakka said. His voice came out lower than he intended because of the pain in him, but it carried. "If you want your men to matter, give me copper in coils and clamps. Do not ask where they go."

"Copper, " the quartermaster began and then stopped because he was a man who did not argue with the one who had saved his tie. "Copper will be in your hands by the next bell."

Ori took a bit of grease and a shard of crate and drew a cycle where the dots were. "You have three tens between pulls. The fourth shot comes early; it fails often. Rotate crews on the long interval and tuck them in on the short one. If you want to keep the ones you bring, don't ignore this."

"You give orders in my hall now?" the quartermaster said, not unkindly, only checking.

"He calls timing," Tamsin said. "I call feet. Call your men whatever you like. On the line, my word holds." She did not raise her chin when she said it. She did not need to.

Lethriel stood with a cloth at her throat, not pressing, only there. The cloth had a trace of blue from where she had wiped her harp's wire and not thought to wash it yet. "There is a line I will not cross unless the door breaks," she said. "Storms answer to old promises. They do not take kindly to being governed for bright victory. If I overreach, the balance

sours and other crews pay. The covenants bind what I name and when. I hold nets and I will blind hooks. I will not call a bolt to pierce men if there is another way."

"I'm not asking you to strike anyone," Cael said. He had the sense to make it plain and not pretty. "I'm asking you to keep their machines dumb."

She inclined her head once, which for her was more than for most.

Garin stood with his good shoulder under the weight of a hook□staff and said, very quiet, "Take the deal. The men he sends stand in front of mine when the hooks come if you place them so."

"Done," the quartermaster said. "You will have thirty by the next bell and more when the lower court is cleared of those who can't hold."

Cael held out his hand. The quartermaster took it once and held it long enough for both of them to feel the work in the other's palm. Tamsin did not smile. She looked at the list of copper written in chalk that a boy had made at Brakka's elbow and at the line Ori had drawn, and she balanced the dock preference against the lives saved. The weight settled. It would hold.

"You will not pull crews off a span that is live to save a pretty dock in a season to come," she said to the quartermaster. "I pull them only when I say so."

"I'm not a fool," he said. "I've got sons. One of them is on your far pad."

"Then you listen," she said. There was no heat in it. There didn't need to be any.

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By the next bell the engines spoke again. The next barrage carried more thought. The engines hesitated on the third shot and came hot on

the fifth as if a man in a favoured coat had given new numbers to a crew. Ori's hand adjusted the cycle and he marked another dot on his wrist and then made a circle to tie the pattern to its own conclusion.

Fresh men took places at the posts he indicated. They came under the marines' shields and moved into the harness without shirking. The first time a hook took a pad under a new man's hand, he listened to Rell's tapping and did not make the mistake of setting too early. The shock passed through him and into the cables and out into the far ground, and he did not fall. Two other men would have, but Cael had placed them under a beam by order and their shoulders took it.

Lethriel's voice tightened on her third pattern. She widened the net to catch a pair of hooks that the enemy had staggered. The widen took more breath. When she finished it her voice came out rough with a new edge. She coughed once into the cloth at her throat. The iron taste stayed; she swallowed it and kept the mesh spread. She did not touch her throat with her hand this time because she knew people were watching and they did not need her fear. Where the mesh pressed the anchor□ring, the brass blackened, inscriptions hissed under the load.

"Anchor□rings will blacken if I hold this width," she said, low enough for the work and no more.

"You stop if it costs too much," Tamsin said under the rail of sound.

"I stop when the door closes," Lethriel answered. She set the harp's foot to the deck and let her fingers rest exactly where they needed to for the next call.

A tie beneath the far strake had begun to go soft because its wood had drunk too much thaw water in the last days and had not had time to dry. Brakka smelled it before anyone else could hear it. He turned to a boy with a tar kettle.

"Bring me the brazier. No, the other. This one runs too hot. We burn it here, and here, where the grain's still honest."

"You'll ruin the core," the boy said because someone had told him that once.

"I'll ruin it tomorrow," Brakka said. "Today I harden it enough to lie about what it can do. Place the burn."

Flame crawled along the wood with a sound like stiff cloth. Brakka watched the colour and told the boy when to pull back, then pressed a pad that had been cut from a coat and soaked in tar against the edge. He did it with the back of his wrist and hissed air through his teeth at the pain of that contact against his bandages, but he did it anyway because show taught faster than words.

"You'll need a new tie," he said to no one in particular and everyone at once. "Not today."

The light engine on the nearer tower was a mean thing bolted to a framework that someone had built with pride and not enough test. Tamsin measured its base and the angle of its line and the way the crews had braced it. She could see where they had cheated themselves with a pretty weld. She stepped onto the narrow catwalk that ran out along the dim line of a maintenance rig and felt for the hum through her toes.

"We take its feet," she said. "On my count. Diagonal counter from here and there. Two cuts. The second cuts on my three after the first gives."

"That rig falls into the court," a man said whose face had not known kindness this season.

"It falls the other way," she said, and tapped the line at her toes so he could feel what she meant instead of being told. He closed his mouth and then opened it again to say something useful: "I've got a nephew under that run."

"Then you pull true," she said.

She took the count in and let it out. "One. Two. Three."



Blades bit. The first cut freed the hinge that had been under strain. The carriage slewed on its base as the load shifted. Men shouted on the far side as they tried to throw sacks where they were not needed. Tamsin watched the weight settle. She lifted her hand. "Three," she said, and the second cut took the downhill leg at the lower pin where the weld had run cold. The engine fell. It went away from the court and into the open. Its tether line sang once and snapped. A hook went over the edge with it. No one on the engine had time to jump. The tower shook and then stopped shaking before it had time to become a habit.

A hook came too close to a repair crew at the inner tie for any grace. Garin saw it first. He moved without leave because there was no time for leave, and he set his broken wing pauldron into the path. The hook bit metal instead of a man. It tore the pauldron and then tore his shoulder under it, and he felt the tear in a clean line that would not be ignored. He did not make a sound anyone could hear under the bell and the hum of cable, but his jaw locked hard. His grip slid up the hook staff to tighten, and he missed Rell's next tap by half a count. Rell hit the bar twice, reset, and they took the next pull clean.

"Back two steps," she said to his men, and they pulled him and the hook and the rest of that moment back to a place where it could live.

Cael shifted his marines by two ranks and enforced a rotation that drew men off shields and into water and food and then back past the tar kettles to repair guard. He did not ask if they liked it. He put a hand to the shoulders of two men who had not left their post for two cycles and moved them himself. They went because a hand had told them.

At the inner anchors, plates smoked. A split ran through a board and showed its honest heart. The smell of hot iron smothered everything else. Tamsin saw too clearly that the cost of this day lived in those cracks as much as in any man's wound. They were overspending on holds. They would pay in weeks when there was no cannon, only weather and the weight of trade. She touched the rail twice. "Rell, chalk those plates one to five and mark the split board red. Tally it. Inner tie takes first repair when

the barrage lets us breathe."

"Four coils left. Three pads good. One clamp cracked," Brakka said, not lifting his eyes from the work.

The engines stuttered. Silence began in pockets and spread along the front. Hooks that had been in the air fell away or hung limp. A man at a reel far out raised a hand that could not be seen here and then lowered it because no one was watching him who would take comfort from it.

Bells changed their speech. The cadence for repair took the air so crews could live by it. A cheer tried itself out and died small under the crackle of strained lines and the stench of tar.

"Drink," Tamsin said. She put her hand on the rail and let her body feel the truth the wood could still tell. She took three breaths, counted by habit because fear had its teeth in the bones of the day, and it loosened a little. She did not let go of the knot at her belt yet.

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The service deck under the east bell casing had held only pigeons and waste a week ago. The bell had cracked in the last hour and lay like a fallen bowl on a bed of sawdust someone had poured in a hurry to keep it from taking a second wound. The casing had a panel loose, a carefully chiselled square that had been hidden behind a coat of age and smoke.

Ori's fingers ran along the seam. He found the edge where a loved hand had taken pride in a clean join. The piece came free with a breath and a tilt. Inside, wrapped in cloth that had been kept from damp by more care than any of them had given their own beds these last days, lay a shard of stone with shallow incisions that were neither writing nor ornament. It slept until Tamsin's shadow fell over it.

She took it into her palm. Heat came into it at once, not burning, only present and choosing. It set a line of warmth along her thigh where her

belt would hold it. For a heartbeat the hum of the fortress shifted in her ears and showed another path it wanted. She breathed once and set the shard in the oilskin at her belt beside the first. Her hand did not shake as she tied the thong. Etched lines pressed warm through the oilskin against her hip. She carried it for duty, holds and crossings.

Ori let out a breath.

"It's honest," Ori said. He put a mark on his slate that meant more than a dot and less than a song. "We're one closer."

A woman from the bell deck crossed herself in the way of her people. It was a small motion. It didn't ask anyone else to join it.

Below, an apothecary's runner came with a wooden cup that steamed and stank sweet as garden bloom. She pressed it toward Brakka. "Sleep□draught," she said with the authority of one who knew herbs and how men hurt.

Brakka looked at the cup and then at his hands, which were wrapped in cloth that had stuck in places where skin had torn and healed to it. He breathed the scent and shook his head.

"No softening," he said. "I judge heat and hum. You numb me, I lie to the line without meaning to. I don't do that."

"You'll not sleep," she said, and there was no cruelty in it.

"No," he said. "I won't."

She took the cup back. "Then we keep your hands clean and dry and wrapped. Come back when the light goes; I'll wash the tar out of what I can without taking the skin with it."

He gave her half a nod, which for him was gratitude poured out to the brim.

Garin stood in the shade of the bell frame with his pauldron off. The cut showed clean and wrong where the hook's barb had gone under the edge and torn muscle. Blood had slowed. His shoulder said too much

about the hour and none of it in words.

"I can hold a post," he said to Tamsin. His jaw was set despite the shake in his arm.

"You can teach better than you can hold right now," she said. "Take the dock boys and the rope□sellers and show them how not to die when a board breaks. Show them the brace and the way to use a hook□staff without tearing a man off his own feet. You do that, you save more of them than if you stand where you want to."

Garin started to argue because he owed himself a chance to prove he was not broken. He closed his mouth on it. She put him on the lower deck with boys who needed a teacher. He put his hand on the rail. "Aye," he said. "I'll set them straight."

Lethriel sat with two young women on the floor of the repair hall. She had chalk and slate and drew a simple pattern with three turns and a rest where an apprentice's breath could live before the next call. She turned the slate toward them. "Do not copy the flourish. Copy the count," she said. She spoke four sentences and then left the rest in her hands and on the board. Her voice was there if it was needed. The room did not ask for it before it must.

Aldren came to Tamsin with the lantern□staff balanced at rest. He had not opened the cowl this day. A smear of earlier use had been cleaned from the brass. He set the staff's foot to the deck and leaned on it as if he had always leaned on it and it had always taken him.

"The holds we carved today will do for a turning," he said. His eyes had the colour of old storm glass and the wet of the day made the skin around them look older than the work had made it. "We must ask wider help than a fortress and a court can give. The Sky□Senate must be told to count at the right places."

"We chalked five plates and a split board," she said. "Those marks won't wait. We need Senate copper and crews to keep the crossings honest."

"They sent a bell□lark to make us report to them," she said. The old taste of bad brass was back in her mouth at the word.

"We will go to them under open sky," he said. "We will not be taken into their chambers under escort. We ask, and we don't stop asking when someone in a better coat than ours says no."

She set her fingers on the knot at her belt and twisted it and freed it and tied it again and knew she was doing it and let herself do it anyway. "On the line, my word holds."

"On the line, your word holds," he said. "In their hall, we will find a way to make them hear the bells they have forgotten."

Cael came then, hair stuck to his head in the simple way of a man who had not looked in a glass since morning. As he stepped in, his hand touched the casing rim; Lethriel inclined her head without speaking. He lifted his hand to Aldren in a greeting that had work in it, not court. "I'll spend what I have there for the commons," he said. "They'll talk heir's rights and house tariffs. I'll throw any of that in the sea if it means men can cross on ropes when they must."

Tamsin looked at him for a breath and saw that the ribbon on his shoulder had dirt on it that he had not noticed. She found she trusted that more than words. "Then we go," she said. "Ori, show me the road that wants us."

Ori set his slate on a coil and drew a line that did not want to be straight because the wind did not love straight. He drew three marks where void had shown itself in the last hours and a box around a tie that had felt wrong at sunset. He set an arrow where a leave□window would sit when dawn came and the heights threw a shoulder of warmer air under the cold.

"We go north of the inner ladders," he said. "There's a soft place here that doesn't look soft but is. We take a bend there with feet on the balls, and then we move. If we miss the first window, the second is mean and will cost us a board or two."

"We don't miss the first," Tamsin said. She set her palm on the deck and felt the hum. The shard at her belt warmed, not pushing, only present and ready.

Brakka stood without a sound. His bandages had been changed once and would be changed again before the light failed. He raised his chin to Tamsin. "I'll get you as far as the inner rope road," he said. "After that you'll have to use your wits and that thing at your hip because I won't be able to hold a wedge for you at the same time as showing a boy how to keep a pad from sliding."

"You've done today's work twice," she said. "No one asks for a third."

He snorted. "Someone always asks."

They stood in the small quiet that sometimes came between storm and next work. Men do not see those quiet times when they have not been on a bridge. On a bridge they appear and you take them into your bones so that when the rope moves again, you do not forget you were human a minute ago.

Dawn took time to find them. When it did, it found them with harness buckled and tar kettles covered and Lethriel's harp wrapped in oilskin. The marines had their hooks and shields. Garin had a whistle at his neck for a boy who had not yet learned to hear a tap at two in the middle of fear. Brakka's bandages had been wrapped again with a cleaner cloth that the apothecary had torn from a good shirt. Aldren's lantern sat with its cowl shut. Ori had cleaned his slate.

Tamsin touched the rail with three fingers and then let them fall away. She took breath and shaped it where it had to go.

"Under oath and under sky," she said.

"Under sky," came from some throats and only breath from others, and both were true enough for work.

"On three," she said. "One. Two. Three."

They stepped onto the outbound span as the first light reached the lines and woke frost to a faint, honest shine. The shard warmed once against her belt and then settled. The bells of Rimespan rang the cadence for repair behind them, and Lethriel's apprentices took up the slate where she had left it. They had ties to cross and a strake to take, then the Senate. They took the wind□road toward the High Aerie. The company moved because the bridge asked them to.

# Chapter 5

## The Senate's Rope

It was second bell after their arrival; bell-cadence in the High Aerie came measured and spare, a clean three that belonged to halls and not to spans. Wind had a place here, kept small by brass pins and shutters; it ran along slits in the stone and through worked vents. Where a span would have answered with a living hum underfoot, the floor took weight with no sound beyond the soft rub of leather. Tamsin disliked that. A floor that did not answer was an argument all on its own.

They were shown through a high arch into a chamber with rails of polished brass and columns whose capitals carried Wind-Law inscriptions worked for ornament. Hooded lanterns hung in pairs on short chains. A dais at the far end held the Speaker's chair on a platform built to take sway from memory, though sway did not live here now. Envoys had come in from islands on all sides in the last day, and their colours showed in neat strips near their breasts. They spoke to one another in low, dried voices. They had the faces of people measuring stock, making the sums that kept others alive or dead. Some had grease under their nails; others had the quick hands of clerks. The air carried polish and beeswax and the faint bite of cold brass.

Aldren stood with his staff grounded beside Tamsin, the cowl shut and the glass clean enough to show a man's face if he leaned near. He had the patient look he wore when work must be asked of those who wanted praise instead of instruction. Prince Cael held himself with his shoulders set square and his hair tied back without ornament. His rope-laminate bow had been taken politely at the door and set with other arms beneath the gaze of a pair of guards who were too steady to be merely decorative.



Lethriel had wrapped her coil-harp in a cloth to keep it out of too much watch, and Rell had taken a place half a pace behind Tamsin without touching her, ready to catch her count when she needed it. Brakka came on slower than he liked because the steps were shallow and narrow and they were not his. His bandaged hands were kept close to his belly so no over-eager officer would try to shake one as a courtesy.

The first words in the hall were not words at all. A clerk rattled a chain of chair-tokens and a bell cradled in a hand called three small notes. Doors opened. Veyana Strake came through the arch at the rear of the dais with two aides on her left and one on her right. The aides stepped a pace back when she reached her seat but did not go far. The Speaker was tall, made taller by pins in her hair that held it back from her face and by cuffs of brass at her wrists scored with house seals. The pins caught the lantern light in short flashes as she turned. Her eyes answered no one and nothing until she had sat. When she did look, it was with the care of one who had weighed men all her life and did not waste seconds on fiction.

“Welcome to this hall under our common sky,” she said, and her voice carried to the upper rows without show. “We honour service at Vael and work at the Frost-Heights and Rimespan. We have read the messages regarding a shard recovered beneath the east bell-casing and the machinery of assault brought against the outer strakes.”

“By pins and anchors, the chair marks this sitting under sky and holds it orderly.”

“We did not write a message to reach here faster than our steps,” Aldren said. His voice did not rise. The speaker turned her head, not in offence, only marking him fully now that he had offered himself. “We came because lines have failed where none living had seen failure. We come with a count that is not in any ledger you keep.”

“We keep all ledgers,” she said. “Including the ones that measure hunger.” She looked again to Tamsin as if words had points and she was aligning them to where they would hold best. “Tamsin of the Lines. Your

name has reached here as quick as a weather shift. You have spoken Law on spans and held crossings when wardens left their rails. That is not a small claim.”

“Claims don’t hold hawsers,” Tamsin said. “Hands do. Rules do. The shard answers to breath and count. It does not care where chairs sit.”

“We are agreed that craft holds,” Veyana said. She leaned a fraction toward the left-hand aide, who placed two slips on a small table at her elbow. “We are also agreed, I hope, that craft needs space to work. We need to remove pressure and restore order. We must not mistake motion for efficacy. There is a way to proceed that keeps our lines from worse collapse. It involves custody. We request that fragments of the Law remain under Senate guard until we have restored stability. In the interim, we will provide for you here. Housing, rations, a crew of your choosing for training and further reconnaissance as required. We will assign escort for crossings as conditions allow.”

“Until you have restored stability,” Tamsin said. “On a failing span no one waits for abstract stability. If you set me in a room and offer me a bed while a hawser goes soft under families I won’t sleep that bed. I won’t sell a breath.”

“You will not be selling anything,” Veyana said, with evenness. “You will be discharging duty under central oversight. It may be that your gift belongs with instruction rather than with the hazard of a running line. A school for riggers under Senate charter would let us multiply what you alone can do.”

“You want the shard to sit under your seals. You want my count in a room,” Tamsin said. The knot at her belt had warmed under her hand in the last minute because her fingers had gone to it without her permission. She let the knot be and lifted her hand away. “On the line my word holds. It holds because people feel the count in their feet while weight shifts under them. I cannot do that from a chair. And this shard is warm in my belt for a reason that is not in your diagram.”

“Prince Cael,” Veyana said, turning the weight of her attention with no loss of balance, “you speak for Windharp while your elders gather their counsel. What do you ask of this hall?”

Cael did not look at Tamsin. He let her stance be what it was on its own terms. “I ask for a clear call that binds us to common work,” he said. “There is no house that survives alone. Send copper, crews, and grain where bridges are honest enough to carry them. Suspend the ritual of escorts that slow crossings when minutes are coin we cannot spend. Put your seal to a doctrine that the commons move first where bells go to failure. I set Windharp marines to off-sway guard for this company; under the single voice on the sway they move.”

“You offer soldiers but ask to circumvent measures set for order,” Veyana answered without visible heat. “My duty is to ensure that when the bells return to habit, there is a people left to hear them. We must protect our granaries and reserve harbours. If we open all lanes, we invite famine to move where it had a harder path before. Copper is finite. Sacks are finite. Men who can climb a rope and still hold a knife at the end of the day are finite. If we salt what remains of order with too much chaos in the name of speed, we starve.”

“We starve anyway if spans fall,” Aldren said. He did not move the staff. The glass took the room’s lamplight and steadied it in its face so any eye that came to it met that steadiness and then met their own reflection laid over it. “The Law is not a paper to be put in a drawer while accounts are argued. It is something you do with your breath and your hands while the board shakes under you. You speak it in motion or you do not hold at all.

Veyana’s eyes, which had been measuring in clean quiet, sharpened by a hair at that. Not for visible offence. Not fear. A mark made in a book where the clerk did not write the line aloud, only pressed his nail into the paper as a private sign. “No one here intends to keep the Law under glass,” she said. “But no one in this hall will move with an artefact of power without a writ under the Speaker’s seals and oversight. We are not

in the habit of conflating courage with a mandate.”

“You asked what we ask,” Cael said. “We ask you not to slow us into uselessness.”

“What you ask is noted,” Veyana said. She turned her hand and the left-hand aide set another slip where she could see it. “The chair will order that the Aerie kitchens supply you, and a guest rail is set aside so you need not camp in a court. We will convene a working committee before the second evening bell with members drawn from this hall and from the anchors.” Her gaze returned to Tamsin, level. “If you have a count you believe will make a difference before that, you may sit and speak it at that time.”

Sitting made sense in a room like this. Sitting did not hold a cable where it had begun to unlay. Tamsin said nothing. She let the shape of the answer live in that nothing.

The chamber emptied with the knotted motion of a tide that had been trained to turn on a bell. Men and women stood who had listened without interrupting and went to speak to their juniors in side rooms with brass pens laid ready. The Speaker stood last. Before she left the dais she set her hand on the rail, a small, nothing contact a woman might make with a household object, but the weight in it said more. The aides watched the contact as if it was a lever. Then she took her hand away and went. In her eyes when they crossed the floor there was a clean, hard patience that did not quarrel; it endured and it would do what it believed to be necessary when the hour let it.

Outside the hall they were shown to a long antechamber with a rail that overlooked the wind-docks. The rail was high and had pins at intervals for ropes that were not there now. A table had been set with covered dishes. Tamsin caught the edge of a bell two courtyards away ringing for an internal thing that did not belong to any work she respected. She counted her breath to keep the sour taste from owning her tongue. She let go of the knot at her belt and did not look down at the

oilskin under it that had warmed when the Speaker had named custody.

“Rell,” she said, quiet. “You keep the packs where anyone can put a hand to them in one breath. No one goes anywhere without telling two someone’s. We leave together when we leave.”

“Yes,” Rell said. He looked as if he could walk a strake blind and make the right call at the end of the walk without raising his voice. “You want a head count on the two?”

“On two,” she said; then because it mattered to say it aloud in a place where nothing moved, “And we brace on three.”

Aldren set the staff’s foot by the wall where it did not ask for notice and did not draw any. He took nothing off the table. Brakka looked at the covered dishes and did not move toward them either. Cael removed a cover and found plates hot enough to steam and closed it again because hunger had a shape, and his men out by the rail that watched the long case on its chocks did not have hands for forks at that moment. He went out to them and stood with them until the working committee sent for the company.

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The committee room sat off the main hall to the east. Its ceiling was lower and the lamps closer to heads. The brass on the walls carried more marks from hands and elbows where men had leaned over paper. Numbers had been cut into the edge of the central table for seat positions, and small pins lay in a shallow tray, each bearing a set of three dots at the head. Tamsin stood, not at the table’s rim, but with her shoulder an inch from one of the room’s two narrow windows. She did not want to put her weight on that floor and pretend belief in it. Aldren took the nearest corner. Rell had measured the room when he came in and stood within a grasp of Tamsin’s left; by an old habit, his eyes marked three exits whether he would ever use them or not.

Veyana came with two of the same aides. Four others came in by a second door which was narrowed in the middle. One of them carried his shoulders as if he had worn armour once and had only a coat now. Another had ink along his hand to the knuckle. A third could not keep his eyes from the lantern where it rested. He was young. He gave himself away twice in two minutes; first the glance, then the way his throat moved when he swallowed at an oath he had known as a page and had managed to forget in a room too long.

“We have heard your urgency,” Veyana said. “We must weigh it against what else wants our hand. If you would present your count, present it in terms we can place on the same board as grain and rope.”

“By the next turn of light,” Aldren said at once, “three outer ties in the east will want hands. Not words. If you send hands, you slow the fall of two. If you do not, you will be discussing those islands as matters of memory rather than logistics. The fourth we cannot hold from here and it will cost men to go now. We are not asking you to upset the whole table. We are naming three counts and the work that matches them.”

“On what evidence?” the man with a soldier’s back asked. “We have reports that contradict each other.”

“My evidence is that the Law has not been set for two generations and the Null King’s unbinding has taken the habit out of holds you rely on as proof,” Aldren said. “My evidence is that wind and weight have told us in the last two days what your reports cannot show from a chair.”

“You speak under oath?” the young senator said. He did not expect to be answered directly.

“Under sky,” Aldren answered, and every man and woman in the room who had ever put hands to a span looked at the floor and then at him. Rell breathed out and found he had been holding an extra half a measure because hearing that in this chamber felt like climbing a strake two lengths taller than they had thought. The young senator’s mouth tightened against his will. He could not have put words to why that

answer mattered beyond its grammar, but his body knew it.

“Thank you,” Veyana said, and her voice set itself to a steady cadence that put bearings back under those who had moved when they did not wish to. “The chair notes that an oath is given. The chair also notes that an oath is not a resource we can allocate. If we send hands to three eastern ties we remove them from a dozen places where men already stand too thin. We must be sparing with our courage as with our copper.”

“It is not courage that I offer,” Aldren said. He let the staff’s ferrule turn a hair on the stone, less than a hair, but the sound reached the men who could hear. The glass at the lantern’s throat took the room’s nearest lamplight and steadied it into a clear disc the size of a man’s palm. Nothing burned. No oil moved. The disc was only reflection, and it gave back the faces of the six nearest people exactly as they were without flattering them. The ink-handed senator shifted his shoulders. The soldier’s back straightened another inch. The young senator flushed above the collar because he had not asked for the image of himself looking away from a thing larger than him.

“You wanted something in terms you could place on your table,” Aldren went on. “Here it is. You are omitting a measure that you do not understand. It is being spent without your consent out on the ropes. When it is spent it will not come back for your ledgers to reconcile later. If you do not include it, your sums are wrong.

“We could set a joint command that includes your... company,” Veyana said. The word did not fit comfortably in her mouth because it refused the shapes a proper professional cohort should have. “You would subject your movements to oversight so we can hold the most lines with the least waste. Without that, we cannot justify the risk of dispersing forces to match any one company’s preferred windows.”

“Windharp puts our marines to that joint work,” Cael said, stepping forward with both hands open. “On the sway Tamsin calls. Off it we bind

to the plan your command sets, provided you do not kill the count with delays that belong more to a coat than to a rope. We can begin with the eastern ties in the next turn.

One of Veyana's aides shifted a cup a finger-width. The Speaker did not look at him. "We will adjourn for the space of tea," she said. "The chair will confer with anchors and quartermasters and return with a framed proposition the whole can sign. In the meantime, you will be honoured at table and shown to the guest rail. If you require writing materials to present your counts in the terms requested, they will be provided." At her word, the right-hand aide gave a nod so small only the guard by the door answered it. She did not say escort. She did not have to. The way the men placed themselves as they rose drew a soft line in the air where those who knew how to see such things could see it.

When the door closed behind the last of the aides, Tamsin let the silence breathe. She watched dust drift in the lances of light where the narrow window admitted it. The dust hung there as if the rooms themselves did not easily allow for movement. "Packs near," she said. "No one alone. If someone needs a pen for a thought they can bring the thought to me and we set it down on slate on the rail where wind still gets in."

Rell made no fuss. He had his own small page work with three boys who followed him because of his belt and the way he said a word. They moved through the corridor with no more noise than steam. Cael stepped out and gathered two men who had drifted apart to admire a carving because the carving did not matter. Tamsin put her hand on the knot at her belt again and then took it off it again because she did not want to give the habit the right to own her.

"We go when we have to," Aldren said under his breath.

"We go when we must," she said. "They call it tea; I call it a delay that feeds a trap."



He flicked his glance to the lantern without giving it away. "Then we will see where the tea is poured from," he said, and let the smile not quite come to his mouth.

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Half a bell to tea, enough for a tired lock.

Ori had been shown into many rooms where men valued charts more than people. He knew the smell of ink that had been ground too long and of oil that had been set in a dish and forgotten for a week. The High Aerie carried those smells behind the polished air. It hid them, but it could not erase them. He had not eaten from the covers on the antechamber table because his stomach had the size of a fist. He had swallowed half a cup of water and then rubbed the wet into his wrists to keep the ink there from cracking.

He had not been asked to attend the tea in the small committee room with the others. No one had told him to leave either. He stepped into a side corridor where two armours stood without men to fill them, their shoulders rubbed smooth by generations of hands that had touched them for luck. He went past them. He kept his knees low, the way a man who belonged here would walk. He turned at a place where the corridor widened and a draught ran under a door and under a mat placed there for a purpose that did not match the season.

The lock on the drafting room door was a small one that had a habit. He did not force it. He waited for a pulse in the hum that did not exist and that missing told him enough. He set the tip of his small knife to the place a tired man had bit the brass tool last winter and slipped. The tumblers answered to the old mark, and the door opened to a smell of paper under oil and pens cut too blunt.

No one sat at the table. Two rulers lay crooked and an inkwell stood without a cap. On the wall, a board had been hung that could be covered

by a curtain on a pole. The curtain had been thrown back in a hurry and the pole had not been set square in its cradle. Ori reached out and set it square. It made no sound. He did it because quiet demanded that kind of courtesy when you had asked a door to be kind to you, even if the room belonged to someone else. Then he looked.

He did not need to read the titles written across the top of the board to know the shape of the thing under him. The lines spoke for themselves. There were the islands that everyone in the archipelago thought of without thinking. Their names had weight. Around them the ropes on which people had built towns and marriages and winter stores were drawn in a clean hand that did not love the rope for its own sake but only for what it could carry. Along the eastern arc, red marks had been placed at anchors with notes under them that did not describe repair. The notes measured petals and radius, counted days, and named weather tags. The word written small in the corner had turned someone's stomach in the room because he could see the places where a pen had pressed down hard enough to leave a trench: controlled falls.

He could hear the foot of a clerk who did not know where his right foot fell compared to his left because the man had not had to walk a board in his life. The steps went past and then came back and then stopped and he breathed as little as a man could breathe and call it living. He slid over to the small table where a fresh sheet of fine paper lay without letter. He left the paper alone. He touched the slate in his belt and pulled it free and the small stub of grease in its groove.

He drew no pretty picture. He drew only enough. He marked three anchors in the east and a fourth farther than anyone could stand to name. He marked the arrow of wind across the thunder corridor where copper rods had given men a false sense of being clever for two generations and where Lethriel had told him under her breath she would pay in voice if they went. He set down the ribbon for trade that wound around the core islands and then he set a bar across four places in that ribbon where a man or woman had written they would cut to keep the core fed.

He checked his wrists. Space remained to write four words. He wrote them on the inside of the band where no one looking would read them unless he offered. Green Pylon , slow answer. Northern Twelve steady. Rimespan plates chalked.

There were more sheets. He leafed. A list pinned at the bottom told him how many hands went to each task and who had been asked their counsel. The letters were neat. He found the mark of the Matriarch of Windharp among the names consulted, not an opinion written in full, not a signature that could be taken and shown on the steps and shouted at until a crowd ate its bearer, but the neat note that said a clerk had put a question to a woman who had worn a house for years and she had not refused to answer.

He had seen plenty of signatures in his life and they had never seemed to weigh anything. This one had weight because of the man whose mouth had asked him to put his men to use without a ribbon on their backs. He did not take the sheet. He did not tear it. He set his thumb on the edge of the page and then took his thumb off and left nothing of himself on it because that would have been wrong. He pulled a small slip from his roll and copied the column headings and the one line that mattered, naming the consultation without copying the name. He put the slip away. He wiped his slate quick on the edge of his coat to even the grease and held his breath until his lungs burned, then let a thin breath out.

A guard's step sounded heavier than the clerk's had. The guard had learned to walk softer than he had used to because someone had asked him to be gentle with his own floors. He was not gentle now because he did not have to be in this door. The handle turned. Ori was not in any place when the door opened that a reasonable man would find him; he was behind a case set with coils of brass wire that had been delivered yesterday and had not yet been unpacked. He had seen the delivery on the list of things the quartermaster had promised Brakka. That list had been matched to this room by someone who had cared about order to the

degree visible only in cabinets.

“Left it open,” the guard said to no one, because no one was there. “Leave it when you’re done. They’ll be back in a breath.” As he shifted, the scabbard at his hip clicked once against the wire crate. Ori knew which they. He let the guard’s shadow run along the edge of the wire case until it reached the corner where it would show a man’s hand if the man had put it there. He kept his hand off it. He let the shadow pass and the guard go. Then he stepped out and closed the door without letting the latch speak. The lock would set itself.

He went back the way he came and did not touch the armours. He kept to the rail where he could feel the air through the window slits. He stopped at the next corner and counted two breaths as a clerk’s murmur faded. He crossed the long boards only when the slit-wind rose enough to cover his steps. He let his legs wobble one step and then he told them to stop it. He turned by the carving that had caught Cael’s men and he kept his eyes off it. In the antechamber, Tamsin stood with her hand unoccupied and her head turned to hear a bell three courts away. Aldren had the staff still set to ground and the glass still answered to whatever it answered to, not to men. Lethriel’s throat had a strip of cloth around it now to keep the air too clean from drinking her in the wrong way.

He put the slate on the table and laid the little slip on top of it. He offered no explanation. He did not show these things to the room. He showed them to Tamsin and to Aldren because he knew which two hands held what had to be held in this moment.

Tamsin looked until what was on the slate was in her. She took one breath only too quick and then found the line she had lived on and put her weight back on it. Aldren’s eyebrows bent only a hair and then they soothed and went back where they lived. He touched the edge of the slate with the back of his fingers, a gesture too small for any hall except a span.

Cael came in a half moment later without making it look as if he had been called. He did not sit. Ori turned the slip and showed the line he had

copied, the list and the small mark of consultation. He did not name whose consult it was. He did not need to. His hand made a small start toward tearing the slip, then he smoothed it flat. Cael's mouth tightened. He placed his hand flat on the table and then lifted it. He pressed two fingers to the table's edge until the knuckles blanched, then took them away. He looked at the door where two guards stood without swords drawn because they did not need swords to be heard here. He looked at the coil-harp where Lethriel's fingers sat with care so the strings would not answer to her breath by mistake.

"We're done," Cael said. "We won't get what we need from this room. They will pitch us a language that looks like a bridge and isn't. We should move."

"The thunder-reef runs hot from the last weather," Ori said. He eyed Lethriel's throat and then took his eyes away for her pride's sake. "Copper guides are still true. The count across them is worse than last season. We can take it at dusk when the edge throws us a small mercy for twenty tens."

"Senate patrols sit heaviest on the upper lanes," Tamsin said. "They moved them after the market. If we go by the reef, we go under the look of people who count only what courts count. They'll be two turns slower to realise we were theirs and now are not."

Lethriel pulled the cloth down from her throat and set it aside with the care she would set a tool she had used and would use again. "The reef takes a price. The guides keep the worst of the storm's hand where it belongs but cost runs where the covenant has been made thin by men using it as if it was their servant. If we go, I keep the edges off your bodies and your packs. I will not call a rod to a heart. I will not do that for any reason until the door breaks. But the keeping will eat at this." She touched her throat with two fingers. "It will rasp me. It will take a slice of what I can be for a while. If that buys twenty tens for a column that needs to move, I spend it."

“I won’t ask for your voice at any cost,” Tamsin said.

“You won’t,” Lethriel said. “You will ask for the hold. That is right.” She smiled once, small and clean. “You are not the sort who colours the work with a song to make it taste sweet.”

Aldren put his hand on Tamsin’s shoulder for the space of a breath. He did not squeeze hard. He did not say the words that would have gilded an order. “We eat if we can. We move with dusk,” he said.

“On the count,” Tamsin answered. “We step with it. Rell,”

“Packs are ready,” Rell said. “Two slips with water. Hooks for those who can use them. I posted two men on the rails to count the patrols’ routes and bells.”

“Brakka,” Tamsin said.

“Copper’s at the dock below,” he answered. “Their boys laid it there to make the room neat; they didn’t move it to where it should be because they didn’t know the weight. We’ll take three clamps and leave the rest. My hands don’t tie. I tell others where to put them if we need to. You say move and I don’t argue.”

Cael had gone to the window with the narrow slit and counted the patrols in his own head. He returned to the table and put a hand to his men’s shoulders as he passed. “We’ll need a lie to cover the space between dinner and dusk,” he said. “Something plausible enough for men who want to be polite and do not wish to look rude while their Speaker drinks tea.

“Ori will write a pretty schedule,” Tamsin said. “He will call it a rotation for straps and gloves and a demonstration for apprentices. It will require a run to the lower dock, because of humidity that will spoil the leather if we keep it too high. That is a thing a clerk will understand.” She did not smile. She would not give the room that much of herself.

Ori bent over the slate and wrote exactly that. He wrote it in the clean hand that men read as truth because the letters sat their proper height

and kept their angles. He included a name for a man who did not exist, a cuff-cutter in the lower docks with a habit of leaving his initials on his work in a way that made the men who wore the cuffs feel braver. No one in a hall should know a cuff-cutter's name. If someone did, that would be a different problem.

They waited while the shadow on the rail climbed up the wall and met the seam between two stones and then slid across it. Bells in the inner courts rang their measured notes to tell the hour to people who did not look at the sky. At the wind-docks, lanterns were being lit with cowls set so they threw light where feet would go and left faces under hoods dark. Men with a proper sense of their place on a line walked along the edges to feel any shift first. Rell's two watchers came in and gave their counts and then went back out without asking after their shares because this was work, not eating.

The committee sent a boy with a note on a tray. He wore a collar too stiff for his neck. He set the tray down and retreated without looking into any eyes. The note asked them to present at the second bell after dusk. The note asked them to think in the interval about what they would need for a school. The note did not say the word school. It said riggers' hall. It had three seals.

Tamsin did not touch the note. Cael did. He folded it cleanly and then unfolded it and then folded it again because there was nothing else to do with such a thing that did not involve fire. Lethriel looked at the seals and did not laugh because nothing was funny. Aldren lifted the staff and set it at an angle that made it look as if he had just rested his hand on it rather than marking the instant of leaving.

"Under oath and under sky," he said, not loud. "We go."

Tamsin did not give a speech. She tightened her belt. She looked at the faces that had come with her this far, and she counted without sound. Then she gave it voice. "On three," she said. "One. Two. Three."

They walked out past the guards who stood slightly wrong because the count made their knees want to move with it and they were too well trained to move. They turned down the corridor with the armours and then the one with the carving and then the long way that smelt of oil. At the last turn, she stopped and touched the rail with three fingers. It did not answer. She expected that. She breathed. "We'll feel the proper hum under us again in a minute," she said to Rell.

"On the dock," he answered. The words were not for comfort but for orientation.

They reached the wind-dock where the guest rail met the broader planking. Men had set the long case on chocks and roped it off, moved from the Frost-Heights platform under their watch. Cael's men stood near it with their backs to the edge because they were the right sort who put their backs where moving weight would take them first. Ori's false note had been carried well. A clerk had nodded. Two marines had relieved two others along the rail exactly when they were meant to. No one had noticed that the company as a whole was drawing together with packs to hand and hooks to belt.

Lethriel unwound the cloth from her harp and checked a pin she had drawn once and set back. "Twenty tens," she said. "Do not ask for twenty-one. If the count stretches I pay with voice I do not have.

"I won't ask," Tamsin said. "I'll make the count live inside those twenty tens." She lifted her hand. Rell placed his palm on the rail at two and lifted it at three as she had taught him to on a different night in a different wind. Cael looked once to the upper lane where patrols went, calculating where a polite trap would fold, and then returned his gaze to the place a foot had to go next.

The cowl-lamps on the dock threw steadiness at their boots. Copper coils lay stacked in a neat array the clerk would have been proud of had he ever known where they ought to sit to matter. Brakka grunted at them and put three to one side with a small shift of his knee because his hands



were not to be used and he would not make a man break a rule to spare him the indignity of using a head.

A bird of brass whirred by, wings beating quietly. It did not alight. Aldren turned his head just enough to mark it, and then he looked down to the water-dark gap where the guide lines for the thunder-reef began their patience in the air. He smiled a little. It was a tired man's expression; the lines at his eyes held. He put his palm to Tamsin's shoulder and let go.

"On three," she said again, because a count used twice made itself true. "One." Voices and doors lived behind them. "Two." The lanterns at the far edge of the dock flickered once and steadied because the wind shifted, and a faint wire-whine rose from below. "Three." She stepped, and the rail under her boot answered honestly at last.

# Chapter 6

## Thunder-Reef

The reef's corridors stood in their quiet order where storms had been taught to pass, column by column, with guides of hammered copper taking the worst of their mindless reach. The rails had frost-sheen on their edges from air shivered thin. Ozone sat heavy against teeth. Hair lifted along forearms and neck under hoods. Even breath crackled at its edge near the rails where the hum rose.

Tamsin set her palm to the near post and did not leave it there. The post was honest. It answered through the hand with the low live sound of a thing under vow. It did not want to be held as a handle. No rail did. "Hold, not stop," she said, voice kept even to carry under the hum. "On my count. This is not a street. You brace on three, not on two. No hand to the rail at two. Elders and children clip first if they are here; none are. Packs keep to the lee of your body. If I say cut, you cut. Argue later on honest boards."

Rell's palm came down at two and lifted at three in her rhythm, a clean, practised echo that travelled without noise along bodies. Behind him the Windharp men steadied their shoulders to catch stray sway. Cael kept his sea-green cloak bound tight and his jaw unremarked. The coil-harp at Lethriel's hip answered to nothing until she touched it.

They were on the threshold of the thunder-reef where the copper guides ran in shining lines through the storm-tunnels. The air tasted of coin and wet iron, and the guides sang to one another just below hearing. Far in the maze a small white stammer of light moved from column to column, testing, then passing on as if a patient hand shaped it to routine.

“Twenty tens,” Lethriel had said by the dock when the cloth still sat around her throat to keep the High Aerie’s air from taking more than its due. “Do not ask for twenty-one. I will keep edges off your bodies and your packs for that count. I will not call a rod to a heart.”

“Twenty tens holds,” Tamsin answered now, as much to set the rhythm in her own ribs as to tell the others. “One.” A breath. “Two.” The quiet rail-tap from Rell. “Three.” The column stepped and the boards answered clean.

Brakka Copperweft walked with his elbows in, fists hidden in bandage, bandage hidden under a coat. No one looked at his hands if they could help it. He gave the line what he had. “You, take that coil,” he told a marine whose kit showed not a gloss of parade. “Not there, curse you gently, here, where the joint lives. We run jumpers from this rail to that brace and that brace to the guide. No pretty loops. Flat lays. Tell the copper where you want it to carry and it will listen.”

“It screams when you ask it wrong,” the marine said without any claim in his voice to knowledge he did not have.

“It interests the copper more than it interests you whether it screams,” Brakka said. “Seat that clamp with your boot. My hands don’t tie. You lay it; I point.” He crooked a wrist at a brace and the boy followed the angle at once.

The corridor ahead shifted a fraction and reset. Ori, who was longer of limb than was sensible on a line, narrowed to the work and left his height behind him. He pulled his sleeves back to the inked bands on his wrists and began to mark the wind as movement, not as a picture. Three strokes, a long one, a notch. A small arrow. Then he rubbed the fat of the pencil along the slate and set the same marks there clean, in case the skin went slick. He held his hand out at shoulder height and let the forefingers float. “The thunderheads are walking left to right at two tens,” he said. “There’s a window right under that cross-vee, the copper sings truer there. We have fifteen tens to the first drop; twenty if we don’t make fools

of ourselves.”

“Under sky,” Tamsin said. She tasted the count in her mouth. It felt like rope through the bare fingers: tight, persuasive, unforgiving of error. She lifted her hand and the small column lifted with her. She set them in, one, two, three; the boards lay their length underfoot and not more, the joints telling where not to put a weight.

Lethriel tested the place with the lightest brush of a string. The sound that came was not hers. The reef spoke to its own paths, the guides taking and letting go, taking and letting go again on an old promise laid down in elder days. Lethriel inclined her head to it. “The promise sits here,” she murmured. She set her fingertips to the coil-harp’s cheek and drew the pin. “I will bend the edge of it a little so that it minds bodies and packs and keeps its good behaviour in narrower lanes.” She tightened the cloth at her throat once and then took it off. “I will not call a rod to a heart,” she said in the same tone she had used at the dock. “If a man puts himself into a wire’s answer, the wire will not be held responsible for the way it answers.”

“You will not be asked,” Tamsin said, because this had to be said in that moment. Then she looked past Lethriel’s shoulder and across the shoulder of the wind to the rear.

A dark mass slid into the corridor behind them with the patience of a thing sure in its jurisdiction. Lanterns under cowls threw steadiness at feet. Brass along its gunwales caught what light there was and carried it dull. A canvas hung tough over a long box on its deck. Hooks and lines stood ready. It was not the enemy’s make. The sails bore the Senate’s signs. The brass bird from the dock had done its work; a barge slid in off the outer lane. Men stood at their lines without calling, because the reef did not encourage calling.

“It’s a Senate barge,” Rell said behind his teeth.

“They don’t intend to strike,” Cael said without turning his head. “They intend to fix us and speak to us in the way that comes next. Hooks

to slow us, no blood if they can help it.”

Tamsin did not answer him. Hooks to slow could still bring a fall if a man’s weight met one oath and then another in the wrong order. “We move,” she said. “Open your hands. No one watches their own feet alone. If you have a breath for anything, give it to the count.” She lifted her hand. “One. Two. Three.”

The barge behind gave a small cough of chain. Hooks sang. Lethriel’s fingers moved along the harp with the accuracy of someone who would not waste any. The first tone she laid was thin and true. It found the copper guides and ran an even hand along them. The hair along the back of Tamsin’s neck went up more and then settled because the tone told the charge where to stand and for how long.

Brakka’s boys had the jumpers laid flat along the joints now, clamped copper to brass and brass to copper. He walked his eyes along their work instead of walking his feet: bandages dark at his wrists, jaw tight. “This is a gutter,” he told the nearest. “You’re making channels. You want to draw water. Water goes where it’s told when the cut is right.” He looked up once and had the smallest space for something like satisfaction. “You can load a thing like this,” he said to no one who needed to hear it; perhaps he said it for the copper. “You can hold and then you can let go where you decide.”

The barge’s first hook bit at a rail and skipped because Lethriel’s tone made the air around the rail unacceptable. The second hook came lower, showed cunning, and glanced off a pad Rell had put there without asking. The third took the bait Brakka had set without naming it bait. It bit on the small sacrificial lead the copper-smith had told a boy to lay where a certain kind of man would aim when he thought he was clever. The hook seated honest. Wire sang along wire. Cael swore very softly and then said, “Shields to the copper. If anything falls, you take it on your back and not let it break the channel.” His men took their places without asking for reasons.

“Commit,” Tamsin said. “No half. This is all or a fall. You hear me? One,” breath steady, hand high “, two,” Rell’s palm on paste-cold brass “, three.” The company took weight and set it where it held for that count and not for longer.

Ori’s fingers danced in the air, a clerk making figures with no paper and yet making figures that would be read in muscle and skin. “Two tens to build,” he said. “Short drop to follow. Then a long and a drift. On your three.” He flicked ink on his bands so that line and count would land in his sight where breath filled and emptied.

Lethriel narrowed her whole body to the gap between the first and second pins on the low course. She pulled a line of sound as thin as the hair at a wrist, not too taut, with give where give would keep it from breaking, and laid it along Brakka’s copper. The guides took it. The air sat still where it should have moved and moved where it should have stuck. The rope-boards under the company’s boots trembled and then steadied inside the count because the count had been built for that.

The top chain from the barge bit the second sacrificial lead that Brakka’s finger had marked. It seated. The boy next to him started and then lifted his chin because Brakka had already told him there would be a bite and had already shown him how not to flinch. “Boot,” Brakka said, and the boy kicked the clamp home. The copper lay steady.

“Ten tens left,” Ori said, low, in the space the three-beat allowed.

The first load came. It came without show. The rails hummed lower. The breath in lungs went rough at the edges. The little hairs along Tamsin’s wrists lifted and then lay down again at her will. “One,” she said. “Two.” Rell’s palm touched and left the rail without making any fuss. “Three.”

The barge kept its line. Men on its deck watched and did not call. A man in a helm moved his hand by the winch where wires lived. The engine-box near his knee had a seal in its brass. He rested a finger on it like a habit.

“Now,” Brakka said, just under the hum of the copper, and he drove the last clamp home with his boot. The copper screamed. Light did not crack. It ran. It ran along jumpers and rails with the speed of a thing that will not be delayed for a single useless flourish. The hair-fine tone Lethriel held did not widen. It remained true. Charge that would have jumped into a chest went to copper instead. Charge that would have found the easy path through a hand found the path it had been given to walk.

The hook-lines that held to Brakka’s sacrificial leads brightened and then softened. The softening travelled up them. The looped head of the hook became something else that used to be a hook. The engine-box on the barge took the light and could not count it as it came. For a heartbeat it argued with the measure, then there was white with no colour. Pressure ran the rails into their boots. A hook-head spun loose and dropped clean into cloud between the guides. Brass bent. A jag of plate struck a raised shield over a jumper clamp; the marine took the hit on his back and the channel held. Plates took on a shape they had not been paid to take. The barge’s deck lifted and then came apart in two places where the engine-box had taught it to be strong in the wrong way.

“Tethers!” someone on the barge called at last, late and without breath. Men cut lines with the speed of practice and drove harness into belts. Some fell; harness caught them. Two swung out into the corridor’s dark and hung on their own poor geometry. The barge itself sank in the charge-tunnel like a man withdrawing a hand from a bucket because he had at last felt the heat that had been there all along.

A whip of light crawled back along the guides toward the company like a small animal still wanting to persuade someone. It touched where copper clipped brass and whispered there. Cael took it across the forearm where his strap held his kit. The skin blistered at once in a stripe. He closed his mouth around a breath and placed the arm behind his back not to touch anything and not to disturb any line of work.

Lethriel's second tone tore through her own throat. The sound frayed; the silver veining at her throat dulled for a breath. She did not stop until the count took it. She finished, not with anything anyone would call elegant, but with the exact sound needed to say to charge, "You go now and not then." When it was done she bent from the waist and set her hand to the boards. The hand shook. Nothing moved in her expression for a long breath. Then she took the coil-harp and set it back against her hip and looked to Tamsin in a way that said nothing because it did not need to.

Tamsin held the count at the same level she had set at the dock. She did not let it change because the corridor had made a noise, or because men had swung on harness, or because Cael had skin on his strap that should have been on his arm. "One," she said. "Two." Rell's palm down, palm up. "Three." The boards took them and gave them back again.

"There's a stray under the vee," Ori said, voice tight to make it take less of the air than it wanted. "Right slip on her three." He set his hand so men could see what a right slip looked like, because seeing and hearing both was better than being clever and then falling. The arc under the vee looked to jump but found it had been given no reason to come their way.

After the white, night reclaimed the corridor. The reef exhaled. The copper sang low, satisfied with its work for that count. Ash taste came up from the rail and spread inside mouths. Blood smell went sharp from small splits on fingers; no one complained. The barge's lanterns dropped until the lids of the cowls met and the lids were gone into the dark under them.

Lethriel tried to find a tone to lay along the guides for the last walk out. The sound that reached the air from her throat would have made a novice ashamed. She did not let her face answer to that shame. She slipped a slate from a pouch and wrote the pattern her body would have sung if her body had had anything left to give in that channel. "This line," she said, but it was barely a thread. She tapped the slate for Ori's eye. He nodded and copied the curve in his own hand.



Then the rail shook, but only a little. Enough to loosen a knot that had been tied in damp, in a hurry, under a hum that had argued for itself as the only thing anyone should notice.

Tamsin felt it first as the absence of weight against her hip. The oilskin at her belt had lain its quiet warmth there since the court at Vael. It ran cooler in the Senate halls. It had warmed to her touch when the word custody fell from the Speaker's mouth and had grown still again when she would not give it. Now it took air.

She looked down because she could not not look. The pouch hung slack. The shard slid along the angle in the bag and went for the small drain cut years before in the boards, to let rain find its way out and not swell the planks. Cold air moved along the seam. The shard made a short sound against wood and went for the hole.

"Ori," Tamsin said, and the sound had no fear in it because if it had, someone would have given their fear to her and that would have been the bad death of a boy or a woman at the back. Rell's rail-tap stopped for one breath.

Ori did not answer with any words. He moved as if he had been waiting for the lack of weight at Tamsin's hip since he was born. He dropped to his knees on boards that did not stay still and set his left wrist across the seam. The shard drove its edge into the meat there. Ink went blacker in wet. The oilskin's corner pushed under the heel of his hand. He lifted his hand; the shard took the space; he set the hand down again harder and stopped it. The pain that the seam offered him moved up his arm and made a line of heat under the skin. He breathed once, twice, three times, and then he made himself laugh, just once, as if to tell the seam its best was not power over him.

The corner of his lens tore from its frame when his weight came down. A fine crack went across the field of his right eye in a cold perfect line that made a grid of the world. The air around his eyes took the charge no longer busied by Lethriel's keeping and stung; water came without his

consent. He blinked and saw less than he liked.

Brakka's coat brushed past and then his voice came to the boy at the clamp. "Leave the copper and take that braided tether from your belt. Good. Now bring it here. No, here. Under the lady's hand. Through that loop. No big hands. Use fingers that are not mine." He did not put his wrapped palms anywhere near the line. He showed a shape in the air that the boy mirrored. "Seize it. Not handsome. Honest. You know the difference?"

"Yes, Master," the boy said, because Brakka did not need the word to dress him in the hall; he had earned it on a board and everyone here knew it.

"Rell," Tamsin said. "Bind him when we pass that seam."

"With respect," Rell said, already halfway down, already opening a little roll he kept at his belt, "we bind him now."

"You bind him when we are past the seam," Tamsin said. "If we stop here we gather more charge on more bodies than we own and someone will give it back without meaning to and the rail will take a life in exchange for our poor scholarship." She did not raise her voice at the end of any sentence and men obeyed her because of that decision and not because of the words.

Rell did not look at her again to argue. He held his roll between his teeth while his hands got the measure of Ori's wrist with his eyes only. He waited with calm he had not had three days ago, calm put into him by the count and by the work.

Lethriel crouched next to Ori and did not say anything. She put her fingertip to the centre of his palm and drew a small pattern in slow movements, one, two, three, hold, and did it again. His breath found the pattern and moved inside it. He looked at her mouth because he wanted words and then remembered she had given what she had for him and for the rest and would be a long time putting it back together. He set his forehead briefly against the boards after the pain moved past the first hot

edge and the wood, for once, did him a kindness and did not give.

The boy with the lanyard tied the oilskin bag to Tamsin's belt where Brakka told him. It did not sit as it had done. It sat proud of her hip now where everyone could see it and not pretend not to see it. Brakka checked the lay with his eye and then with the back of his wrist because the front of his hand had no say in anything today. He nodded once and then looked away because the rightness of a tie was a private thing between two pieces of line and a man should not make a show of it.

"Now," Tamsin said to Rell. "Your roll."

Rell bound the bandage around Ori's wrist with clean pressure. He did not try to be gentle in the way of men who put kindness into their fingers but not into their measure. He left Ori the use of his thumb and first two fingers and told him in three words where he would have the strength and where he would not. Then he stood and was a wall again and did not watch Ori's face to see if he was thanked.

They took the last turns of the corridor on the count as if it were any lane. Ori's breath grew quieter in his chest with each three. His vision threw him wrong once and he corrected by turning his head. He tilted until the crack's grid sat square and shifted one wrist-mark a finger's width. "Into the last five," Tamsin said, steady as before. Lethriel walked beside the harp without touching it. Brakka's wraps darkened where a seam had opened again under old heat. Cael tucked his burned arm in tighter and looked at Tamsin with his mouth plain.

The copper guides ahead lifted out of their rows and into a shallow vee that had always meant departure. Air lost its taste for metal. The boards took on more of the world's hum and less of the reef's and let Tamsin's count be the louder thing. Several shoulders eased. Breath settled back into ribs. Then the reef threw a last flash behind them and the lanes shuddered as a well-cut joint settled. Whatever wanted to follow would have to be asked to find its way again through the promise Lethriel had bent and not broken. That would take time.

They stepped onto a broader run where rope-road planking had not been taught to a storm's peculiar courtesy. Sudden quiet felt wrong. Men swayed without meaning to when the hum underfoot changed. Tamsin did not change the count. She put it into the new boards as if they had been waiting for it, and the new boards accepted it because that was what good boards did.

Lethriel set the harp's cheek against her hip and tried a single line to test what remained. The sound that came was low and rough. She stopped it with a small shake of her head. Instead, she set the slate in her hand and drew the shape she would have sung if her throat were not raw. With her left hand, she passed the slate to Ori and lifted her right to brush the side of his bandage with the gentlest possible disapproval; he gave her a very small bow of his head as if to say he admitted her point and would forget it again when he had to and she could remind him then.

Aldren stood a little apart with the staff grounded under his palm. In the reef he had not lifted the cowl to burn the light. He knew as well as copper what kind of cost a thing demanded and he fed nothing to nothing. Now, on the rope-road, with the hum reduced to a civil measure, he turned the cowl just enough to see how much wick would answer if he needed to ask it for itself and not for him. The glass, clean from his hand earlier in the day, gave back the small, exact disc again and it did not flatter anyone's face. He looked at the wick with his thumb measuring a finger's width below the cowl and the oil at the base at about a finger. He said nothing. He did not need to. Brakka saw the measure in the set of his mouth and did not say anything either.

Cael came to where Tamsin's breath lived in the space between one three and the next. He did not stand in her way. Nor did he take her hand. "Thank you," he said. It did not sound like a prince greeting a subject; it was without rank in it.

Tamsin lifted a shoulder once, which was as much as to say there was nothing to thank for, that this was the work, and he had been in it as much as any. She put her fingers on the lanyard at her belt and felt the

new lay there and tugged it to test the seize. It held. She tugged again because anxiety had not learned to settle on the first pass. It held again. She left it alone and tapped the rail with her toe to feel the hum the way a rigger might beat a board for rot. The rail answered honestly.

“Copper,” Brakka said. “We used what they had put neat on their dock. I told the boy to leave them the good count of what we took. If we find more copper before we meet more fools with hooks, I’ll forge braids. Emergency braids, not the fine kind. I won’t pretend otherwise. They’ll hold long enough to bring men home if they listen to you.”

“They listen to the count,” Tamsin said. “Not to me.”

“The count sits better in a mouth that deserves it,” Brakka said. “There’s your flattery for the year. Spend it careful.”

Ori stood where the lamplight from Aldren’s staff did not reach and cleaned a smear of grit from his cracked lens with the softest edge of his coat and the least wet part of his breath. The world looked as if someone had taken three fingers and pushed the lines across it out of their proper places, and he would have to live with that. He lifted his wrist and rewrote three marks on his forearm with the grease because the bands had gone slick with new blood. The marks felt wrong under his hand because the skin was swollen, but wrong marks here were better than clean marks left somewhere a clerk could fold away in a drawer.

Rell checked Cael’s burn with two fingers and a look. “Salve later,” he said to no one and to all of them. “Water now. Strap stays where it is. Don’t tempt the scab to think about glory while there’s work to be done.” Cael nodded in the way of men accustomed to being told by cleverer hands what their bodies could or could not bear on a day when it mattered.

They looked back as one does without meaning to, when a thing that had tried to claim them shrinks with distance. The reef gave them a last answer: a small white tightness that ran along three guides in order and then vanished. It neither invited pursuit nor forbade it with a blow. It

simply did the work it had been cut to do when men and women with better time than this had driven rods into cloud and coopered their covenant with weather and with brass. Any barge that wanted to follow quickly now would have to put voices on a thing that no longer wanted to hear them. That would buy a little time.

“Course?” Cael asked, because the asking mattered and because he would not announce his own house’s will over the woman’s word on a rope.

“By the eastern road,” Tamsin said. “Angle toward the Rimespan line. They know our work and we know theirs. If we meet one of their boys, we’ll trade what we learned for copper he can spare.”

“Under sky,” Cael said. He whistled a short breath between his teeth in a way that meant nothing but attention to his men and they adjusted by a hand’s width so that the new course line sat under their boots and not to one side where it would tug at a knee later and make a fall at a bad hour.

Lethriel wrote a small curve and then another on the slate and put it away. She pulled a swallow from a skin and held it in her mouth until the rasp eased. On a winter lane not yet cut, her breath had run out; the note broke and left her throat raw. She let the cost stand now and would take the voice back when the soreness eased and the work’s count allowed it.

Aldren walked the staff forward until the ferrule felt the boards and the boards felt it. He set the cowl a fraction tighter, not enough to starve the lamp of air but enough to spare a thumb’s-width of wick. He put his hand to Tamsin’s shoulder and lifted it away at once. The disc in the lantern glass gave him back the faces of those nearest, not as pretty hopes, but as what they were, tired and alive and not more than that. He nodded to the world about that fact and then nodded to the woman and then to the men and then to the dwarf and the elf, because if a man cannot find equal measures for creatures who have saved his life, he does not deserve to hold light at all.

They moved through last-watch toward a cleaner sky that would take on a hint of grey before a bell would mark the hour for men who could not see it coming. Knots lay true. The new lanyard sat proud against Tamsin's hip and told everyone what it was: not an ornament or a charm but a small rope saying a thing had been learned in a difficult place. The count went on. Rell's palm lay on cold brass at two and lifted at three. In the place where the reef fell away into night, a flash marked the end of that lesson. Ahead lay boards that had not yet been asked for more than their duty.

No one said safe. Safe was a word for men who wanted to taste it in their mouths before they had earned it. They used smaller words and better ones. "Water," Rell said to Ori and put the skin in his good hand. "Copper," Brakka muttered to himself, as if speaking to the buried veins under the world. "Maps hold more than distance," Ori said to his own ink without looking at any face. Cael touched his burned arm and did not wince. Lethriel put her slate away. Aldren's thumb moved over the lantern's brass where a smear had once been and was now clean, as if to remind the metal what kind of day it would have later.

"Under oath and under sky," Tamsin said into the dark as if it were not listening and might surprise them by doing so. She counted. They put their feet down where the sound told them to. The road remembered.

# Chapter 7

## Siege at Rimespan: Return

Rimespan's bells spoke repair in a tired cadence, steady enough to hold hands to work. Under that, a new hum lived where no honest line should hum. It ran through wire and wood and up the throat if a man stood near the outer strake and tried to drink his breath in peace.

They had come off the thunder-reef at grey and reached Rimespan before the first bell. The bells worked through a day. There was no moon yet.

Tamsin came to the near rail and let her palm feel it answer. The boards returned the weight that she put to them. The rail gave back a low tone that told of strain at the eastern approach and a clean, taut core where Brakka had forced a lie to hold two days and a night ago. She lifted her hand and tapped with her toe to hear what the metal chose to say and what it refused.

Hooks flashed in and bit beyond the place where they had bitten before. Wire sang long in the air and settled. Men flinched and kept their feet. Pads smoked and held. The enemy had brought a different measure and the line remembered it without kindness.

"Fresh engines," Rell said under his breath, half a pace behind her and off to the side so he could see what came up the lane before she asked.

"Longer throw," Tamsin said. She stepped along the rail three paces and listened to the way the air answered there.

Beyond the last rung of the east tower a taller shape stood where there had been only sky. A tether-tower of black timber and braced



copper stood braced against the wind. Wire loomed from it in bundles that snaked away toward four smaller towers on rafts and rock teeth. At its throat, a box with fins pulsed a slow count of white. On each pulse, the tether-cannons in three quadrants adjusted, and their next hooks found the rail a hand's breadth nearer the men on pads than prudence liked.

"Don't stand in front of it," Ori said from her other side. His voice came from a mouth that had not eaten since dusk. He kept his bandaged wrist close, the wrap from the reef-lines' burn, fingers free for pointing. He had set his broken lens back into its frame and held it there with a stitch of wax. He narrowed his eyes until the crack's grid sat square and peered along the wire lines.

"What?" she said.

"It's a signalling mast," he answered. "It teaches the smaller engines when to breathe and where to look. Every four pulses it shortens the rhythm and throws a fifth fast. That's why men are bracing early and losing weight on three. It's feeding them measure."

"Close the distance," Tamsin said, not to him, but to the work. She watched a hook lift and turn and fall clean because a pad lay where Brakka had taught a boy to place it the last time. The next hook caught only cloth and tore it. The boy made a sound and then did not. The pad smoked and stayed.

"I can draw you to it," Ori said. He pointed under the mast's shelves.

A narrow strand lay slung from the old service island to a strut near the mast's lowest brace. Varnish had cracked there years ago and had never been renewed. The lay spoke of a lazy hand in summer and a hurried one in the turn of winter. Someone had maintained the habit of it by accident. If a body went onto it, it would listen, but only if the body agreed to do exactly as asked.

"Single clip," Tamsin said.

"Single," Ori said.

She looked at the line until the grain answered her.

“Three-count spacing. Palms open. We go soft onto each brace and softer off. No one shows eagerness. No talk. Breath in three. Rell will count with the rail.” She let her gaze find the men she would send.

“We need hands for this,” she said.

Garin stood where the light from Aldren’s lantern did not quite reach, as if he had chosen to be nobody’s remembered first choice. His broken-wing pauldron hung at his back because he had tied a strap wrong the day before and had never had the chance to fix it. His face held no plea in it.

“Let me take it,” he said.

She looked at his shoulder before she looked at his eyes. The strap there sat lower than the other. There was a seam along the muscle that had not settled yet from the hook that had struck him in the repair hall. She remembered him walking a wrist-wide strand on her count, his mouth set on the word shame and his feet arguing for their lives.

“You freeze on wrong ground,” she said.

“I froze and I walked,” he said.

He lifted his left hand and rotated it slowly until the joint in his shoulder answered with a small sound. He did not flinch.

“I can pay for it if I make the wrong call. I won’t make the wrong call if you’re in my ear.”

She watched him stand still inside the noise while hooks landed and skidded and were turned. He did not look at anything that threw light. He looked at the lay of the line that would bear him. He breathed in a measure that matched hers without being told.

“You lead,” she said.

He nodded once.

“On my count. You cut on my call. If the line wants to teach you a lesson, you walk the lesson back and teach it to every boy whose mother will not have him home if you fall.”

“Understood.”

Cael’s boots stopped within reach of her fingers. He had his sea-green cloak closed against back-blow. The strap lay firm over the burn he had picked up in the reef. He had not bothered to clean the white line of blister where light had crossed his arm; Rell had told him not to and he had listened.

“Southern parapet,” he said.

“Noise?” Tamsin said.

“Drill,” he answered.

“Noise that looks like drill,” he said, correcting himself by a breath.

He did not prettify it. He would raise shields and drum brass with the flat of spears to draw a watch. He would make enough light to mark a path without giving a fool a glowing circle to aim at. He held her eye until she inclined her head the smallest fraction.

“Relay to my whistle,” he said to Rell.

Rell answered with a two-finger touch to the rail.

Brakka stood on a crate because his legs were shorter than everyone else’s and he refused to borrow a man’s back as a step. His palms were wrapped in cloths that had once been white and were now the colour of the first coat on a copper pot. He had two squat jars on the crate beside him and a small coil that wore a strap. He did not touch either jar. He used his chin and elbows to direct a girl and a boy to lift the jars and fix them to Garin’s harness.

“These are cutter jars,” he said to Garin.

“They bite where the weld is bad. Bad weld there is, because men who build in a hurry don’t believe anyone will come close enough to shame

their work. You will marry a jar to the cold seam where the mast meets the base. You will marry a jar to the brace that isn't true. Don't try for all three. Don't try to be clever. You want a true bite or you'll open nothing and you'll give me back an apology instead of a hole."

Garin stood steady while straps threaded and buckles came home. Brakka pushed the coil pack against his chest with a gentled forearm.

"When I tell you, you bring the coil to your belly and breathe once to wake it. It doesn't need your whole life; it needs that one breath. Don't give it more because you hunger to matter."

Lethriel came with slate under one arm and cloth at her throat. She had three apprentices from Rimespan at her shoulder: a boy whose eyes flashed too quickly toward the sky, a girl who had cut her hair short, and a man who moved his lips when he counted because no one had taught him otherwise yet. Lethriel drew two shapes upon the slate with a steady hand. One shape cupped the lane. The other combed the top of it thin. She did not sing the shapes. She set the slate between the apprentices and moved their hands until each finger understood what belonged to it.

"Thin only," she said, and the word came out a rasp from the thunder-reef.

She touched her throat and shook her head when the boy looked at her as if he would lend voice where she had none to give. She took his hand and set it to the slate again. He would hold no more than a squall, the sort that lay a veil over bad wood when men wanted breathing-room and not victory.

A messenger in a quartermaster's coat that had been cut to free his shoulders pushed through a knot of men. He came with an offer ready.

"Mistress," he said to Tamsin, "we can pull men from the far pad and hold your inner post. If that holds, you save your raid and we keep a dock. If the far pad goes, it's only a few carts lost to cloud."

"Only," Tamsin said.

She looked at the far pad where a woman had two children wedged under the low stair and her feet set apart because a man had taught her to do that when the world moved where it shouldn't.

"No," Tamsin said.

"We hold here. We hold there. We don't sell the bridge to buy a dock. You draw men from a dead post when I call that post dead. You don't get ahead of the funeral."

The quartermaster's mouth shut. He had the look of a man who had wanted to be reprovved because then he would know who he was for the next ten breaths. He nodded once and slipped to the edge to see what his enemies would ask of him instead.

Tamsin put her palm on the rail and counted, light under the hum because the hum wanted to steal any sound it had not invented.

"One," she said.

Rell put his hand flat to the rail at two.

"Two."

He lifted on three and let breath go with his palm.

"Three."

"Rules," she said, and the men who had not yet learned to listen to the sound of the word itself fell quiet because they learned faster that way.

"No running unless called. You brace on three, not on two. Elders and children clip first. If I say cut, you cut. You argue later on boards that answer back. You don't pretend a failing line isn't failing. You hold what can be held and you throw what must be thrown. On this strand you do not unclip for any reason."

She took the lanyard at her hip in her hand and felt the tie sit proud and honest.

“We go before moonrise. One pass. No second try. Under oath and under sky.”

“Under sky,” several voices said, and others did not say it but set their weight to be where the oath would ask them to be.

Aldren turned the cowl on his lantern just enough to satisfy a habit learned before many of the men in the court had been born. He saw that the wick would answer if asked and that oil would not give freely. He set the cowl down again. He walked the ferrule forward until the boards felt it and the boards’ answer ran up the staff into his hand. He did not meet Tamsin’s eye because there was nothing to say except that he would be where the count put him.

Wind changed. The pulse-box on the far mast shortened its beat and then lengthened it. The small towers along the arc took the change and sent hooks to measure it. One hook brushed the hair at a boy’s temple and did not take skin. He lifted his head at once, trained by drill, and set it still because he had been told to do that when his life trembled on someone else’s skill.

“On my count,” Tamsin said to Garin.

He stood ready, eyes on the strand, harness light on his ribs, the weight of the cutter jars a rightness on his chest.

“On three.”

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Cloud cover had come in thin over the little service island and its stone. It was not generous. It parted and closed without learning from itself. Garin had learned without grace. He felt his boots meet old braid and varnish grit where too many hands had walked outcomes that did not concern them. The strand took his weight and did not complain because he set it down clean.

He let the breath Tamsin lent him find his bones and did not tug at the count. He matched his steps to it and stopped fighting the sway.

“One,” came quiet from behind through wire. He kept his own count with it, steady in his head.

He placed his foot where the fibres spoke of care.

“Two.”

His palm skimmed the strand for talk and found none, which was talk of itself.

“Three.”

They were five across the void with the service island half-seen when the first man slipped. Rimespan’s dock boy, the one who moved his lips on counts. His hand found a wet seam in the varnish. His boot went down and then went forward of his knee. He gave his fear to the line in a short sound. The clip held. The old anchor splice to which the clip trusted had had its day more than once. It failed. The boy reached as if reaching would make law. His breath scraped. He fell into cloud.

Garin took the weight of that with his mouth shut because anything else would have stolen the count and given it to grief.

“One,” Tamsin said. He widened the gap for the missing mouth.

He moved. He moved as if there had been no boy in the world and no anchor and no sound. He moved so the men behind him could step down into a world that had rules again.

The mast rose as a wall when he found it. It was worse than he had hoped for. Bad welds where men had chosen speed and coin. A seam where the man who had cut the plate had trusted that hot metal would forgive the shape it had been given. Garin set his hand to the cold seam and felt its lie. He waited for the count to say that his blood had somewhere better to be than his temples. He looked at the harness strap over his shoulder and told it to behave. He set the first cutter jar home and felt it seat clean on bad metal.

Boot-scrape on the rock above him. A flood of lantern from the tower's throat. The shadow of a helm cut across the beam and broadened.

"Now," Cael said, far to the south, but he might have been standing above Garin because the word arrived at a human time.

Shields rose and fell beyond sight. Brass sang under brass. Two flats, then the lift. A drum-beat rolled over the lanes. Someone threw a single spark into a dry pan just east of the parapet and it took nothing it should not. The guard above Garin turned his head toward the loud, obedient as a man who has practiced distraction more than thought. Boots ran on planking. The lantern's cone slid along air and went thin.

Garin lifted the second jar to the brace that had not yet been tested. He married jar to seam and felt the clutch, took a breath, gave the coil pack its due once, no more, and watched the small coals begin to answer. Counting backward from three to one in his head, he kept her count beside it, steady and separate.

"Back," he said, and it did not carry far, but the man behind him heard it because the man behind him wanted a word that told him what to do with his hands.

They moved for home.

Halfway to the worst seam a pocket of unbinding opened under the strand. It took sound and gave back nothing. It took the tone and replaced it with a dead feeling that felt like the moment after a lantern goes out and the wick still remembers the heat. The strand sagged. Weight ran wrong through Garin's harness and met the place where he had already borrowed too much of himself. Something in the shoulder cracked and set hot and then numb. His hand went open without his consent. He closed it again with the other hand doing part of the work. The coil pack bumped his ribs; a harness clamp pressed hard, breath catching. He did not swear. He placed his feet where the old varnish told him he would not die for being hasty.



Ahead, the last tie where the service strand kissed the mast island's main. A good knot cut and tied in a poor hour. If the jars had time, the mast would go in a way that would tear its voice out of the smaller engines. If the brace stayed, the mast would fight and might then teach the island something it was not ready to learn.

"Ahead," he said, and his file moved as told.

"One," Tamsin said.

He set the hook-staff and put meat into it with the arm that had not gone numb.

"Two."

He pulled. The tie grudged learnings and then gave because it had been promised nothing.

"Three."

He cut. A clean cut, a cut with no flourish where a flourish would have made a show for boys and paid out a life for spectators. The strand kicked. He felt it in the foot that had been learning to talk to boards his whole life. He turned for home.

The jars took their breath at last. They did not flash. They ran white along the seam as water runs down a well-shaft when a bucket goes over and leaves a rope lying. The base plate parted where it had always wanted an excuse to part. The brace bent, then snapped. The mast leaned and caught on its own pulsing wires. Those wires spoke in four directions at once. The little towers out on the arc missed their word. Hooks flew and then fell dumb because men's hands had trained them to hear instruction first and think after. One engine coughed a last shot that kissed only air. The mast went, and took its pride with it.

The maintenance strand jolted hard, down then up, and tried to throw Garin clear. His hook slid and bit nothing. His feet went over and the sky came up. His harness checked on a secondary that had no right to hold and still did. He wheeled out into the cloud and the cloud took his

breath and did not give it back. He hung and did not have a word for it because he did not have breath to make a word.

Hands came down the strand the way hands do when they have been told they will never forgive themselves if they are late. Rell's, dry and sure. A marine's with old rope burn that marked him as a man used to taking instruction. Another with raw skin from a pad he had held too long. They set hooks where hooks should go and did not make speeches. They hauled at Garin's harness; iron pressed at his ribs, breath catching, and then air came. Garin lay on his side and retched. The sound came without dignity and did not need it. He tried to lift his sword arm and his sword arm was a foreign thing in a country whose language he did not speak. He laughed once because a man will do that when something is absurd and he does not want to cry in front of boys.

"Hold him there," Tamsin said from the near rail. Her voice was not loud. It did not move to meet anybody. It stood and asked to be come to.

Rell took Garin's weight and nodded to Tamsin without taking his hand from his work.

The arc beyond them, between the little towers, went slack in places and then slackened further because the slackness had infected the habit of the crews who had been given orders by pulse and nothing else. Hooks came out of wood with a lazy sound. The sound a small wind will make when it finally lets go of a blade of grass it has decided it does not love.

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Harness buckles came off on boards that answered; the main's hum settled underfoot. By the next bell they had him across the inner run.

The inner court breathed for the first time in hours. It was a hard breath, not a happy one. Men who had not remembered to drink water did so and found that their throats had become strangers. Women who had held a brace too long let go and watched the pad black in the centre

where heat had sunk and set tar.

“Don’t chase,” Tamsin said in the voice she kept for proud men.

A knot of rope-fighters at the outer strake had already set their feet to run along the catwalk toward a tower that had stopped thinking. They stopped because it was easier to stop if someone told you that you were still good and must remain so. She lifted her hand.

“Brace on three,” she said.

Rell set his palm.

“One.”

The men bent their knees and learned their bodies again.

“Two.”

The air felt less like a wire in their mouths.

“Three.”

They held. They did not go.

Beyond, where the mast had stood, a gap smoked. Lines lay across the rock like cut snakes and had no plan. Small towers took longer to shake off habit than men, and that saved a boy at a pad who had been standing further forward than he should have been. The nearest enemy engine sent a hook without instruction. It struck the rail short of his belly and fell. He stared because he had expected to be dead and had had plans. He lowered his body to three and the rail tolerated him because he had learned to listen.

“Where the mast fed, I want a splice that will put shame in a man from here to the Green Pylon,” Tamsin said.

Brakka had already moved to the edge of the gap. He did not bring his hands. He brought his temper. He put his boot on the crate and nodded to the boy who had called him Master because calling a man Master did not make it true, but obeying him did.

“Lay the braid so that it sits flat,” he said.

“You don’t sing it. You persuade it without theatrics. Copper coil here. Clamp there. You tell the heat where it serves. You don’t let it think about glory and run to the weakest point, because heat will do that if you let it.”

He set the back of his wrist against a clamp the way a cook will test a pan, and his mouth twitched.

“Hold the pad steadier. You’re jouncing it like a cart. It’s not a horse and it can’t stand your foolishness.”

The men he had insulted for days nodded to him now without rancour because the hum rose true under their feet and men are not so proud that they cannot tell their friends from their enemies. The splice went down. The emergency braid lay where it should. The hum thickened and lost its dry scrape.

Lethriel stood with her back to a pillar where someone had written a saint’s name long ago and someone else had rubbed it away in anger. She drew a shape on her slate and raised her hand to move a girl’s wrist from a too-wide sweep to a narrow one. She took a boy’s thumb and set it lower along the wire of a small practice frame. She spoke once and then not again. Her eyes told the students where they were wrong and her hand told them where they were right. The squall her three could buy would not fool a sage. It would fool a tired man on a tower for three tens of a count and that was all anyone had asked.

A brass-winged courier came over the court and settled on the rail near Cael. It turned its head too many times because it had been made by a man who enjoyed cleverness more than utility. Its leg carried a small band with seals set not quite square. Cael’s jaw had been less sure since moonrise. He set two fingers under the band and slid it off as if he took a splinter from a child’s skin.

He read without sharing his face with anyone. Folding the strip, he smoothed it. It opened again under his fingers. Lifting his eyes to Tamsin,

he came to where she stood so she would not have to move her feet from where the rail would like them to remain.

“A sitting under sky for inquiry,” he said.

“Words?” she said.

“Interference with lawful patrol,” he said, and the words lay flat in his mouth because they had been weighed and found too light.

“Damage to a Senate craft.” Brakka’s jaw set; Rell’s eyes went to the east towers.

He turned the strip so that the seals faced the lantern and the light told the truth of them.

“They want us at a neutral tie at dawn,” he said.

“Do they want us or do they want your men?” she said.

“They have left themselves the courtesy of not saying,” he said.

“We go,” she said, because she had not learned yet to refuse any road that would make the world wider for someone who was not herself.

“We go and we answer under sky and not under a roof. If they call us saboteurs, they can do it where the wind can take the word away if the word is wrong.”

Cael let out a breath that might have been relief or might have been mourning for something he had not yet had to bury. He closed the strip and tucked it under the strap at his burned arm because that was as good a place as any now.

Garin sat on a coil at the edge of the inner court where men put coils when they thought coils were furniture. He kept his injured shoulder pressed into the wood until the pain settled into a shape he could plan around. He did not look toward the edge where a boy had gone into cloud because he did not trust his mouth if he did. He watched Rell walk up and stood.

“Give me a whistle,” he said.

Rell produced one from the roll of a pocket as if he had expected to be asked.

“I can’t lift a blade,” Garin said.

“I can train boys to hear a tap through a panic. I can teach them to turn a hook with a stick so a hook thinks about itself for a breath and not about a boy’s belly. Find me a stretch of board that hasn’t been taught anything for a season. I’ll teach it. I’ll teach them.”

Tamsin had come behind him without his knowing because she had a way of making herself into a quiet that work did not notice.

“The corner beyond the tar kettles,” she said.

“You have a post there as long as the bells mark repair. When they mark anything else, you have a post there then too. You don’t go near a live edge until I call you to it.”

He took this as if she had given him a sword he could lift. He put the whistle in his mouth and blew a thin sound that was not meant to carry farther than the wrists of the boys in front of him. Two dock lads came without being called because boys go where instruction is without being told how to live.

Ori stood near the mast gap and watched the little towers learn to talk to themselves again. He held his slate and a bit of grease with the surety of a scribe and the shame of a thief because he had a way of writing down what belonged to other men and making it into a common good.

“They’ll find another rhythm,” he said, mostly to his own wrist bands.

“They don’t think as quickly without the mast, but they’re not fools. We didn’t win hours. We bought tens. That’s all.”

“Then we spend them well,” Tamsin said.

She put her hand to the rail the way she did when she wanted to learn whether her own nerve would obey her without complaint. She counted

to remind the rail that she knew its names. She felt the lanyard at her hip sit proud and honest and wished it were hidden, not because she meant to deny it, but because anything too visible became a thing men tried to own.

“We’ll answer at dawn,” Cael said.

“Under sky,” Aldren said, and his voice was very tired and very firm.

Aldren met her eye; his lantern tapped once to the rail. She nodded. “Under oath and under sky,” Tamsin said.

She lifted her hand. Rell set his palm. The bells at Rimespan shifted to a cleaner repair and then to a warding knock beyond the east tower to remind sleepy men that sleep was not for now. Lethriel put her slate under her arm and raised a finger at a student who had already begun to ornament the line and would lose the line if she did not learn. Brakka nodded once at the hum as if a man had finally apologised for an old lie. Garin’s whistle found two boys’ ears and brought them to heel.

Night thinned. The world’s breath turned cold in the way it always did when bells thought about their first honest note of morning. From the neutral tie beyond the east tower, a thin dawn bell carried in.

The road remembers.

# Chapter 8

## The Sky-Senate Closes Its Hand

Wind came thin from the north and veered to the east between bells. High Aerie's Sky-Senate Chamber held the sound against marble and brass. Paired hooded lanterns hung in twos; polished brass rails ringed the floor that did not answer underfoot. The dais was the old platform built to take sway from memory, now fixed and sure. The court sat in its hall.

They had answered the dawn bell at the neutral tie beyond the east tower; the sitting moved at once under escort by cradle-line across three ties and a span to this hall between first and second bells.

Tamsin counted the seams under her boots. The answer was honest enough: two set true, one with old polish, one that had been cared for in a season when someone had thought that sort of thing mattered. Rell stood half a pace behind her shoulder with his palm ready to listen and knock when she asked him. Cael's marines held a square at the well below the dais near the inner rail. Brakka stood solid by the rail, bandages tucked neat at the wrist. Aldren's lantern-staff leaned against his thigh, cowl turned down to spare the wick.

Speaker Veyana Strake stepped onto the dais with a measured breath and a still back. Brass cuffs at her wrists showed the Senate seals in a line whose edges had been rubbed by work or worry. A clerk with ink to the knuckles carried a roll between two hands. A guard's cleft pole rested across his chest. Two aides took places at Veyana's left and right.

"This sitting is under sky," Veyana said. The words were in the right order and had weight because the wind heard them.



Tamsin did not bow. She had not bowed to anyone on a line since she was a child, and not then either. She set her weight and waited for the formal blows.

"Before this court," the clerk read, "stand Tamsin of the Lines, Aldren of the weather□staff, Prince Cael Aeronar of Windharp, Sir Garin Cloudfall, Brakka Copperweft, Lethriel Rainvein, and those acting under their hand. Charges: interference with a lawful patrol of the Sky□Senate within a thunder corridor; damage to a Senate craft during operations; sabotage of a signalling mast at the eastern approaches; possession and movement of restricted artefacts without writ; instigation of riotous assembly at Rimespan."

The clerk's voice flattened the last line as if even he could hear how little it meant where men had been too tired to riot.

Cael's jaw set without flourish. Garin shifted once and let it end there. Lethriel touched the cloth at her throat and lowered her hand again. Brakka breathed in and held it as if testing his ribs for cracks. Aldren was still. He had a particular stillness that belonged to men who knew cost by first name.

Veyana's gaze touched each of them and did not linger. "You may speak to the charges," she said. "I will hear words that weigh against copper. I will not hear speeches that turn wind into ribbon."

"We held Rimespan," Tamsin said. Her voice stayed at a level where work could hear it. "Your engineer's mast taught enemy engines when to bite. We cut it. Your barge in the thunder□reef threw hooks on a lawful column. We turned them and lived. These are not crimes in any shop that wants to open its doors tomorrow."

A murmur pulled at the gallery rail. A woman who had stood at the guest rail the night before put a hand to her mouth and took it away again. A boy with a breaker's cap stared at Veyana's cuffs and did not understand why they seemed clean.

"The mast signalled to coordinate repairs," Veyana said. "The barge was an escort tasking under my writ." She inclined her head toward the clerk. "The court will hear from Engineer□Third Nale. His words are recorded from last night after rescue."

The ink□handed clerk unrolled a strip. He wet his lip as if the words required it and set his voice to plain. "I, Nale, engine□hand third, assembled at the thunder corridor under orders to recover a drift line and inspect a lower guide for arc bruising. We were disabled by an unauthorised discharge. I record that those who struck did so with intent and used storm□craft without badge or count." The clerk swallowed. "At Rimespan, the mast was part of a civil signal chain. The collapse cost two men on a brace and the work of ten."

"That chain timed hooks to take flesh," Brakka said, not loud, not quiet. "It wanted a reason to fall and we gave it one at a time of our choosing."

"A dwarf's temper is not the court," the ex□soldier senator said from near the staff basket. His back stayed straight because habit does not loosen under weather.

"A temper doesn't put a coil where it belongs," Brakka said. He kept his eyes on the clerk's hands that were clean of tar.

Cael stepped forward by a half□sole. "Trial by sky□oath," he said. "Here and now. Ask each of us the count and the place and the breath. Ask your engineer as well. Let those who lie do so with the wind listening."

Veyana did not rise to him. Her head turned a fraction toward her left□hand aide, then came back. "Emergency powers are active for the safety of the archipelago," she said. "Sky□oath proceedings are suspended. I will not give you a rail to climb into noise. The hours are being eaten beneath our feet." A bell at the east corridor clipped once; benches creaked under hands; tar at the gallery rope gave a blunt scent. The hall heard law demoted to paper.

Aldren moved his palm to the lantern's brass and turned the cowl just enough that the glass breathed. He did not light it. He set the ferrule to the board at a groove worn by use. "I will speak the Law only to name tension and share, "

Four guards put the hooked poles down over the cowl and caught the staff under the guard rings that had been welded for war and not for bridges. They did it cleanly, without anger. Their eyes stayed on the rings. "No Law□voice in the sitting," the right□hand guard said. "No lantern called. Those are the orders."

A low sound started near the far gallery rail and came on in uneven pulls toward the dais. It stopped when Tamsin lifted her hand in a way that had stopped men from running at worse edges.

"The charges are hollow," she said. "Who crossed at Rimespan when hooks came, say so by your hands."

Three hands went up first. Then seven. Then more. A guard turned his head. A porter in dock□grey at the gallery fixed on a green nick in the brass; his raised hand settled first. Hands fell to sleeves. The air carried no pride out of the bodies that had stepped forward and then back. Tamsin marked each who had tried and each who had failed. She did not hold that as a book to be read later. It did not belong to her to do that with other people's fear.

Veyana's cuffs shone dull. "Pending review," she said, "you will be housed in guest rooms on the east face above the wind□docks. Food and water will be provided. Your movements will be supervised for your safety and the safety of others. This is not a jail. It is order."

"You mean delay," Tamsin said.

"I mean survival," Veyana answered.

Ori had stood out of the line of sight of both guards and clerks. He looked at the pattern of patrol boots and turned his wrist to find a free inch between last night's marks. He made a narrow line for a patrol that

counted seven turns between the far stair and the lantern rack with a one□turn linger at the rack to speak to a boy. He breathed once through his teeth and gave Tamsin a small nod for the moment between the third patrol and the relief. "On the shift," he mouthed without sending breath to the word.

Tamsin touched Rell's forearm. "We leave on the relief," she said.

Aldren stood as the guards lifted the poles away and left the lantern alone again. He afforded them a small nod for their clean work in holding without hitting. They did not answer with pride, which meant there was hope in them for later.

"Under oath and under sky," Aldren said. It made some men straighten and a few bend their knees without knowing why their bodies chose that answer.

"Under sky," Tamsin said. "On three when the relief turns."

The small bell at the east door gave a clipped note for a relief and a soft call went down the line of uniforms. Tamsin's hand came up.

"One," she said.

Rell set his palm to the rail. The wood answered. He gave it the space it required.

"Two."

He lifted on the third breath and let his hand go with the air he had held under it.

"Three," Tamsin said, and stepped off the formal floor into the antechamber toward the wind□docks, where posts still carried scuffs from barrels and not from boots.

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The air was cooler from the vents; dock noise carried from below. The long antechamber overlooked the wind□docks. Pins stood along the rail for ropes; covered dishes cooled on a table. Brass along the wall wore the marks of hands that had missed and found and missed again. A short bell clipped; the east vents sighed cold. Veyana stood already near the rail where the room widened to let traffic swing. She had moved by a different route because her office cut new lanes where none existed for other people.

"Tamsin," she said. No title.

Tamsin stopped where the floor told her to. She did not bring her feet closer to the Speaker than the boards would allow for proper balance.

"You know why this is being done," Veyana said. "Ropes that can be saved must be saved. To do that, pressure must be lifted where it eats. I am offering Windharp's lanes kept clear. Supplies. Copper. Crews. Gentle roofs. Delay your run. Return the fragments to custody for safety's sake, where none will reach for them. When the count steadies, you will be free to attempt your journey."

"You can say Windharp out loud," Tamsin said. "You have already spoken with his house. They will live. That's your promise."

Veyana's mouth hardened at a corner without making a grimace. "I have spoken with many houses."

"And the islands that have no voices in your benches," Tamsin said. "The rope□farms past the second fog. The cutters on the drift roads that do not send a penny to a Senator's room. What happens to them when you lift pressure?"

"Some can be saved," Veyana said. "Some cannot. There are controlled falls that must be made so that the rest does not tear free by chance and kill ten times more. Do not pretend the sum is different because you dislike doing the counting."

"I dislike choosing the bodies," Tamsin said. "Law binds what it can hold to hands that keep it for everyone or it is not Law. I won't put my breath to a law that says your banners first and the rest when your tables smile again."

"It is not your choice alone," Veyana said. "Hand me the shards and I will give you safety. Not only for Windharp. For your company. For you. There is time to make a school from your count. There are apprentices to lighten your voice." She glanced at Lethriel's cloth, then back.

Tamsin took one measured breath and widened her stance by a half inch. "I won't sell my breath," she said. "The shard answers to crossings and to work. It will not lie behind your seals and wait for you to feel generous."

Veyana's gaze held, measured. "I cannot save you from the engine I serve," she said. "Once it moves, it moves. If you will not accept safety for a season, then it will grind what it finds in its way."

Cael's step made just enough sound to be named. He had come without his cloak's edge dragging. He had heard what a man needed to hear at the point where a mother's name would sit. He did not speak that name. His eyes said enough that he would not take the bargain if he were free to set his own table.

Lethriel had placed her slate under one arm and her other hand against her throat where the silver veining had dulled. She did not draw a line. Her look spoke for the places where singing would have been wasteful cruelty. Veyana met it and did not look away. She had other kinds of courage.

Veyana's face settled. Her aide at her left hand shifted the smallest amount. The guard at the end of the passage turned his head toward a bell that might ring or might not.

"We run the commons," Tamsin said to Cael without giving the sentence any more breath than the boards needed to understand the instruction.

"Under sky," Cael said. He offered no court word to the Speaker and that omission was a clean cut.

They moved as a file past the angle. Rell's palm waited for the rail. Ori glanced at the louver over the next turning and nodded to himself when it breathed wrong by half an inch.

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They took the guest rail at the wind□docks and cut onto a service span that had been dressed for peacetime work and left there to remember it without company. Three boards to the cleated post, then one more to the service brace. Varnish crazed; frost slicked the surface. The span ran between a maintenance island with a tar kettle on its side under a cover and a little square platform that had once hosted a fishmonger's cart and now did nothing.

Tamsin stepped onto the boards and felt them learn her weight. "Rules," she said without interrupting her count. "No running unless called. Brace at three, not at two. Elders and children clip first, if any here count as such they go ahead. If I say cut, you cut. Argue later where boards answer back. Don't pretend a failing line isn't failing. Hold what can be held. Throw what must be thrown."

Rell set his palm on the rail at two out of habit and lifted at three. The men nearest him took that knowledge into their muscles and moved cleanly.

The first push from the Senate came in clean and under cowl. A pair of long□bodied kites, copper frames with netting that had been lacquered against wet, shifted in over the outer arc. Dockers called them brass hawks because men give names that make the day bearable. Their under□rigs carried charge packs no bigger than a grown man's chest. When the crews threw their nets, lightning had been taught to lie flat and tidy in those nets, the air in their path lost the small sounds that keep a

man honest. It did not become absence; the nets removed the small sounds and dulled the wind. Ori marked the moment at his wrist with a quick stroke and lifted his head long enough to see where the nets would choose to settle next. He raised two fingers and pointed at a gap that would stay clean for six breaths if nobody tried to own it.

"Window," he said.

"One," Tamsin called, adjusting nothing of the rhythm. "Two."

They moved through the gap. The hair at the nape of Tamsin's neck lifted and eased back; the charged air stayed still.

The second push came by foot. Three Senate guards in plain coats stepped out of a side□lane with hook□staves and tried to take up space that did not belong to them. The first closed a grip on Garin's good arm. The knight turned his shoulder as if to slip a coat and his face did not change. Tamsin made a small square with her hand and spoke the count a fraction shorter just where she needed to. "One-two-hold-three," and in the hold she had the file flatten and slide aside with their hips while Garin put his weight on the guard's boot and took the least cruel part of his arm with a twist. The guard's hand opened because hands open when you teach them to stop trying to own other people. Garin came clear. He did not strike. His bad shoulder pulled wrong under the motion and he carried it nearer to his body because it belonged there for a time.

"On," Tamsin said. "Don't let the fear own the air." She shaved a half□count to steady the file.

They went over a patch where varnish had cured uneven and slick with age. A boy with a sack of nails, a dock□runner trapped between posts, slid a half step and then did not because Rell's hand found his harness strap and put him back where he belonged without turning him into a display for anyone.

"Windlass ahead," someone called in a voice that did not try to turn itself into a story.



A narrow post with a winch sat too high on its stand. The handle had been kicked by someone who had wanted nothing to do with repairs. It had jammed with the teeth not fully settled. The run out from the winch took load into a side guy that would choose to let go if insulted. Brakka went to the post like a man approaching an old argument. "Don't," Rell said, because his job was to remind men of their limits.

"I know what my hands are," Brakka said. He put his forearm under the handle, teeth together, and leaned. A sound came from his wrapped palms that Rell had heard before from meat placed wrong on hot metal. The handle shifted and then clicked half a tooth. Brakka moved his stance and gave it another inch with his arm. He let the handle settle into the seat where it had always wanted to be. He stepped back. He did not look at his bandages. He breathed in through his nose and let the air out without asking anyone to tell him he was brave.

The kites threw a second set of nets. The wind lost its small edges to those nets and then took them back when the charge settled into the copper guides along the lane. Lethriel raised a hand and turned the slate so that her apprentices could see the two curves drawn there. She tapped a wrist. Thin squall, not song. The boy whose thumb had wandered earlier found the frame and gave it a breath. The girl on the other side did the same. The air along the lane took that instruction and made a veil. It did not move the enemy from their posts. It took two breaths from their eyes each time they tried to count distance.

At the cross□board where a ferry cradle's control line came up through a cleat, Rell stopped. The line ran clean to a cradle two boards out where clerks clung with braided straps and stared at the world as if it had changed its language while they were asleep. One clutched a ledger stick hard enough to whiten his knuckles. If Rell cut the control line the cradle would swing and snap back and then stay with them on the far side, safe and taken care of until someone braced it. The clerks would be stranded, frightened, unhurt. The cut would take a piece of the pursuit's convenience and put it in a bin where they could not reach it.

Rell put his hook under the line and did not pull. He looked at Tamsin. Tamsin looked at the cradle and back at Rell and did not say a word because her rules would not let her order that cut while people depended on the line for the breath they were taking.

Cael stood with his men one board to the left. "Cut," he said. "On me."

Rell pulled. The line came away with a sharp sound. "Held on my witness," Tamsin said. The cradle swung once, hooped back, and came to rest against its post. One of the clerks began to cry, a thin, tearing sound. No one fell. None of their line was hurt. Rell made a sound that he did not usually make. He kept the hook close to his thigh and did not look at the cradle. Cael's fingers closed on the rail; he kept his gaze on the far brace. He took the cost and did not ask anyone to ease it.

The span ahead spoke with a sound that should not come from an honest line. The boards sank in a ripple that ran three anchor-holes and then stopped at a brace that had been placed more carefully than the rest. The next five steps were not for children.

"Right onto the maintenance line," Tamsin said. "Single clip. Spacing at three. Palms open. No talk."

She put her weight onto the narrow line that had been laid in another season to carry repairmen from a storage hook to a tie. It did not belong to any procession. It took their weight because they had asked in the right voice. She counted. "One. Two. Three." The sway came up and rolled under them. She widened her stance and let the sway pass through her. Behind, Rell echoed the count with his palm and his back. Ahead, the world narrowed to two feet of board and a hum that wanted to remind her of Vael on the morning when a man had taken a bribe for a place and a child had almost died for it.

They reached a point where the maintenance line kinked under a nail that had taken water and grown a little too proud. The file stepped over it one by one on the count. A Senate guard with a badge no one had afforded him came close with his hand out to make a point and Lethriel's

apprentice raised his slate so that the guard's hand met slate and not flesh. The guard did not get a handle. He stepped back and thought about orders.

They cleared the kink and Tamsin let herself count a shorter span in her head for the first time, which is not the same thing as calling it. The moan in the boards changed. It began to sound like the part of a bell that nobody listens to until it fails.

"Window," Ori said from behind her shoulder. "Six breaths. Then dead wind."

"Through," Tamsin said. They went through, one breath each with a spare at the end for the man who will always need it.

They came off the maintenance line into a broader strip of board where it met a post with old paint worn to the grain. The sound underfoot was wrong by one shade of tone and one shade of feel and the wrongness grew under them while they tried not to notice. They had a lead of one breath and no more. The line moaned in a way that said it was not going to argue much longer.

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The lane curved past two empty posts and opened to a fork.

"The split buys us a dozen yards," Ori said. He pointed with two fingers toward where the service lane divided and then married itself again at a square platform with a bolt plate that had not been fully seated when some man's child had called him away to look at a tooth. "They can't place both nets at once if we take both lanes."

"Risk," Rell said.

"It strands the slower of us if anything goes wrong," Ori said, speaking his own answer because he was an honest man. "It also takes the kite off the right thread if the crew thinks like engineers instead of

riggers."

Tamsin looked at the faces that had come with her into a life she had not promised them would be safe. She turned her head toward Cael.

"Left," he said, before she had to ask. "I draw the bite. Under your count until the threads split."

"Under the count," Tamsin said. "On three."

They found the fork. The left thread had better boards and a clearer path; the right thread had the boards that had forgotten how to be boards for a year and then remembered all at once. Tamsin took the right. Lethriel fell in behind her, apprentices under her hands. Brakka moved without asking who was allowed to be on what thread because anyone who had ever made anything knew you went where the work asked you to go. Ori stayed at Tamsin's shoulder, drafts bound tight.

"One," Tamsin called.

Rell held the left lane's cadence so the two threads braided sound for one breath longer.

"Two."

Cael raised his chin at his marines and did not look at the men he would not bring with him if the count broke. He put his foot on the left thread and set his weight.

"Three."

They went. The kites did not love the choice. The crews argued with their own nerves for a beat and then committed where pride told them the work would be. The lead kite put its net down clean on the left thread toward Cael. He bent his knees and put his back to a brace and did nothing that would waste the small bit of air he had to himself.

On the right, the boards sagged. They did not sag politely. The drop took a half inch all at once and then tried to take another half. Tamsin felt the boards' answer in the arch of her foot and in the way the hum fell

away as if the line were trying to go to sleep in the middle of the day.

"Load□shed on three," she said. "Packs and spare gear only. On my word." She was not soft with it. "It's lives or metal. We keep lives."

Her hand lifted. Rell was not there to echo but five men and a woman read her shoulder as if it were a rail.

"One."

The first pack came off. It thumped once, then slid and went to the cloud. The man who had owned it had two children at home and looked after his hands as if he had to use them again in some future that was longer than the afternoon.

"Two."

More gear went, including a split clamp jaw.

"Three."

Brakka took the last coil at his belt and the clamp bundle he had been hoarding as if it were his own wife's wedding ring and put them on the board, then pushed them over with his foot. He did not hesitate. He did not make a joke. He looked at Tamsin and she nodded and then looked away because it hurt in a clean way that did not need an audience. "Under oath and under sky."

Lethriel raised two fingers against her throat and then flattened her hand and held her breath and then let it go to show there were four breaths left in the board if someone did not put a promise in it. She made two movements on her slate. The boy with the quick eyes understood what her hand was telling him and did not add any flourish. The thin squall came again and the kite crew looking toward them took one breath less than he needed to keep his count.

They rejoined. The two threads married at the platform that had the bolt plate with the slight lift. The plate had taken heat sometime in the last hour and now wanted to be a different shape. A thread of oil wept at the near bolt, and heat shimmer thinned the air above the plate. The bolts

had been seated hard on a cold day with a woman standing by wanting to go home. The anchor under the plate had been honest for longer than anyone had paid it for. It asked someone to stop lying to it for a short time so it could remember what it had promised. Under their feet, the moan held to a low third.

Aldren's hand went to the lantern. He did not lift the cowl. He set his thumb to the ridge on the brass where he always set it when he measured wick by touch. He looked at the file of bodies that had stepped under his map. He looked at the plate that had begun to move in its own small way.

Tamsin counted the breaths still in the board and felt each of them as if they were hers to spend. "On three we go across this plate," she said. She did not say what would happen if the count failed. Some men cannot step if they are made to see the ground from too far above their feet.

A kite's net cracked in the air over the left thread where Cael stood his brace. He did not cry out. He took the lash of charge across his forearm and put that arm behind him where it could not pull anyone else down. Rell, three men back, saw it and did nothing because doing nothing was the right work in that moment.

"On three," Tamsin said again. She looked at Aldren. He had already looked at her and then away. The lantern glass was clean and the oil was what it was. He placed the ferrule where the board would feel it when the time came.

"One," Tamsin said, and the hum dropped lower than any of them wanted to name.

Two men from the far pad who had not understood anything that had been said this morning put their arms around each other because that is the only thing men know to do when language fails them and the ground does not.

"Two," she said, and Rell's hand rose in her mind though he was not there to lift it.

"Three," Tamsin said, and the company put their feet where the count told them to place them, and Aldren's fingers tightened once on the lantern and then did not move again.

The plate lifted a breath. The rail stopped singing to itself and waited for a word that would not be spoken yet. Cael shouted to his men and they heard him. Lethriel pressed her slate to a boy's chest to keep him from making art where there was only work. Brakka took air and held it and did not let it go. The kites circled wrong because someone had made a plan at a desk and not on a rail.

The road remembers.

# Chapter 9

## Eight Breaths

Tasmin set her weight back by a hand's width and tapped the board with two toes. The answer came dull. The plate had lifted a finger-width and wanted more. On the near side, the pins that married the plate to the buried anchor showed a thin white at their edges. The load had prised there. She knew that thin white. She had seen it on a stay an hour before it let go with a sound that never finished.

"Hold," she said, low. It was not the word for stopping. It was the word that told bodies to make the gap in themselves to take an instruction.

On the left thread, the Windharp marines held position. Cael stood a half pace off her shoulder with his burn tucked behind his back so it would not steal anyone else's balance. Rell kept his palm over the rail at two and lifted on three. He didn't tap, only felt for the board's answer. Lethriel's apprentices had their slate between them where the two curves were drawn for thin squalls. Brakka had both arms folded across his chest to stop his hands asking to be used for work they could not do today.

The plate moved. The plate stayed low. It moved, a slow lever toward the chasm. The thin white at the pins became a hairline. Then the hairline swallowed the small noise at that seam.

Sound thinned all at once. Not quiet. A thinness. The neat oval that ate sound had opened for a breath under the plate. Tamsin could not hear the wet cloth on her own tongue for that one breath. Then sound returned in a ragged way.



A long shadow passed across them wider than any hawk and cut the already thin light to a flat tone. The count narrowed to heartbeats; talk ceased. The air had the taste of old iron and wet copper. No body moved. No one looked up. A void-wyrm's shadow made men do wrong things if they met it with their faces. It went on, and the wind forgot it quickly.

No more talk.

"Uncrossable," Rell said without ceremony, eyes on the pins.

"Uncrossable without a hold," Brakka said. He did not look at his hands when he said it.

Aldren had stepped forward while they watched the pins. He set the ferrule of his lantern-staff into the groove worn by other days when men had asked for steadiness and paid for it in smaller coins. He kept the cowl shut. He took one breath as if he had a scale in his chest and had set a weight on it to see whether it would lift. Under her soles the hum tipped a hair.

"Tamsin," he said.

She kept her weight where it was and met his look. The line still had a word to say and she would not interrupt it to tell a story about herself.

"Eight breaths," Aldren said. "Count them."

"No," she said. It came out without any ornaments. Her hand closed and then opened at her side. "No."

He moved his head a fraction. His eyes were old storm glass and held things a man should not put into anyone else's keeping. He had told her once what the lantern cost: eight the safe word; twelve the edge. The brass under his thumb was warmer than it had been at dusk. He had spent little light and much patience since then. The wick of him had been measured long before she met him.

"Eight," he said again, and there was no place to stand that was not inside that number.

She nodded once. The place behind her breastbone took the instruction. She shifted to the work. Her voice went to the count she had given a hundred times and hoped not to give this way again.

“Order,” she said. “On one, Brakka. Ori. Take a shard and the drafts. On two, Lethriel with your two. On three, Sir Garin. On four, Windharp men with Sergeant Rell. On five, civilians. On six, Prince Cael. On seven, me. No one on eight.” She looked at Aldren when she said the last and he looked at her and accepted his own order as if he had always known it.

Cael stepped forward the space a man makes when his body goes before his mind. “Let me hold,” he said. It was not a shout. His jaw had set as if that part of him believed it could decide the world alone.

Aldren kept his eyes on Tamsin. “You lead on four,” he said. “You have men who will keep order when you are there to be seen. You hold them together on the far side. I hold here.”

Cael stood there as if he did not accept that men could choose him and not his orders. He narrowed his gaze to Aldren’s shoulder. “Under sky,” he said, and turned his head to Rell. “Fourth breath, Sergeant.”

“Fourth,” Rell said. His palm rested at two and lifted at three like it had done since dawn.

Lethriel came to Aldren without her harp. She had left it wrapped. Her hands were steady. She put her palm on the lantern’s brass. The skin of her hand made a dry sound on the metal and left nothing behind. Then she put that palm on Tamsin’s shoulder and held it there for two heartbeats. The silver in her throat had dulled since dusk. Her mouth did not open. She took her hand away and moved back to her apprentices and lifted the slate so they could see the two curves again.

Brakka did not step closer to Aldren because the place in front of the lantern was not for anyone else now. He spoke from where he stood. “Pin it,” he said. “I’ll wedge and body the slack once the plate stops lying.” His eyes were wet but not from the air. He blinked hard and the drops went into his beard’s ties.

Tamsin pressed her hand to the pouch at her belt, the oilskin sitting proud on its new lanyard where Brakka's boy had tied it after the reef. Two pouches there. One for the first shard that had answered her in Vael. One for the shard Brakka had found under the bell-casing at Rimespan. The stone lay quiet. The board under her counted the wind for itself in a slow three that did not belong to any man.

"Aldren," she said.

He turned the cowl with his thumb. The glass took the light from the tight wick and gave it back to the boards without flourish. The light gave no glare. It steadied. He breathed once into the light. The smell of clean brass and old oil rose. The hair on Tamsin's forearms lifted where the light placed itself along the grain.

The plate came down a fraction of an inch. The hum under Tamsin's feet lifted one shade and moved toward what she knew was honest. The white at the pins thinned to a line again and then held to a hairline for two counts. The cable behind the plate tightened by inches; the droop pulled up. Brakka took a breath like a man who had been under water and had found a post.

"Your count," Aldren said.

Tamsin lifted her hand. It shook once and then remembered itself. She made the flat palm that asked bodies to listen and not to speak.

"One," she said.

Ori had already rolled his sleeve beyond the bands. A grid crack crossed his right lens from the reef. He neither touched it nor pushed it up his nose. He did his work. Tamsin pulled the knot loose on one oilskin pouch and pressed it under his coat just above Rell's binding on his wrist. "This one," she said. "Keep it under your breath." He nodded once and set his jaw so that the corner of his mouth did not do a thing that would cost anyone time. Brakka moved with him. Brakka did not look at his hands. He set his feet soft. He put the side of his forearm to the first brace to take the sway and did not try to control it; he let it tell him what it would do

and then went with it. Ori stepped on the plate where Tamsin's count told him to put his feet and did not ask the plate any questions it could not answer.

"Two," Tamsin said.

Lethriel tipped her head to her apprentices. She made a small rectangle with two fingers and cut her hand through the air to forbid any ornament. The girl had learned not to flourish and her face was clean of anything except work. They went together. Lethriel kept one palm flat as if it could shape air without voice. It could not. It could tell boys how to keep their mouths shut so air did not steal steadiness from them. She placed her feet on Tamsin's word and did not look left or right.

"Three."

Garin's face was wet and pale. Rell had laid a strap around his upper arm earlier and it held now where it needed to hold. Garin's pauldron sat wrong and told the truth about his shoulder. He left the hook-staff alone. He did not pretend to be a man who could save anyone by lifting. He put the staff into a marine's hand and said, "Yours now," and then bowed his head to hear a name spoken right. He stepped on the board. He neither hurried nor turned. At the far side he stopped just long enough to look back toward Aldren and Tamsin. He bowed in a small way that did not ask anyone to answer, and then he moved beyond the platform where orders were spoken.

"Four."

"Windharp!" Cael called, and Rell echoed nothing at all because the men could see their commander's face and that was their count today. The marines moved in file. Their boots placed where the plate allowed them to live. Rell kept his palm on the far rail, calling the beat there so the men crossing had a word to step into. One boy looked like he had second bell still on his coat. He did not fall. He stepped on the rail's word and not on his need to get this part over with.

Cael stayed. He watched each man's back until a pair of eyes met his on the far side and turned away to make room for the next. He kept his burned arm behind him and let Tamsin's count shape his breath. Marines across; now civilians.

"Five."

Two clerks had strapped themselves into the ferry cradle earlier because they had been told once that rope was safer than walking and they had made that into a rule they applied to any road. They had cut free on Cael's order. Tamsin had held that on her witness. Now they stood, pale as wax, with straps still around their chests. Tamsin pointed at them and at a dock-runner who had not put his sack of nails down since dawn.

"You three," she said. "On five."

One clerk tried to speak. His mouth made a flat sound. Lethriel's apprentice put the slate between his eyes and the drop and he stopped trying to speak. They went together. One clerk stumbled at the last brace and Rell's hand found his strap and set him where he could breathe again. The boy with the nails did not let go of his sack. He carried his work and he carried himself to the far side.

"Six," she said, and turned to Cael.

He looked at the men already across and then back at the plate. Leaving anyone in his sight behind him sat wrong. He had learned to do it twice this week and it had not got easier. She lifted two fingers a hand's width. He nodded once. "Under sky," he said to her, and went. He set his weight cleanly and kept his eyes on the far rail and not on the drop.

The light in Aldren's lantern had gone paler. The brass took on a heat that did not belong to metal. Tamsin could feel the way his fingers had tightened on the staff and then gone very still.

"Seven," she said.

She stepped into the hold she had heard in another body and made it hers. The plate had one honest word left. She spoke her count into it and

it answered as well as it could. Her throat did not close. The noise that wanted to be a sob became the lift on the third beat where her boots cleared the raised edge of the plate. The far side reached for her with its own hum, and she met it, and for one breath the boards heard only the count and not the people on them at all. She set her foot beyond the plate and moved aside.

She did not say “Eight.” She did not say anything. The eighth did not belong to her.

Aldren looked at her and he did what a man does when he cannot speak and wants to tell someone that this was not an accident and it was not a mistake. He let the corner of his mouth move the smallest way. The wick ran its last measure. The lantern’s light lifted, clean against the boards. The plate held true for one full breath more than she would have believed it could. Then the flame thinned to near-clear and sank low behind the glass. The brass made a sound against wood and slid, still warm, toward the far edge. The ferrule hit the board and left a mark that would not be planed out by anyone who had respect for anything that had held this day.

The plate dropped. It did not obey anyone. It fell into its own weight and the near pins let go; the far platform held. The boards hugged the anchor once and then went out of sight into a low run of cloud. Sound came back wrong and then came back right. A brass hawk circled where the threads had met earlier, then banked off. Men on the far side stayed where they were because moving before the boards told them to move would have been stealing something from someone who had paid for it.

Tamsin went to her knees at the far edge. The lantern had lodged against a board’s raised grain where someone had not hammered his pride out earlier. She put her hand on the brass. It was hot enough to tell her that the man who had held it had been very near. She lifted it. It felt heavier than it had felt this morning and she knew why.

She stood with the lantern in her hand and the column waiting, and the wind-dock below them went on making the noises it always made when men were not crowding it with rank and orders.

Cael had not moved far from where she had left him. He went to one knee and his cloak brushed the boards. He looked up but not past her. "Under sky," he said. "On any span I follow your count. In councils I take your witness. I will set a table where this oath is heard." His hands stayed at his sides. He spoke the work.

Brakka stepped in close and put the back of his bandaged right hand against the lantern's side. The bandage smoked a little where oil had kissed it; he did not draw away. "By craft and by the honours of my hall," he said, "I'll tie and clamp to this light, even if I have to tell other men where to put their hands because mine won't do it yet. Lines that lie get burned out. Lines that hold get sung."

Garin stood with his arm hanging in a way that meant harm would come if he let it hang longer. Rell had the strap in his hand before Garin asked. He lifted the knight's arm and set it into a sling that would stop it pulling on wrong parts. Garin's face relaxed by one small line. He came to Tamsin and offered his left hand. "Orders," he said, as if that word could be as noble as anything else.

"Train," she said. "Boys and men who'll listen. No edge work unless I call. Not one step toward a live lip. You have a whistle. Use it."

He nodded and did not waste any talk on his bad shoulder. He took the whistle from the strap at his neck and blew the short call meant for men at his boots and not for the world.

Lethriel came and knelt where the lantern had been, as if she could still hear something there that the rest of them did not. She pulled a grease stub from her sleeve and wrote one word on the board between two weather-splits. REMEMBER. Then she met Tamsin's eyes and nodded once so small that it took a woman who had been counting breaths all morning to see it.

Ori had his slate open and his bands rolled above the ink that had not yet dried. He tapped the slate frame twice to set his count. He set three marks that meant wind veer at two fingers above the far brace and a cross-vee two lengths out. He drew a line that showed a lee pocket in the cloud beyond the east face where the wind would fold over itself and make a small room for breath. "There," he said. "If we keep light, they'll count wrong by a lane and we can sit for twenty breaths without being noticed. Then we move again down the lower run past the two empty posts and a tar kettle platform." He did not say cloud-cavern. He did not say any word that would teach a place to too many ears.

Tamsin lifted the lantern and felt the small pull through the staff into her arm where the weight lived now. She put her feet the width apart that made the boards answer their best. She looked at the men and women who had waited for her to say the next right thing and not to stand here and say something about loss that would not hold any cables.

"Under oath and under sky," she said, and took an even breath. "We do not trade one island for another. We do not save houses and let rope-farms fall because they do not send coin to a bench. We hold for all we can hold. We throw what must be thrown. We do not lie about what a line can do. We keep the count. We keep witness. We carry this light until there is a place where the Law can sit and not break the people under it."

There was a sound from the men that was not a cheer and not a sob. It was the sound of bodies that had decided to do a piece of work and were telling each other that they had heard it.

"Lamp down," she said, lowering the cowl until the brass hid the flame's face and gave only enough steadiness to their feet. "Rell, you take the rear to listen for bad decisions. Brakka, you direct wedges where our wake goes soft. Lethriel, your apprentices keep the thin veil when we make a corner. Ori, you count the windows and put a finger on my shoulder when we have one so I don't waste a breath asking. Garin, train on the move. Cael, your men are a wall to either side of whatever looks weakest."



She did not wait for anyone to say “Under sky.” She turned and stepped onto the first board beyond the platform and the boards told her they were ready to be asked for honest work again. The wind came across their faces and did not hurt. The lantern gave their feet a shape and kept their eyes out of the dark.

At the first corner, Ori put his finger against Tamsin’s shoulder. She nodded, and they slid left into the lee he had marked on slate. Cloud closed around them. She kept the lantern’s light to the boards; only their feet took its steadiness.

# Chapter 10

## The Line Remembers

Wind eased and lay wrong in the mouth of the cut where cloud folded back on itself. The air tasted of wetted rope and old copper. Boards underfoot stopped talking to the wider span and spoke only to their own nails. Tamsin tested that talk with a toe and found it honest enough for bodies that knew how to listen.

She raised her hand and brought it down in a flat line. The file passed from light into a thicket of whiteness that held sound close. The seam of the lantern stayed low behind the cowl, a thin band across the boards that gave their feet a shape and left the cavern's skin unlit. The fold of wind made a pocket. In that pocket the day's noises could not get in and their own would not get out.

"Here," she said, setting her palm against a post that leaned a thumb to the east. "Two mouths. One north, one west. Watch them. No songs."

Rell moved to the rear mouth by habit and laid his palm at two against a rail that had been nailed on a day when men had meant to mend a sap bucket to it. He lifted at three. It was a signal to those who could see him that the count still lived, even when bodies lay down.

"Lamp down," Tamsin said, lowering the cowl until the brass hid the flame's face and gave only enough steadiness to shape their feet into a ring. She set the staff so the ferrule slipped into a small knot-hole that had been planed shallow and forgotten. The fit took wobble out of the post. Aldren had once put a ferrule into a board like this and his hand had left a ridge where thumb met brass. On this staff the ridge was already there. Her count reached seven and held. She left eight unsaid, took three steady breaths, then kept her next calls to three.

They settled by tens, not by rank. The first tens were for those who could not be trusted to keep their eyes open when they needed closing. The second tens were for those who would not close their eyes if not ordered. The rest would lay down when told. They took water in small mouthfuls and passed the skin without counting. No one reached for more than he could drink in a breath.

Tamsin stood a while and felt the small muscle at the corner of her jaw ache as it let go of a task that no longer had to be done. She untied and retied the same knot in the tail of the line that held the lantern's strap to the staff. The movement made nothing except steadiness. She counted three breaths to put her own body back into a measure that would not steal steadiness from others.

Brakka took a place near the lantern without asking for it. His bandaged hands lay across his thighs, palms up, as if to show they would not try to grip. Two dock lads with rope-burned fingers and a rigger's girl who had cut her hair to be rid of its weight stood in front of him.

"You don't tie first," Brakka said. His voice had a rasp in it that came from smoke and heat and hours. "You look. Then you listen. Then you place, then you press. The lay tells you which way the braid wants to go. You tell it where it must go and you make it obey without showing off."

He put his forearm to a coil and turned it. "Lay flat. If it humps, you've lied to it. Press here. Not like you're trying to break a board. Like you're telling it a true thing and it's arguing. Breathe while you persuade. Hear it change."

The rigger's girl put her palm down and pressed. The coil shifted and settled, a small scrape followed by a content sound that did not carry in the pocket. Brakka nodded. "Good. Again. The wedge: set the thin side first. Don't try to jam the fat end and pretend the thin will find its way. The clamp: place where the strain lives, not where you wish it did. You don't get to wish with clamps." He breathed the words as counts. "One. Two. Place. Three. Press. Hold."

“Master,” the smaller dock lad said, and then swallowed the title when Brakka’s eyes narrowed. “Brakka. How do I know if I’m pressing too hard?”

“You’ll feel the give turn to grind. If you grind, you’ve gone too far.” Brakka lifted one bandaged hand with care. “And you’ll smell something you cannot afford to smell. Then you’ve already paid. Don’t go that far.”

Beyond them Sir Garin had taken a strip of plank that had been set to mark a bad seam and turned it into his ground. His right arm sat in a sling made from an old sash. He took a short stick in his left hand and used it to hook an imaginary line. He blew his whistle, the small, sharp call meant for men at his boots and not for the wide air. Two boys and a man with a burn mark on his jaw came to heel.

“Not arms first,” Garin said. “Feet first. You feel a shove in the board, not a call in your blood. You step when the board says to step. You turn a hook with the stick and your weight, not your shoulder. The stick is a way to put your foot somewhere your boot can’t go. That’s all.”

He showed them. He turned the stick with his left hand and shifted his weight a thumb to the side. The movement was small and not fine to see, but the board’s groan changed and the stick slid clean and then stopped where a man could make a choice and live with it.

“Again,” he said. “Whistle calls you. The board tells you when. I will not save you from going when the board says wait.”

The older of the two boys tried to make the turn fast because he believed speed would make him true. The stick skittered and tapped the board with a wet little sound that promised a fall. Garin shook his head. “You want to be a hero, you can do it with a bucket. Here, you can live. Again.” He blew the whistle, short.

Lethriel sat with her back against a post and a stack of cloth squares across her knees. She had cut the cloth from a sail that would never see salt again. Her throat cloth lay close, and the silver in her throat had lost some of its shine in the last days. She laid a grease pencil along the cloth

and drew a clean line that bent twice and did not ornament itself anywhere.

She drew two curves and dotted them where boys were apt to rush. She marked a small square where breath must be held at two. She set arrows where breath could be let out at three. She drew a hand, not a harp. She wrote next to it in small, block letters that could not be mistaken in fog: FLAT. THIN ONLY. NO ROD. Underneath she wrote numbers the way riggers counted: two, three, two. Then she handed the square to her youngest apprentice and placed his finger on the flat word until he nodded and did not try to smile.

When she had finished ten squares she stacked them on her other side. She lifted her slate and wrote with the same hand: Twenty tens before voice dies. Share this pattern. She showed the words to Tamsin when she passed.

Cael did not write. He walked the ring, stepping down to speak to men who had sat on coils all their working lives and to boys whose straps hung wrong. During the east-face scramble a Windharp marine had pressed his rope-laminate bow back into his hands, found unguarded when the bells clipped. Hands on buckles, he set them right. A strap end he pulled a thumb tighter and passed back. He asked names, listened to the way a man said his own, and promised nothing he couldn't keep.

"We won't leave you to hold a post alone," he said to a marine with a notch in his ear. "You have my word and hers," he added, inclining his head toward Tamsin without asking whether he might use her to make that promise. The marine's jaw loosened. Cael snugged the strap and let it lie right.

"You will want leave," he said to a boy whose eyes went left when someone said 'cut'. "I cannot give you leave. I can give you food that will not make you sick and boards that answer. If you do not chase a bright idea down a bad edge, I can give you another day. If you cannot stand, you say so. We won't spend your body for a banner's tale. Not today."

Ori knelt near the lantern seam and unrolled his oilskin. The slate under it had a skin of oil that had not taken dust because they had kept the cowl low. He slid the slate free and set it across his knees. The crack in his right lens made a line through the pattern when he looked down; he shifted his head so the crack did not sit over anything that mattered.

He had copied the High Aerie board that had been kept hidden behind a curtain on a pole. The lines and circles had been ugly under a clerk's hand. He had not copied the clerk's hand. He had written the words he could not leave behind without harm: controlled falls. He had drawn the three anchors marked in red. He had written the small notes that counted petals, radius, and days. He had drawn a column that said consulted and had left a blank where a name had been written on the board he had seen. He had written in small letters under it: houses will save themselves first.

Tamsin came and looked at the slate. She touched the word controlled. She pressed her thumb where the clerk had made a flourish in his R and Ori had not. She did not need to say what lay inside that flourish. She had refused it two bells ago. Refusing it twice would not make the wind less cold.

"Say it," she said.

He nodded. He told the room what the board had meant and did not spare the parts that hurt to say. He pointed to small islands drawn like petals under larger ones and to straight lines that ran like supports and to the numbers that told how many men a post would be asked to accept without food.

When he had done, Tamsin lifted her chin and spoke in the cadence that made riggers listen even when their backs hurt. "Under oath and under sky," she said. "We do not trade one island for another. We hold what can be held. We throw what must be thrown. If I say cut, you cut. You argue later when your feet are on something that will answer. If I say hold, you hold. If the line lies, we say it out loud and do not ask it to tell a

story it cannot live.”

“Under sky,” voices answered in the pocket, not loud, just sure. Cael said it with them, and Rell did not move his palm from the rail when he said it, as if the rail had a right to hear that answer from his hand as well as his mouth. Lethriel tapped the inked word REMEMBER on the board where she had written it earlier and her apprentices lifted their eyes and accepted the weight of that tapping without asking for more words.

Tamsin set watches. “First tens,” she said. “Rell, you take the rear mouth. Sergeant’s pick for the front. Two breath calls on change. If a brass hawk throws a net, do not answer with cleverness. Wait for the gap. Ori, you count windows with your hand on my shoulder. Brakka, you speak when you must, no more. Garin, you train. No edge work unless I say it. Lethriel, no singing.”

Lethriel touched her throat and then her slate and drew a line, flat. She wrote thin only and held it up. Tamsin nodded.

The seam of the lantern made a circle on the boards. Men put their feet inside it because the boards had asked for that shape from them since morning. Someone drew breath for a joke, swallowed it, and thumbed a frayed strap. He did not try again. Outside the pocket, the wind moved with its own mind. A kite passed and a net fell somewhere that wasn’t here, making a place where small sounds had no meaning for three breaths before wind reclaimed its work.

When it was Tamsin’s turn to lay down she lay on her side with one hand on the staff. The brass was warm through the callus on her palm. She counted quietly until her chest stopped insisting on telling her how it should rise and fall. The count went to three and then to nothing. The pocket held.

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First watch ended; second stood at the mouths.

Ori did not sleep when his turn came. His hands needed to follow the lines already in his head or they would turn to noise when he closed his eyes. He set the slate down and wiped a small patch with the fold of his sleeve to make space for new marks. He pulled his wrist bands up to the place where the ink still held and set the grease pencil into the groove that had formed along his thumb bone.

Two days behind them he had watched a void slit eat sound under a cable and learned its cycle: three tens between snaps with a liking for the lee side of ties. The reef had shown him a way to steal a breath from a storm if he met it clean, not brave. The mast at Rimespan had taught him how men could bind stupidity into wood and call it a plan. High Aerie had taught him where the plans lived and why the ink on them mattered more to the men who wrote them than the names on the hooks did. All of that lay across his slate now, not as a speech, but as a web of marks that could be learned in the body and not forgotten.

He drew star-lines the way navigators taught boys, but he drew them as weights lay across wind. He marked sighting angles from three towers and two posts where boys had recorded their shadows with grease because no one had given them ink, and grease streaked a knuckle. He drew the veer of wind off the east face measured by a strap hum on the third beam of a service run; the slate rasped under the pencil. He wrote next to that mark: hum dropped a shade and lost its edge. He marked the nights when kites had emptied the small sounds from the air and noted the three-breath windows when the air gave them back.

Under all of that he drew lines that had no right to be lines: the moments the shard at Tamsin's hip had warmed at her skin and taught her a diagonal when everything else shouted straight. He had watched it once and had seen how her pace altered by half a footfall when it whispered. He had not told anyone he had watched that. He wrote those moments onto the slate as arrows that meant more than a guard's arm, oil from the slate's skin making a faint sheen under his thumb.



He unrolled a small packet of papers that were not paper, each stiffened with oil from the back of an old coat. Aldren's marks lay on them. The marks had not been made with a steady hand and they did not claim a lord's right to command. They claimed only that a man had once stood somewhere and had said what the wind had done there and what the boards had said back to him. Ori laid those marks alongside his own, the edges rasping his palm.

The crack in his lens caught the lantern's seam and made a small flare that ran through the board. He tilted his head until the flare fell off the edge of the slate and the seam made nothing but a line across his knuckles.

He set wind and star and shard to one another until the offsets stopped shifting. The marks did not point to any place a man could walk to in a day. They did not point to a tower. They did not point to a harbour. They bent toward a place that did not have edges the way stones have edges. The blind pockets on his map matched the void-slit's three-ten snaps and the brass-hawk windows; laid together, they formed a ring toward the center.

He set the grease pencil down and breathed once as if he had a bell set in his chest and it had to sound clean or not sound at all. He looked up. Tamsin watched him without speaking. Her hand rested on the staff. Cael stood back, giving space without giving distance. Brakka looked at him from under his brow, not asking for beauty, asking for truth. Lethriel put a hand on her apprentice's wrist to stop a square being ornamented while the world decided where to put its weight. Rell did not glance away from the mouth of the cavern, but his ear had turned toward the lantern and toward Ori's breath.

"It's here," Ori said, and did not try to make it sound better than that. He set the grease pencil to the slate and made a mark at the place where all his other marks would not refuse to meet. He drew a circle that did not close all the way, because the place it meant did not like closed things. "The Fulcrum isn't out on a far post. It isn't under any house. It sits in the

Hollow Zenith.”

No one made a noise for two breaths. The seam of the lantern threw a thin stripe along the boards and the cloud at the cavern’s mouth moved like breath held between teeth. A dock lad near the rear mouth blurted, “There must be another post we missed,” then went still.

A boy who had never stood in a chamber under open sky before now lifted his head and stared at the slate and then at Tamsin and then down again quickly because he had learned something about how men should not stare at people who could decide whether they lived today.

Cael spoke first, which was right for a man who had pledged to take witness in councils and had to grow the part of him that could say the hard words without ornament. “If the axis is his seat, then we do not get a way to the Fulcrum without going past him,” he said.

Brakka grunted. “Then we cut what must be cut and bind what can be bound. You give me metal and men who will put their hands where I put my eyes and I can make a hold long enough to teach a bad line shame.”

Garin lifted his chin. “If we have a mouth to bite us on the way in, we will need men who can stand on the lip and not make art where there’s only work. I can teach that.” He did not lift his sling. He did not need to show the cost to sell the work.

Lethriel leaned across and placed her fingers on Ori’s wrist where the ink lay dark. Her touch did not shake. She lifted his hand a fraction until he met her eyes. She did not smile. The pride there did not need to show itself more than that.

Ori looked down again because his hands had not finished their work. He drew a line from Windharp to the place where the lines would have to break into three if any of them meant to come away with breath left in their chests. He drew a small triangle at Windharp and wrote: sky moorings. docks. space for an army that would not call itself an army because the men in it had roofs to keep and not banners to march.

He tapped the slate. “We need ships and griffins and rope-fighters and sappers and singers. We need to strike the air, the lines, and the law all at once or he will cancel one with the others and we will burn men to make nothing.”

Tamsin stepped forward and put her hand on the slate where his circle had not closed. She did not look away from it. “We go through him,” she said. It was not a dare and not a prayer. It was the kind of thing a woman says who knows how to step onto a board that is not ready and make it ready by the way she puts her weight down.

Cael nodded once. “We need a treaty wider than my house. Windharp will call, and I will call in words that have cost in them. We cannot do it with only men who already wear my colour.” He paused. “Ships and griffins come from Windharp; rope-fighters and sappers from any house that will sign; storm-singers where they can be spared. I’ll pay from my tables and take the loss in my house.”

“Agreed. Not alone,” Tamsin said.

“And I will have to put my quarrel with my own table where all can see it. Under sky.” That last word weighed more than the rest because he knew what his mother’s name had meant on the board behind the curtain.

“I will need metal,” Brakka said. “Copper. Clamps. Coils. Men who won’t let me sleep until I tell them it is time. I will make emergency braids that do not care what pretty name a post gives itself. They’ll hold because we tell them to.”

Lethriel wrote on her slate: teach. leave cloth. She underlined it once. She looked at Tamsin and tilted the slate. Tamsin inclined her head. “Multiply your voice without singing,” she said. “Give me ten more hands who can keep a squall thin.”

For a breath a small draft moved through the fold and lifted the flame behind the cowl. The seam along the boards brightened and then settled. No one spoke. Men did not look around for a meaning. They did their

work.

“On the line, my word holds,” Tamsin said, because that word needed to be said again now that the place ahead had a name. “Off the sway, Prince Cael orders his men. We don’t tangle that.” She set her palm flat over the lantern. Heat touched her palm and was gone. “We set a rally at Windharp. We have two day-marches if the lower runs hold and one more if they don’t. We take what we can on the way, men, tools, food. We do not stop long enough to teach the Senate where we sleep.”

Cael put his hand to the rope-laminate bow that lay across his knees, untied in the guest rail and kept near because someone had known not to leave a man naked when the wind was wrong. He set two fingers to the strongest part of the bow where the lamination had been done with patience. “Under sky,” he said, and it was not an echo. “I bind my levy to the commons. I will call my tables and name this oath in their faces. I will eat the cost.” His jaw set and then relaxed because setting would not move a board that needed a different sort of weight.

Tamsin nodded once. “Brakka,” she said, and the dwarf looked up from the coil he had been watching as if a coil could teach him something new when he had burned his hands on that lesson many times already. “You go where the copper lives. Take two marines who can carry what you point at. Tell the forges what you need. If they argue, show them the count. If they still argue, tell them I will come and bring a board into their hall and make them walk it while I speak.”

Brakka’s teeth showed for a breath. “Under sky,” he said. “I’ll bring the metal and the hands to marry it.”

“Garin,” Tamsin said, and he stepped forward without making his sling any excuse. “Raise rope-fighters. Not men who think they are brave. Men who can feel where a board is lying and stop it. Take Rell if the prince will spare him. Train on the way. No edge work unless it is mine.”

“Under sky,” Garin said. He looked at Rell and the sergeant looked at Cael.

Cael took a breath and let it out. "Rell goes with me until we hit the forks by the tar kettles," he said. "After that he's yours if you need his hand to keep the count honest where you're going."

"I do," Tamsin said. "For the first run I want his palm on a rail that will lie if we don't listen."

Rell inclined his head, the small movement that meant the count had entered his body and would not leave it until someone took it out with words.

"Ori stays with me," Tamsin said. "He has the slate and the ink and the way of seeing a window where a fool sees only weather. He keeps the shard under his coat. I keep the other at my belt." Ori tapped his coat where the shard lay; Tamsin touched the oilskin at her belt. "If a hand goes on either without my word I will break that hand, and I will not apologise." No one moved. No hand looked like it wanted to try.

Lethriel touched the cloth squares stacked at her side. She lifted three and slid them into the hand of her older apprentice. She wrote: carry to Windharp. teach there. She did not write: do not sing unless the door breaks, because she had written it so many times before it would have been a waste of grease to write it again.

"We rejoin at the Windharp docks," Tamsin said. "Four bells past second day if the wind holds. Six if it turns stubborn. If you miss that window, you go to the second mooring and leave a mark." She looked at Ori. "Show them the mark." He drew a small vee with a cross through it. "That," she said. "If it's not there, you go to the green post and leave it there. Do not hunt me. We won't spend men on finding each other when we have a world to carry."

Cael looked at her and his face showed the part of him that thought he should say more and the part of him that knew he should not. He said only, "Under sky," and the words did as much work as a speech with more words than sense.

Tamsin put her hand on the lantern again and then lifted it until the seam touched the boards in a thin line that showed the place where a foot must go next. She lifted her chin at the rear mouth and Rell moved. She lifted her chin at the front and a marine went to the edge and put his palm to the air and measured its answer.

Outside, dawn had not yet put colour into anything. The pocket thinned. The wind outside made a sound like a bell struck a long way off through old wood. It was not one of theirs. It might have been. They did not answer it. Answering bells that were not yours was the sort of thing a man did when he wanted to die for the idea of being right.

“On three,” Tamsin said, and her voice carried along the boards without needing to be any louder than it had been when she had told a boy not to make art where there was only work. “One.” The men at the mouths watched the sway and counted with her. “Two.” Ori set his fingers lightly against her shoulder and would lift when he had to lift. “Three.” She stepped onto the first board beyond the pocket.

The board answered with a sound that had weight under it and no lie. The seam carried along under her and her feet knew where to go. Behind her Ori put his boot where the sound had been before and not where the light told him to; he had learned not to let his eyes trick his balance.

Cael peeled away with his men and their straps and the two marines Brakka had chosen with his eyes a long time before he had named them. Lethriel took her squares and her apprentices and turned down a lane that would take her to voices that could learn her marks. Garin took three boys and one man with the burn on his jaw and moved toward the fork where a good stick could make a hero out of someone who had not asked for that.

Tamsin did not look back. She counted. “One.” The line hummed a fraction low and she lengthened the second by half without telling anyone why. “Two.” The hum lifted. “Three.” The seam and the boards and the breath sat together. The pocket behind them closed like a mouth that had

understood it should not speak anymore.

The road remembers.

# Chapter 11

## The Harbour at Windharp

Bell cadence held low in the Windharp hall, two notes close together, the tone of gathering and not alarm. Brass rails were dull from grip and salt. The table had not been polished; its edge showed the rub where captains set their charts. Cael stood at the inner rail with his burn tucked back and his rope□ laminate bow unstrung. He did not ask to sit. The eight still held in his count. Behind the table, the Matriarch rested her fingers on a ledger with the care of a woman who built ledger lines with her own work long before any son of hers learned to read winds.

“Your report,” she said.

He kept his voice steady, not loud. “Rimespan holds. High Aerie does not. You were consulted on their board for controlled falls.” He waited for the small turn of heads that always followed that phrase now. “They will keep their core. The rest will be asked to fall in order, with neat notes to justify the order after the bodies are gone.”

“We do not adopt your friends’ language,” one lord said, a clean coat with a line of salt at the cuff where he had brushed spray without thinking. “Controlled falls are a measure against collapse.”

“Against collapse here,” another added. “The out□ isles have always been nearer to wind hard enough to peel skin. We cannot trade our harbour for sorrow at distance.”

The Matriarch watched him and did not smooth the ledger’s page. “High Aerie offers us lanes kept clear, food, copper, crews, shelter. They ask that Windharp not be spent for other men’s boards. Your party has already crossed otherwise and brought Senate anger on your head and



ours. So.” She breathed. “I have to keep this harbour alive. Speak to that.”

He put his hand flat on the rail. The brass was cool. “Aldren died to hold a plate for eight breaths so we could cross. He gave us his lantern. He named Tamsin as the one who carries the Law in motion. He asked that we go to the place where Law can sit again and hold the sky for all of us. If we keep our lanes and leave the rest to silence, Windharp stands on timber over emptiness. A harbour without sky is a shelf with ropes on it. The ledgers will look clean for a season and then they will not mean anything.”

“Stories,” said the clean□coated lord. “A noble’s trick. They always arrive with poetry when they come to borrow my hulls.”

“Not poetry,” Cael said. “Marks.” He lifted a roll and set down a harbour slate drawn from Ori’s marks beside the ledger. Oil kept the slate’s face dark and clear in the hall light. The chalk was straight, not flourished. “The Senate board drawn fair where I saw it in the drafting room. The three anchors in red. Petals counted. The column for ‘consulted’ is there; it had your title in it. You know what that means. They will save what they can count without us. The rest will be let go. None of us will be asked to touch the knife, so our hands can stay lovely. I will not live under that.”

“You go too far,” said a woman in pearl pins. “You talk as if the Speaker were an enemy and our house a traitor.”

“His words are careful,” the Matriarch said. “He uses a language we have taught our own.” Her eyes turned to him again. “He calls on ‘under sky’ without speaking it.”

A younger lord at the back, not careless but careful in a way that made his caution brittle, stepped round a pillar. “He calls on wind□riggers to govern soldiers and houses. I do not give my levy to a rope girl who says ‘count’ and expects me to obey.”

“On the line her word holds,” Cael said, very plain. “Off the sway mine does, if you still count me worth your soldier’s salt. If not, say it

where the wind can hear and stake your name.”

The young lord met his eyes and then glanced aside to the Matriarch. He did not speak.

“She is reckless,” the Matriarch said. “Your Tamsin. She breaks a writ and runs through a thunder corridor. She refuses an offer that would shelter us and ours. It is a hard thing for a woman with no house to do. It is harder for a son who will one day sit in this chair to follow her.”

Cael kept his hand on the rail. “She will not sell her breath. Aldren named her. She sets the count that keeps the weak from dying when brave men run. The board under us knows when a voice tells the truth. The Senate asked us to hand over the shards and wait. I watched them learn to say that word with soft tongues. They wanted us still. Not safe. Still. A quiet that served their books. We left before their dinner, and their kites taught us what their offer meant.” He nodded at the burn under his sleeve. “I took the cost. I will take more. I do not lay it on any man who does not raise his hand.”

“You will lay it on my hulls,” the clean□coated lord snapped. “On men whose names I know by the way they carry coil. On boys whose mothers will curse my door if a letter with a ribbon comes and their bodies do not. I will not send them. I am not moved by your old man’s grave and a girl’s pride. I keep my levy here.”

“You cannot,” Cael said. He did not raise his voice. “You cannot keep them here and keep the harbour. If the Law is not set where it must be set, your levy will stand and watch rope rot. Your boys will curse you for letting their world be eaten by tidy plans written in dry rooms. There will be no letters. There will be no ribbon. There will be a wind you cannot taste because it does not carry sound anymore.”

“Someone taught you to put your words in order,” the man said. “You were not taught to bend your spine.”

The Matriarch’s fingers left the ledger. She did not knock, she tapped once on the wood. “Enough.” She looked to Cael again. “You have not said

the one thing that can move this hall when words and grief do not. You have not put a weight on the table that the table will know.”

He unstrung the bow fully and set it across the table with both hands, a clean, deliberate lay. A first in this hall. The burn in his forearm gave one measured throb; he held an eight before he spoke. “If we fail to save this harbour under the common armada, I step aside. My claim will not stand on empty docks. I will swear it under sky and under whatever word you count clean in this room.”

A long breath went through the benches. Someone shifted a shoe and made a small sound on the stone. The clean□coated lord set his hand on the back of a chair and took it off again.

The Matriarch watched her son’s hands, and then his face, and then the bow. Her fingers slid from the ledger and traced the worn groove along the table edge once, then stilled. The hard place in her jaw eased and set again differently. “A lord who makes a pledge each day leaves none worth hearing,” she said. “As a single act, it is the only clean thing in the hall now.” She turned her head. “Captain.”

A woman in a wing□coat stepped forward. The greaves and breast with braided straps had scuffs from real wind. “We can give a wing,” she said. “One full wing, one fight, under his call. Then I bring my riders home. I will not let their bones hang on ropes so men can tell stories later.” She favoured one knee; the leather at the joint showed a careful patch.

“Understood,” Cael said. “I ask for one fight.” He did not smile at her. He let his eyes hold the measure of what she had given. She gave him a quick nod. He had not wasted the pledge by making more of it than it was.

The Matriarch opened a small drawer beneath the table and took out ropes cut into lengths with seal knots in the middle. She laid them in a shallow bowl by the ledger. She lifted one and set the knot to her teeth for a breath, then laid it back. “We can keep lanes under Senate seals if we

stand apart. We vote,” she said. “Bite your seal and pass it to the clerk if you answer yes; set it back in the bowl if you answer no. We have the count we agreed on in famine years. I do not need to explain it to men who have eaten under these banners since their hair was in plaits.”

They came, one by one. Old hands left the seal in the bowl, and clerks only beat their sticks once against the rail when that happened. Most men bit their knots and put their marks in the clerk’s basket. The clean□coated lord stood near the end, staring at the ropes as if they were going to name him even if his teeth did not touch them. In the end he bit, fast and angry, and withdrew his hand as if the rope would take something from him he could not afford. A very old tug captain raised his rope with both hands, could not hold it, let it fall, and then reached down slow and got it done with no one helping him.

When the last had moved, the clerk counted with a flat voice. “Yes by a hair. The hair is enough.” He lifted the basket. The cords in it were dark with spit; copper sat on the air. “The levy, the stores, the wing for one fight, the musters, the copper.”

The Matriarch closed the ledger. “Go, then,” she said to Cael. “I do not bless this. I do not curse it. I say only this: take less from our own than pride would ask. Take more than fear will offer you. Come back with men who will still look at you with their teeth in their mouths.”

Cael bowed his head once, not a son bowing to a mother at a family table, but a leader to the hand that had made his place and could unmake it. “Under sky,” he said.

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Salt breath off the outer road came up into the harbour and touched cut tar. Hammers struck copper in a measured rhythm, and those beats called men from their benches without a sergeant’s shout. The main quay filled cleanly, not by crush but by square. Clerks set up with pegs. Rope

seals were tied to a line, and each captain who meant it bit his knot and handed it in. The clerks hung the seals on pegs and counted under their breath, not to make a fuss, but to keep their own hands steady and free of stories.

Cael took the square by the mast. He did not stand above anyone. He stood where a man could reach out and touch his sleeve if a word rose that had to be said quiet. His marines formed a half hoop without a tassel among them. He lifted his chin only enough to carry what had to be carried. "If this fails," he said, "it fails with me on the line that fails. If it holds, it holds under the same count for all. There will be no private tables when the boards run hungry. If your house has food, it eats last. If mine has food, it eats last. If we fall, we do not pretend we were pushed by a wind that had no hands." He did not let the heat that had tried to take his forearm show in his voice. He kept the cadence of a man speaking to men who wanted work and truth.

A boy with a rope cut for a harness stood at the edge of the square. Cael looked at his strap and saw it sat wrong by a thumb. He moved and tightened it and then spoke again. "If you cannot stand, you say so. We do not spend bodies for stories. If you can stand, you stand for the one next to you. Harbour first, then road, then sky. Under sky." He lifted his hand. A low answer moved through the square; rope creaked as weight shifted, and the boards settled.

Wing hands unhooded griffins one by one. Hood buckles clicked, and feather grease went to the pinions against the shear in the wind. No flares, no show for children. One finger lifted, one hood slipped, one set of eyes opened. The riders set backs straight and then leaned forward with small hands that knew feathers from leather and leather from bone. The captain gave a signal with two fingers at her knee, and the wing rose as one. They circled tight over the harbour and held together without ornament. Men who already knew what that meant felt their ribs loosen. Lads who only knew wings from the storm-chapel icons learned something by seeing it.

Brakka Copperweft arrived under a coat thrown over his bandages. Two marines walked behind him with their hands under loads they did not drop. "Coils there," he said, not loud. "Clamps on that plank. The cracked ones to the left, the good ones to the right. The pot sits on that ring. No one touches it that doesn't know how long tar takes to lie down when it's been told to get hot before it wants to." He looked up at Cael very briefly and nodded once, then got on with his work. At the mast, Ori lifted the chalk and shifted a mark a half thumb to square with the clamp Brakka had seated.

A girl came with a copper bracelet in her hand and a lad behind with a jug. Brakka looked at the bracelet, turned it once with the back of his wrist, and said, "We do not melt the pretty if the ugly will do. What else?" The lad, reddening, brought out the jug and a handful of broken copper tacks. Brakka looked to the mother. She had none of it in her eyes; she had brought it all. "The tacks go first," Brakka said. "Then the jug band. The bracelet at last if we have to be ashamed. I'll take it, and I will make a line that holds with it if I have to. But I don't start there." The girl's eyes steadied. She put the bracelet in the basket without flinching and went to help with pegs.

Lethriel came to the edge of the wing's square with her cloth and grease. She set her coil-harp case down and did not open it. She put a hand to her throat and then to the breast of a rider's coat. The captain nodded. Lethriel drew a flat line, a bend, and three dots on the leather, each placed where a hand would land when panic tried to own it. She gestured two, three with her fingers. The rider nodded and touched the marks with two fingers and then laid his hand on his beast's neck and breathed. Lethriel stepped to the next coat. She traced the same pattern. She did not try to speak. The silver in her throat caught a little of the light and did not shine as it had at Rimespan; she kept her focus on the coats. Tamsin read the marks in passing and gave her a small nod before turning back to the file.

Ori took the mast and made it a board. He drove nails with a hammer whose head had been ground down so the nail would not bounce out of the board and go skittering at a man's face. He hung the slate that showed the ring where blind pockets made fools of brave men. He marked a left veer under the current wind and set two alternative entries with arrows that were short and without any fancy. He wrote: dead air under copper; count to six. He added: lee hides here; wait for the breath to return. He made a little 'x' where a patrol would think the air was still and he would not put a man there. He took a step back. He saw a boy's eye slide to the flourish of a letter he had not meant to flourish. He lifted the slate and wiped that letter until it was only a block. "There," he said, and then turned because he did not need to hear himself agree with himself in front of men who were not here to be impressed.

Then Tamsin came out of the low road with a file and a breath count that brought men's shoulders down without any one of them knowing it. Ori fell in half a pace behind. Ori still carried the one she had pressed under his coat at the hold; Tamsin kept the other in the oilskin pouch at her belt. She glanced to his coat; he gave a small nod. No hand moved. She stepped onto the test board laid on blocks for training near the main mooring and set a pace with her toe on the plank as if it were one of the lines she had taught to speak back to her.

"No running unless called," she said. "Brace on three, not on two. Two is for listening. Three is for taking weight. Elders and children clip first. If I say cut, you cut. You argue later when you can tell a post from a drop without guessing. If I say hold, you hold." She looked at the boards as if they might lie and her eyes would catch them at it. "If the line lies, you say it. You do not make up a story about what you wish it said." She touched the lantern staff to the plank and lifted the cowl a finger-width, but kept Aldren's lantern cold; the foot-lantern seam along the board made honest feet for the first three men. "One," she said. "Two. Three." The men stepped, each foot placed where a foot should go. She set a gap between bodies with a word and a finger to a strap. Rell was not here to relay; she did not need him; her count traveled anyway.

A boy in a torn coat that had once been a better coat than it was now tried to show he was fast and stepped up on two. Tamsin watched his weight go forward. She held up her hand. He straightened before he fell forward. "Two is for listening," she said. "You can be fast when speed will not pull you off the edge of a line. Not before." He nodded and stepped back to the end of the file and did not try to be noticed again. She gave him work to tie her knot and untie it twice, and then she moved the drill along the plank.

By the time the wing had dropped and set, by the time Brakka had his first clamps hot and the first handful of tacks in a small tray waiting for a pot that would be one man's death if he slipped, the harbour had a shape it had not had at dawn. It was not a procession and not a brawl. It was work measured by count. Men fetched wedges when Brakka pointed and set them thin side first because he told them to and because they could hear in the way he said the word thin that he had stood in places where men who put the fat side in made funerals for their friends. Cael stood at one end of the square and let men come to him and say the ordinary things they had to say when banners stayed furled and the work was heavy. He said under sky softly and not once too often, and a good number of those who heard him answered the same way without being asked.

The harbour hummed. The copper smelled sharp as a man's breath in a cold room. The ropes that had been tied for show were cut down and retied to take weight, and every man who saw a decorative knot on a working line put a hand on it and loosened it and made it honest under the eyes that had made the first knot, and the man who had tied the fancy work did not mind being corrected because he could see a little way farther than his pride when a woman who had just put thirty boys on a board without cutting one taught him how a knot tells the truth.

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On the third bell, the square thinned enough for quarrel. The nobles who had come to the water to say no found themselves surrounded by men who had not said anything but had changed the harbour by the way they breathed. A tight knot of house lords drew inward near the mast, talking with hands behind backs as if their words might come to harm if their fingers showed them to the wicked eye of chance.

Cael walked into that knot and stood under the mast, not on a crate. "If this is to be a quarrel," he said, "let us have it where the wind answers us. Not in a private corner. We do this under sky." He did not use a title. It would have set the wrong hum through the boards.

A thin man with rings on three fingers who carried his age like a coat he did not like spoke first. "You call for men to leave this harbour for a place that is not ours under a girl's count. You throw our names in a ledger we did not sign when you speak of common cause. We say your levy stays home. We don't owe boys on the Second Fog our bread." A cart wheel scraped across a board behind him; his next word waited, then came late.

"Then let the men who will go hear it," Cael said. "Let the men who will not go say it under sky in front of them. The harbour breath is not a thing we borrow and return. We hold it together or we let it go together. Come." He walked to the dock edge where the training plank lay and the lantern seam traced a thin line that could be followed without any man ruining his night seeing things that weren't there.

Tamsin stood at the end of the plank and did not look at the lords. She looked at the boys at the end of her file. She laid the staff down and put both her hands on the plank's edge for a moment and then took them off and wiped them across her thighs as if grease had gotten there and it had to be removed before she touched anyone. "Bridges don't have owners," she said. "Posts belong to the men who work them while they are standing on them. Then they belong to the next set of hands. When a line lies, it lies to all of us. When it holds, it holds because men who have never spoken say three at the same time with their bodies." She closed her

mouth. Someone might have expected more. She did not have more. That was the speech. It lay heavy because it had weight in it. A young noble's shoulders loosened a touch; his gaze dropped for a breath.

A dockworker with shoulders that had learned a rope's favour pointed at a young noble's fine boots. "You take ten steps," he said, not cruel. "I'll hold the plank with you. You can hold my harness. No one laughs if you wobble."

The noble's mouth worked and then closed. He looked down at the plank as if it had teeth. No man spoke. A woman at the back with a baby at her breast laughed by accident because the baby had done something that made her breath come out through her nose with a sound. A few men smiled. It was enough. The noble shook his head with some dignity and the dockworker nodded as if that had been an answer worth something.

Cael did not grin at the man's refusal. He set his palm on the rail. "No show. We say the cost. I offer this: any house that stands aside stands aside clean, but loses harbour preference for two seasons after this is done counted by when the bells ring honest again. Their requests for stores will be heard last. They will not sit the table for division. We will not spend their men now. We will not owe them after. Say it in the open and I will keep it on paper and breath both."

"Harsh," said a woman with a voice worn by weather and not by wine.

"Honest," Cael said.

Three houses walked away under their colours rolled tight. Ori stepped to the mast and moved the east fork two marks inward to close the gap. A lad cut the slipknot at one lord's throat because the lord's hands had started to shake and he could not get at it. The lad did it with respect. He was not the man's enemy. He was the man's boy when they were both working on the same side of the ledger. The rest stood where they were and lifted their rope seals to their teeth and bit. The clerk hung them on the pegs as fast as he could without dropping any. He did not want to drop any. It seemed unlucky to let a pledge touch the boards with

no hand to witness.

Brakka went to the edge of the pot and spoke without raising his voice. “These braids have names,” he said. “Not songs. Names to keep our hands clean when we pull on them. This is Aldren’s Eight.” He touched a coil he had set aside with a bandage. “Eight breaths to cross when a plate lies to your face. If you do not know why it is called that, you are either too young to know or you weren’t there and that is fine. You will learn it without me putting a story on you. This is Dock Runner’s Hold.” He lifted another. “A boy at High Aerie did not fall because he let his harness be taken by a hand that knew how to grab a strap and not a coat. If you do not know his name, you are too far from the ground to be of use, and you will fix that before morning.” He did not name more. He turned his back and set his bandaged wrists to guiding clamps toward heat.

Lethriel took four cloth squares marked FLAT THIN ONLY and pinned them in four places where the quay narrowed and again where it widened. She wrote two, three beneath each. She put her slate up by the mast and wrote in clean letters any hand could copy: no rod unless door breaks. She underlined that once and did not look around to see who had read it.

Ori took up a thick pencil and altered the mast map. He drew a second route for men who had left gaps when they took their houses home. He did not swear under his breath at them. He made the plan work by moving the lines that could be moved. He wrote: if the east fork fails, two breaths to cross the narrow; count for the wing. He looked at the training plank. He altered a count there by a half□beat in his head and then walked over to Tamsin and put his fingers on her shoulder when the breath that had to be bent came due. She bent it without looking and the men stepped clean.

By night’s end the harbour had fewer banners than it might have had if no one had been allowed to think. What it had instead were hands that had been given the choice and had chosen anyway with costs written there in front of their faces. Cael felt the weight in his chest sit where his

breath lived, not rushing, not slamming. He had put his name where a man puts his name when he does not plan to take it back. He was not crowned by any thing in this hall. He was made smaller by the work and larger by the way the men looked at him as he stood at the edge of the plank and took a count from a rigger who had no banner at her throat.

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The last watch set at the tower. In the dark, men made less noise without being told. Cael walked the dock with no marines at his back. He put his palm against the main mooring, where the great lines came in and asked the harbour to be honest. The hum there was low and steady. Under his palm the vibration held the day's set knots and squared boards. It had lost a little edge since the rain in second month. He had run his hand there often enough to know it without looking at the chalk line on the post that the old wardens had left when they still did rounds. He did not know if he would ever lift a hand in this hall again and have it be a hand men bowed to for its right. The post answered him and this was the right work.

He passed the training plank. Tamsin stood on the far end with the lantern cowl down and cold so only a seam from the foot□lanterns touched the board. She stepped and spoke three, not loud. The board gave back an honest answer; it made that small note it makes when weight is put down with the right patience and the right mercilessness. She stopped and rested her hand on the staff as if for a friend's hand. He did not speak to her. He did not need to. He walked on and her count went on behind him with no need of his witness.

Brakka slept near the pot with his bandaged hands resting on a coil of dry copper. He had not let anyone else set it down at the end. He trusted his sleep to the weight. A lad had wrapped his coat over him, and Brakka had not pushed it off. His mouth was open at one corner and his breath came in there with a small sound that did not announce his weakness to

anyone but the boards.

Lethriel bent at the knee and drew a line and two bends on the deck beside the wing captain's place, then a small square. She put two dots and three under them. She wrote no ornament, no flourish next to it. When she stood, her shoulders eased. She touched her throat once and let one quiet breath out through the teeth, then left her hand on the coil□harp case.

Ori sat with his back to the mast and his slate against one knee. His spectacles were cracked still. He tied a piece of twine round the frame and then round his head so the lens would sit where it had to sit when he had to look down and draw a line. He tested it by lifting and turning his head. It held. He did not say anything about it. It was a tool that needed to work. He made it work. He took the grease and wrote a small X where a boy had made a mess of a count earlier so he would not forget to fix it before a wing paid for that mistake. He put the slate down slowly so as not to smudge it where it mattered.

From the tower a bell rang once. The sound carried across the water to the posts. Watch change. Not alarm. A man sneezed, then said sorry to the air and moved on. A woman near the mast turned her child on her shoulder and patted a back until the breath settled.

Cael stood where he could look down on the racks where banners lay rolled and tied and numbered with chalk so the right hands would take them at dawn. No one had hung them up to make the place fine. Beside them coils of emergency braid sat in even stacks, named with chalk marks on wood slats in Brakka's hand: Aldren's Eight, Dock Runner's Hold, Black Ring West, Rimespan Pad Four. There were blanks beneath those names, already waiting for names that would have to be written when the holds were made and held and paid for.

The harbour was quiet. You could hear men not speaking. Hands rested on rope, easy but ready if a bell rang the wrong pattern. The cowl□lamps made the ground honest, not pretty. The wind set a small

edge on Cael's wrist and then eased.

He put his palm on the mooring one more time and then he left it be. When he walked past the plank, Tamsin had laid the staff down again and stood with her feet a shoulder apart, steady and plain. When she lifted her head she did not look for him; her eyes went to the rope and then to the lantern and then to the place where the seam touched the wood. She counted under her breath. He did not hear numbers. He heard the right space between what had to be done and what had to be said. He went on toward the stair to the tower and the bell they would ring at dawn.

The banners lay. The braids lay. The harbour held its breath and did not make a show of it. Dawn had not come. It would, or it would not, and men would step where they had to step either way.

# Chapter 12

## Cables and Banners

Wind veered off the outer road colder than at noon and pushed smoke, with a bite of flux, low along the quay. Heat from the pot spread a foot above the boards and no higher. Brakka set his bandaged wrists against the drawbench rail and watched the colour in the copper as it cooled from cherry to the brown of work. He kept his palms off the work; he had paid that price already. He used the backs of his wrists, the heel of his hand through cloth, the short wooden lever, and his voice.

"Thin side first," he said. "You put the fat in first, you make a lie. We are not making lies. Pull. Hold. Let it settle. Now take it."

The choir of smiths answered with their bodies. One man bent to the crank, another fed the rod, a third caught curl and set it level on the plank. The drawplate's die gave a hard little scrape and then quieted when the strand came through true. Cowl-lamps hooded tight threw steadiness at their feet. Tar warmed and spread its smell wetly. A hand-bell rang twice near the mast for the water square; not an alarm. The wing circled once overhead without show and set again.

Two lads brought a bucket of broken tacks. They held it to him. He nodded, and a clerk tipped to the melt while Brakka kept his wrists off the rail. Raising the back of his wrist, he included the bucket in his field of view, then pointed at the pot. "Tacks go first," he said. "Ugly first. Pretty last if we run out of ugly." He shifted his weight to see along the bench. "Don't clip the curl. Let it rest. A breath. Two." His wrists trembled in the air; he held them still by force and set them down again.

A woman stepped forward, a girl at her elbow. The girl held out a bracelet that had once been a mother's pride. The metal caught light

where hand oil had kept it clean and green where salt had touched. The woman's mouth was set. Brakka looked at the bracelet and at the girl's hand on it. He turned the piece once with the back of his bandage and spoke without raising his voice.

"There's tacks and a jug band already in," he said. "We do not melt the pretty if the ugly will do. If we run short, I take this and make it into something that holds. I will not waste it for show."

The girl's hand tightened and then loosened. She placed the bracelet in a basket marked LAST. The woman said a name. A clerk repeated it. The sound sat in the space next to the pot and did not blow away.

Men came in pairs, a boy with a fist of copper nails black with old pitch, an old mariner with a belt plate from a coat that had seen better boards, the strap hole ovaled. They said names; a clerk with ink to the knuckle wrote on a slate, and a second clerk read back the sounds so they sat right. Brakka did not stop the work for the rite, and the rite did not slow the hands. It was part of the work.

"Pitch," Brakka said, turning his head toward the apprentices twisting on the block beside the bench. "You hear your own hands when you twist? Listen to the sound you make. That is pitch. You keep it even, and you keep your second hand honest and not too proud." He moved closer, let his eyes run along the lay. "No swell in the middle. S-lay, not Z for this one. The board we're bracing takes a slow hum. You give it S."

The rigger's girl kept her jaw shut and moved the short stick with a measured push. The two dock lads mirrored her and began to catch the lay by sound. One drifted and fixed himself a breath later without Brakka's voice. Brakka grunted approval and then kept it to himself; too much praise made hands light.

A clanging step came across the boards and stopped where the planks changed paint. Tamsin of the Lines stood there with the lantern-staff in her hand and boots that took in the shift of hum before his ears did. She had chalk on one knuckle and oil at the edge of one sleeve. Her hair was



bound fast against the wind.

"Test," she said.

They set one of the new coils into the small rig with two eye plates bolted low to the post and a timber that owed them nothing. Brakka nodded to the dock lads, and they took up the load until the braid sat under weight and began to speak. Tamsin put her toe against the timber and her palm against the strand where it entered the eye. She closed her mouth, counted without showing numbers, and then shook her head once.

"It's honest, but the pitch's half too tight for this board," she said. "You'll get a complaint under shock. Back a quarter on the twist. Anneal between the second and third draw."

His bandaged hands flexed once, then stilled. He knew this wood and he knew her ear. "Back a quarter," he said to the apprentices. "You heard the call. Heat and let it lie. Just enough. If you hear it get dead, not quiet, dead, you went too far."

The rigger's girl glanced up once at Tamsin, saw no praise coming, and kept her hands to the work. That was right. Tamsin stayed until she saw the heat go in and the colour settle, then dropped her hand to the board again and read it. She nodded once. "Good. Tag it for brace-board, not a tie."

Ori came near with a slate hung at the mast by a new nail he had set an hour ago. In clean block letters, he wrote where any hand could read: BRACE, S LAY, ANNEAL SECOND DRAW. Tying a rag of grey to the coil's tag, he matched the symbol on the mast board. A woman at the edge of the square asked him where her jug band would go. He spoke to her in a low voice and pointed to the triangle and then to the brace. "Under wing and line both," he said. "If it goes under wing, it holds a rider who will come home. If it goes under line, it lifts weight off a board where boys will put their boots. Either way, it does the right work."

Prince Cael stepped into the square with his cloak pinned close and his bow unstrung and slung where a man could reach it if he had to carry without hands free. He wore his burn under clean bandage. From the cord at his wrist, he drew his house□mark signet, small copper, not a big lord's seal, and turned it once with his thumb. He looked to Brakka and lifted his eyebrow, a question and a courtesy.

"Ugly first," Brakka said by reflex. Then he took a breath and looked at the ring again. It had work in it. "Yours is yours to give. If it goes, it goes to hold, not show."

Cael thought a heartbeat and then shook his head. "House eats last," he said. He held the ring over the pot and let it go. It slid under with almost no sound. The girl with the basket of LAST pieces watched the ring vanish and did not look away. She put the bracelet on top of the other things and set the basket where the clerk could touch it with the back of his hand and mark it.

Lethriel stood by the far edge of the square under the open air, throat wrapped in cloth. She held her slate against her hip and lifted it so Brakka could see. Two words: ENOUGH and TRUE. Tapping the deck once with her knuckles, she lowered the slate. The silver at her throat did not shine. Her eyes were clear.

"Enough for this run," Brakka said in his own chest, not for anyone. He lifted his bandaged hands and set them back down again so he would not betray the tremor. He looked along the line at the racks where coils would live.

They worked by breath and measure until the lamps took for good and the sky showed only the glimmer where the late light lay under the wing's banks. Coil after coil went onto the rack with chalk names on the wood slats: Aldren's Eight, Dock Runner's Hold, Black Ring West, Rimespan Pad Four. There were blanks. There were always blanks. Brakka stood with his back against the pot and set the backs of his bandaged wrists on a coil of dry copper. The hum of the quay settled a

shade as men who watched found that the work had given them something they could hold with their eyes when the dawn bell came. These holds were bought once.

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From the forge square, the drawplate's thin ring and tar smell reached the training plank. The wind came off the water in regular breaths. It made the net under the training line move, not with sway but with a slow bellied rise and fall. Sir Garin Cloudfall stood at the plank with his right arm in a sling and a short stick in his left hand. The stick was only as long as a forearm and had a leather strap near one end. He set his boots where the board told him, not where his pride wanted them, and lifted the stick to show where a hook would shrug off a man's desperate pull and where it would listen.

"You don't fight the line," he said. "You take what it gives you and make it do what you need. That is not soft. That is how you don't go down with three men behind you. Weight low. Knees soft. Short turn with your whole self. Not a shoulder. Shoulders tear."

A boy with hands that looked clean in the wrong way took the line without waiting and set his weight too soon. The board told him the truth. He went into the net and spat a word that did not belong in front of elders. Garin kept his face still. He reached with his left hand, got the boy by his harness, and set him back on his feet.

"Again," Garin said.

"I had it."

"You had a story about having it. Again. Two to listen. Three to take."

Tamsin's step cut the space just then with the sound of a heel that counted and a toe that listened. She kept her mouth shut. Palm out flat where all could see, she said, "Two is for listening. Three is for weight. No

running unless called. You brace on three. Not two. If I call cut, you cut. If the line lies, you say so."

She took the stick from Garin, who let it go without pride, and showed the turn at a speed a body could learn. The board gave that small honest sound it makes when hands and weight tell the truth. She handed the stick back and stood half a pace off his shoulder with the staff planted in the boards so the seam from its foot-lantern could kiss the plank and make the first steps honest for the first three in line.

Prince Cael stood just outside the net's edge with his cloak pinned up so it would not foul. He stepped in, clipped his harness to the practice ring, and raised a hand to Garin. "On your count," he said.

"Two," Garin said, and tapped the rail with his left hand. "Three."

Cael moved and, on the return, missed the second breath by a hair. He let the miss take him into the net with no show of catching on a strap to mark himself clever; he took the fall clean. Men at the rail let out a short rough exhale together. Unclipping, he climbed onto the plank again and put his boots down where the board asked.

Brakka arrived with two practice hooks made blunt and a sectioned piece of an engine's throat that someone had cut years ago for teaching. On a crate where men could see, he had it set and pointed with the back of his hand at the smooth inner curve where the reel throat began.

"You jam it here," he said. "You never cut the main. You cut the feeder. If you cut the main, you tire the engine and you make it fall where it wants and not where you want. You jam the throat and you stop the pull. Then you tell the line what to do."

He had a hook passed to a man who had been eager about cutting something and set the man's grip with the back of his wrist. "Short turn," Brakka said. "Body, not shoulder. You don't fight it. You jam the throat and stop the pull."

Garin took the hook after and showed the same turn with the short stick against the model. "Short," he said. "No show. You make the sound you want, and you let the board give you back what you asked."

At the mast board Lethriel pinned two squares of cloth that read FLAT THIN ONLY and two dots under one and three under the next. A boy reached to trace the dots with a finger and she caught his wrist and set his finger on the word FLAT. He nodded. She showed him two with her fingers and then three. He repeated the motion against his chest and then against the plank, as if the board might learn from him as much as he learned from it. She wrote on her slate in clean letters: NO ROD UNLESS DOOR BREAKS and hung it where Garin could see it. He looked at it once and then did not look again; the law of it sat behind his left eye.

Ori chalked a simple shape on a board next to the mast. No map to impress; he drew a gangway with three brace posts and two lee pockets he had marked from his drafts. He drew a tower that could be a tether mast or any nonsense the enemy put up. He marked dead air with a cross and wrote wait breath returns at the side. He placed a square where a man should not stand even if it looked like a path. Then he ran the drill the way a voice runs a rope-chant, with taps and small gestures rather than a flood of words. Men moved from one board to the next and learned to count while their feet moved. Eyes left the rope to follow chalk routes; the plank went quieter.

By the time the sun sat low but did not yet fall, the recruits put their feet down with less noise and their jaw muscles turned from granite to bone. One rigger touched two fingers to a mate's knee to drop his stance; the next count came cleaner. They turned hooks with their bodies and not their shoulders. A man who had arrived with swagger left it where it would not trip a boy. The net stayed a net and not a story, and Garin took the next file and the next without showing the effort that holding calm cost his bad shoulder. Tamsin stood at the end of the plank and counted three in a voice that did not fray, and the board answered with the sound a board should make when it is not being lied to.

From the plank, count and breath drifted as they moved the wing square stakes two feet inward on Lethriel's sign so there would be room for a ring of boys and girls who would not fly but would make weather keep its side of the bargain. Lethriel stood at the edge with oilcloth stretched on a crate, slate at her hip, a small piece of chalk in her left hand. She wrote the flat line and the bend and the three dots. Her hand was steady. She kept the coil-harp case shut. She did not try to sing.

Tamsin knelt on the deck and set a small frame drum against her knee and gave it a plain two, three. No ornament. The sound made a clean space where hands could place a breath. Lethriel raised her fingers in a small square and then flattened her palm and tilted it. The young voices repeated the shapes and sounds she gave them, and the air moved where it should have. She felt the edges of the square, the cross-shear at the corners, and decided whether they would permit it.

She lifted her palm, turned it, and cut it down. A thin squall lifted across the square. It raised the hair on forearms and made the edges of banners soften without flipping; it took the grit off the deck and put it down again a foot away instead of in a man's eye. The copper guides along the edge hummed an answer she knew from old halls and old storms. One hand came late; the edge wavered a fraction. Tamsin's drum gave a firmer two, and the shape tightened. When she raised her palm again and rolled her wrist a fraction, the squall lay down and the cowl-lamps stopped shaking. The choir looked at their hands as if those hands had done something. They had.

A boy nearest the edge flinched when she turned toward him and her breath made that scrape in her throat. She did not try to explain with her mouth. She wrote on the slate VOICE SPENT, COVENANT KEPT and then placed two fingers on his breastbone lightly. He set his feet a little wider, lifted his chin for a breath, and repeated the pattern again without turning it into a song. She let that be.

Prince Cael stood at the head of the square with two marines at his back. Watching the way the choir's hands moved with the drum and how the air obeyed the marks, he kept his hands still. He said to a sergeant, "Two with them. One on their slates," and the sergeant placed men without show. The marines did not look bored. They watched the slate and the oilcloth more carefully than they had watched swords earlier in the week. It was right to do so.

Brakka came with two men carrying a pair of portable copper guides. Walking them by half-steps until the hum answered the way he wanted it, he took a small coil from his pocket and made a brief spark along a rail with a rod and then cut the spark off with his bandaged wrist. "Here," he said. "Not there. You bring the edge down into this. If you lay it there, you cook the rail and put a lie in it. Keep the cross□shear off the rail. We are not cooking rails today."

Lethriel lifted a hand and rolled her wrist. The choir matched the motion. Air thickened, then lay down. The copper guides hummed like honest wire under a proper load. Brakka nodded once and adjusted nothing further. He looked pleased in the way a man looks when a plan he did not propose works because it is true.

Ori stood to the side with his slate and wrote: twelve hold, four still, six rest. He placed a small line to show entrance windows against the wind that was doing what it always did and another line to show the window under a lee created by the choir's hand. He set small arrows where the wing could thread if the choir kept the edge thin and he drew a cross on the place he would not put men even if they were brave. Wiping away a flourish he had not meant to draw, he looked at the boy who had laughed earlier at the training plank; the boy nodded and did not smile this time. He understood.

They ran two full raise-still cycles under the drum without a voice raised. Flags on the harbour's edge moved, then quieted on the down-beat. The wing's captain stood with her hands behind her back and watched the boys rather than the griffins, which told Lethriel that this

was a captain with sense. Twilight came up from the water and the lamps took their steady places under the eaves. Lethriel stepped back and let the choir go to water in pairs and brought her palm down once to settle any lingering edge. The edge obeyed. She put her hand on the coil-harp case and did not open it.

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The last downbeat of the drum held a breath into the muster. The copper guides' hum eased into the muster's quiet. Night touched every cowl-lamp and left the sky above the harbour clear. The stars were there to be witnessed and not to be spoken to with foolish words. The men and women gathered by squares without being told, and the wing unmanned their beasts and stood with them by the breast straps like partners. Nets lay rolled; braids lay in even stacks with chalk names, and the mast was a board rather than a mast.

Tamsin stood with Aldren's lantern-staff grounded. She set her feet a shoulder apart, shoulders plain, and lifted her chin a finger to set the voice where it belonged.

"Under oath and under sky," she said. "We hold for all we can. We throw what must be thrown. We do not trade one island for another. We do not lie about a line. On any span my word holds. Off the sway, those who keep table keep it with witness. We keep the count. We keep the breath." Power held by witness; witness constrained by power.

The answer did not come as a shout. Riggers answered first, low. Then marines took it up. A third, softer echo came from house hands at the rail. "Under sky," they said around the square and on the quay and at the anvil and under the wing's breast straps. It was enough.

Prince Cael stood at Tamsin's left and spoke after she had spoken. He kept the words unchanged. He added only what was his to add, and he did not add a title.



"Windharp under sky," he said. "Tables to the commons. Levies to the common line. Harbour first, then road, then sky. On spans I follow your count. In councils I carry your witness."

Brakka moved to the anvil with his bandaged hands at his sides. He spoke a single name first, Aldren's, and a second for the boy at High Aerie who had fallen when a splice failed and might have lived if hands had been older or better. He did not embroider. He put the bandaged edge of his hand to the anvil, nodded once, and the striker brought the hammer down a single time. A thin ring rode the timber, then died flat. A hand tightened on a rail; one breath held. They took the names into their count.

Sir Garin raised his left hand because that was the one that could rise without mockery. "Under sky," he said. "I hold posts I cannot lead. I teach feet. I turn hooks with bodies, not shoulders. I go where I can stand and tell the truth with my stance."

Lethriel knelt with a piece of grease and drew a slow spiral on the deck by the choir's place. She stood and stepped over it and put her palm down, and the apprentices stepped over it after her. Then men and women and boys and riders crossed the spiral as they filed on their way past the mast and toward their places. No one stamped. They walked. The spiral took their steps and kept them. It was a way of saying in the open that weather would do what it promised and nothing more tonight.

Ori stood at the mast board with his cracked spectacles tied with twine, and the twine cut a small line into his hair where it crossed, and he did not fuss with it. He spoke short.

"East forks," he said. "Lee pockets marked on the mast. Thunder corridor is shaped and honest; we pass the outer ring on a down-breath before dawn. Two approach lanes, one wider for wing, one narrow for rope. Three fronts at the axis: air to clear the worst of the beasts; lines to cut and hold against tether engines; Law to be placed. Windows posted by breath on this board. We keep to these until we cannot and then we say it

plain and adjust." Boots stilled for a breath.

No one shouted. People looked up at the points he named and then down again. Tamsin lifted the lantern-staff and opened the cowl a finger width. A seam of steady light lay along the deck in a line that men's feet could find without their eyes being tricked by glare. A soft count moved through the ranks: one, two, three. She did not lift the light any higher. It was not a signal to spend. It was a line to follow to their places.

"We lift at dawn," Cael said, not loud. "Wing, one fight as pledged. Hulls, on the count at the second bell, not the first. No private tables. No tassels."

The griffin-wing captain raised two fingers at her knee to her riders, who touched breast straps and made their quiet checks. The clerks moved their pegs one notch along the rope by the mast to mark the hour and then stopped. Men looked at the racks where braids lay: Aldren's Eight at the top, then Dock Runner's Hold, then the others. They put names on them with their eyes so hands would know which coil to take when Tamsin called for one.

Tamsin lowered the lantern cowl and grounded the ferrule. She set her palm to wood. The hum that came back told her the quay was holding and the men on it were not lying. She breathed in, two, and out, three, and let her jaw unclench. She said nothing. The night said enough and did not ask for more. The water under the quay moved without lies. The bells in the tower did not ring. Dawn had a place and a count. The hour was set.

When the muster broke, men did not talk loudly. The wing captain ran her hands along a feather to feel for any broken vane. Brakka's bandages smoked a little where he had put them near a cowl-lamp by accident and he swore softly at himself for a fool and moved his hands away. Lethriel touched the edge of the spiral, breathed out through her teeth once, and then went to sit by the coil-harp case. Ori put his slate back in its roll and set it down and put his palm against the mast the way

a man touches a thing that will be asked to do more than it should tomorrow and hopes it will not break. Cael walked the railing once and put his palm to the main mooring, and the hum there sat low and honest. Tamsin stood with her hand on the staff and counted three in her chest without numbers, and the seam she had made earlier stayed quiet along the plank where men would put their feet in the morning.

# Chapter 13

## The Hollow Zenith

Prince Cael Aeronar stood where three planks joined on a choir raft's forward frame, cloak pinned clean, burn dressed, rope□ laminate bow unstrung at his back. Griffins circled above the rafts in a set ring, not for show. Beyond them, at a greater height band where air grew thin and fought a body, the sun□ dragons moved.

They did not dance. They climbed, turned on lawless air, and set their wedge without wasting a wingbeat. Celestewing the Ancient held the point, scales dull gold under cloud light, the long pinions cut by old scars that told truth about weather as judge. At Celestewing's chin, a breath built. The exhale did not glare; it burned blue□ white where it touched an absence in the sky. Fire met missing, and the seam where they touched made a sound that pressed the chest.

"Wing, guard strata three and five," Cael said, not raising his voice. The griffin captain at his knee lifted two fingers, then a flat hand, and the riders altered height with no fuss. "No ornament. Choir is the work."

Lethriel Rainvein stood within a ring of youths with her throat bound and slate ready. She did not touch the coil□ harp case. Tamsin had set a frame drum on a crate and held it to her knee. Two, three. Plain. No flourish. The choir's hands followed Lethriel's shapes. Palms flat, turn of wrist, settle. The air along the front of the raft shifted by the measure they set and no more.

A void□ wyrm broke high. It unstitched cloud as it moved and left a neat absence behind its head. Its body showed no scale, only edge. Celestewing turned toward it with three of the younger suns on the port. Fire met the wyrm's path and burned to white, then vanished into the

pocket the wyrm opened before the breath could do its work. The dragon banked, drew the breath back, held two wingbeats, and exhaled into the pocket's edge instead of the centre. Blue ate at black absence; the seam tore. The wyrm recoiled from the edge and lost lift.

"Windows," Cael said.

Ori's flag moved on the rope front's mast below, two short, one long, and the horn on the choir raft gave that call. Griffins changed their layer by that count so their bodies did not become crosswind for the choir's work. Cael had learned to hold the picture in three planes and not set a river man's answer down on air. Harbour schemes failed in the third layer if a man clung to them. This fight asked a man to lift the chart in his head and keep it lifted.

"Left edge, thin," Lethriel wrote and showed to the captain, then evened the ring with a small uppalm. A youth had come late on his own breath; she put his fingers back to two and made him see where to put them. The drum answered: two, three.

A nimble wyrm snapped open a pocket under a trio of riders. Two cleared. The third clipped the rim with a wingtip. The pinion burned away where it crossed absence. The rider threw weight to the unhurt wing, not with panic but with the count held low in the body. He lived. The griffin ring filled the space above the choir, bodies set to shunt debris and bolt remnants that the storm choir could not settle without song.

One sun's outer pinion scorched on a pocket rim; it tucked, corrected, and held the wedge.

"Downband for the choir," Cael said. The captain signalled, and the ring sank by a measured span. No one spoke the word safety. The word was count. The wing's lowest rider looked away from the dragon fight and kept his eyes on the line the choir made across the air. He set his beast to slip a small piece of grit aside before it could blind a child.

A white dragon beyond Celestewing loosed breath across a set of small absence holes and caught only one. The others ate the sound of it.

Tamsin's drum found their two again and pinned it for the choir, and the boys' hands pulled a thin veil over the raft's prow. A sun□dragon to starboard dipped into a failing layer at that rim. The adjusted veil set a holding edge, and it banked back onto it before the pocket could take the wing. A wyrm rolled off it, miscounting the edge by a breath. Celestewing did not roar. The old dragon exhaled once more and took the keening from the wyrm's throat. It fell through its own slack and did not return.

"Guard strata five," Cael said. "Keep the edge flat." He spoke to the captain, not to the wind.

A griffin screamed. Cael did not look up, he looked where he had to. The wing captain jerked a knee; two riders threaded into line above the choir ring. A rider and mount fell, feathers cut, toward a dark seam that had not been there a breath before. Lethriel flattened her palm, swept left, and Tamsin drove the drum hard on the down. The fall found a layer that held and not a pocket. The beast beat twice, three times. Its claws found air that carried. The rider set his body as he had been taught and joined the ring again without vanity. "Again," the captain said to him low as he passed, as if they were at the training plank and not holding life over a cut void.

Ori's horn called once more from below: crosswind at two, dead pocket at the right brace. Cael nodded as if the horn could see and stepped to the rail. A body in a harness crossed a braided hold on the outer rim. Little men in dangerous places made large beasts able to live. Cael set his jaw, kept his hand flat on the rail, and watched the layers.

The air war held. No rout. Dragons pulled the worst of the seams who opened them long enough for men to step, and griffins kept the choir alive where they stood. Cael kept his hands where the work was and did not climb the thought of victory. He walked the plank by the count and held the picture in three.

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She left the drum to the second and stepped onto the rim posts on her sign. On the rim, Tamsin took two to listen and three to take weight. The old rule did not belong to a schoolroom; it belonged here, under hard weather and under the eye of a tyrant who hated such rules. She moved along the outer edge of the Hollow Zenith's rim with her lieutenants placed by the posts she had marked on the Windharp mast back in harbour. Their palms stood over rails and their thumbs lay over chalk marks. When she called, they echoed.

"Two for listening," she said across the ring of posts. "Three is your weight."

Rell's palm hovered at two and rose at three, a beat behind her. Garin's boys were here, grown into their feet by necessity. Brakka's coils sat on shoulders, the names chalked onto tags: Aldren's Eight at a hand; Dock Runner's Hold next in the pile; Black Ring West two spans away over a pad where tar bled.

"Throw," Tamsin said. Sappers hurled two coils across a gap the size of a cart. Hook heads took hold, and men on both sides hauled. Pads went under hands. Clamps seated where the strain truly lived. One rookie laid a strap across the wrong hole; the lieutenant slid it two down in the same beat, no talk. "Thin side first," Brakka said out of habit and not from pedantry. A man who had never set a wedge slid it in thick and found his hands corrected without insult.

A tether engine sang high from a tower with a narrow belly and a cunning throat. Hooks bit the first emergency tie and pulled wrong. Two rookies shifted their shoulders to pull back. "No," Garin said from a span to their left. Garin carried the sling under his right arm and a short stick in his left hand. "Short, whole, now." They dropped their weight on three, turned their bodies in the small motion he had made them learn, and the pull went away from the tear point into a post that could take it. The hook skipped the tie and found the armour of a bracket where it could do no harm. Garin's mouth made a shape that could have been a smile or a flinch; it meant the same thing here. "Reset," he said. A clamp at the near

post rang flat.

The second gap took a coil named on the quay last night by a hand that still had a mark of rope bite across its knuckles. Tamsin would have said the name if the work had not asked her to keep her words for count. The braid spoke under weight and did not lie. She saved the name for the anvil in a safer hour.

Heat wanted where cold had settled. Brakka found the place with his ear and with the sight of the wire's lay under strain. He did not put a bare palm near it. Two men seated clamps as he called to the lad with the coil pack. "Two turns," he said. "Stop." The light did not flash; it hummed through copper. Brakka leaned on a lever with the heel of his bandaged wrist and watched the colour and the smoke that was not smoke but old frost letting go. The hum of the line lifted a quarter shade. Tar darkened and stilled.

"Again," Tamsin said. "Back a hair on the turn." The boy at the coil touched the plate with a knuckle, took a breath without counting aloud, and set the second push with his jaw unlocked. The braid corrected its complaint.

A plate ahead gave a groan that the men learned to hear this week. Oil bled at the pin and found the wind and came back in their faces by scent. "There," Ori said. He stood with his slate tied at his waist and his bad lens bound to his head. "Two spans left. Maintenance ledge. If it goes, you do not chase. Two left. Ledge. Then anchor." He pointed and did not wave the hand like a boy. He drew the route on the slate and held it up so a runner could see the shape and not the flourish.

"On my call," Tamsin said, and it was only then that she raised her voice for more than the count. The plate cracked. The hinge let go under its own lie. Men froze because they were born with nerves that wanted to do that when boards moved and made wrong sounds.

"Two," Tamsin said, and the ring answered.

"Three."



They moved left, not fast, not slow, and set two anchors on a ledge with the wind in their faces. When the second man had a hand on the third post's hole, Cael's marines appeared without hurry and made a wall with their bodies between engine and men. They did not stare at the tower and try to cut a story into it. They covered men who worked. The anchor seated. The repeat of that act three times in an hour was what kept people alive, not a bright tale about a single enemy tower.

The tower on their right coughed. Garin's file reached it and did not try to be glorious. They jammed the feeder throat Brakka had cut for training and did not cut the main. The engine stopped singing. The silence of it brought a noise out of men that they had been holding in their chests since morning.

"Enough," Tamsin said. She spoke it with respect. "Count it. Don't spend it." She felt the eager that lived behind men's teeth and did not call it wrong. Then she pointed to a place on the rim where the Zenith's shell made a lip. "There," she said to Ori. "You're with me."

Two gaps bridged, one held by clamps, one tied honest to steel that would not lie today, and a third post braced by Aldren's Eight so that a man could put his foot down without hearing his own soul flinch. It was not safety. It was a place from which to attempt something that mattered.

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Inside the shell, with the rim holding, they hooked into the interior span with two handholds and a harness hook set low. The handholds were cold brass. It bit through glove. Tamsin put her toe into a notch that had seen too many boots and found its edge anyhow, because that is what feet do when asked to be wise instead of strong.

The shard at her belt warmed and pointed down and slightly to the right. It was not a pull. It was a small argument with her bones about where they ought to go. She listened. Ori's palm touched her shoulder

with a tapped two. "Echo is wrong," he said low. The void had eaten the small sounds and left the big ones.

"Lengthen two," Tamsin said. "Listen longer."

They passed a seam where sound thinned. She spoke the count with her mouth closed and let it run down the bones of her face. Ori tested the echo once more by clicking his tongue against his teeth and felt the return in his jaw. He nodded and lifted two fingers for a longer listen, then gave her a third finger for weight. She took it and put her boot down where the board had asked to be treated like a board rather than a story.

A trio of cloaked figures crossed a lattice ahead. Each stepped as if he were alone and as if the boards would never lie to such a man. Their hoods held the absence that the Null King taught his hands to love. Tamsin pulled her hand off the next rung rather than raise it. She crouched against the grid and put her nose against metal that smelled of old oil and meat.

"Leave them," Ori breathed.

"We go around them," Tamsin said. "We're not buying a fight."

Ori showed her a side run on his slate, a lanyard that saw service when men cleaned vents or ran grease to hidden places. They moved along it on two and three. When Ori's heel slipped on grit thrown wrong by men who had not loved their work once upon a time, he did not snatch; he held two and waited the beat, then took three and let his foot decide. They cleared the lattice while the adepts turned off a walk that men with power believed belonged to them, as if a board could belong to a man by decree.

At the end of the lanyard, a hatch sat tight on a hinge that had gone grey. Law marks faded along its lip, not gone, but lower than honest. The shard steadied at Tamsin's hip.

"Old clause," Tamsin said to the hatch, and that was for her and not for the world. She kept her teeth together and let the words come from

low in the chest. "Bearing held by willing witness. Hinge speaks. Plate returns.

"Only this," she said, making it smaller rather than larger, and her breath counted two under it and three as it settled. A small pressure gathered under her tongue as the words seated. The hatch answered. It did not make a sound for men's ears. It changed what her hand felt under it. It became what it was supposed to be long enough that men could pass and not die under a lie. She slid it inward and it did not fall off its pins.

Ori chalked the knot points on the lanyard with arrows that a panicked boy could read. He wrote WAIT BREATH RETURNS where the sound died a span away. He drew a square where a man should not stand even if it looked like it would hold and marked it with an X shaped without flourish. He wanted the simplest marks possible because he wanted the boys to live.

Through a grating, a light showed far below. It was not the light of lamps on a quay. It lay where gravity should have held and did not. The glow bent lines Tamsin had learned as a girl on boards that held. The shard's pulse picked up the count and kept it.

"Halfway," Tamsin said, not for comfort. She looked at Ori's jaw, set just so, and the line in his hair where the twine lay. He nodded to show he had heard the truth and accepted it. They went on. A cheer reached them thin through the frame, and the next pulse put their count a shade off. "Lengthen two. Hold," Tamsin said, and the beat settled.

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On the rim, while the interior team edged inward, a secondary engine tower collapsed away from the posted line when a team of sappers took Brakka's teaching and turned it into a fact. They jammed the feeder throat and let the pull die where it could do no harm. The tower buckled on its own weak joint and fell into cloud that did not hold any story for it.

The sound of the engine's death went through men. It lifted something from their chests. It put something else in its place.

A sun□dragon chased two wyrms down and made them leave the choir strata because it had found edges that punished them for being there. It exhaled into the seam of a pocket's rim and not into its centre. The wyrms turned, not from fear, but because they had to. The dragon's voice carried down the shell and into Tamsin's bones where she hung in the guts of the Zenith. Men cheered where they should have stayed quiet.

"Hold your posts," Tamsin said. "Do not run the joy." She did not say wait; she said hold. It mattered.

She and Ori stepped into a seam that had been snapping three tens between closures since dawn. It did not snap. It held its edge steady a shade too long. Ori touched the frame, counted three, and raised his eyebrow. He drew a mark on the slate that meant longer return. "It's softening," he said.

Tamsin would have let a laugh happen in a clean world. She put it with the rest of the world in the basket marked LATER and moved along the edge of the seam with her hand on rough metal. She took the count through her teeth. She did not push for speed.

Below and outside their place, frames unfolded in a way that was too tidy. Metal arms opened in plates and left gaps that were not gaps. They did not hurl, they did not cut. They made pulses. The first went through the shell and through men. It did not hurt. It stole timing. The down□beat hitched once. Boys' hands put a breath in the wrong place. On the line, rookies braced on two and threw weight backward and nearly made their own falls.

Tamsin took a step and found the floor where it should be, but the breath in her chest that had been two was not there. "Hold," she said because the body wanted to give up a count when a count failed. "Two," she said with her teeth. "Three." She found the board with her toes and not with hope.

Lethriel stood on the raft and wrote a new pattern while the boys wavered. She did not look at their faces. She looked at their hands and made her hand make a shape that set a second hand a beat later than it had been. A small tremor ran through the chalk line; she wiped it flat with the heel of her hand before setting the repeat. She flipped a page and wrote it again for the second ring, then lifted her wrist and turned it so the boys would change together and not all alone. The edge came back. It did not come back at once. It came back the way weather does when you ask and not when you order.

A dragon fell through where a seam ate wind that had been there a breath before. Claws hit a frame that had been hot once and was not today. The dragon tore that wood for purchase and took air again. The thud of a body that did not recover carried through the structure to where Tamsin went along a maintenance bar. She caught it in her ribs and did not let it be a thought. She let it be a duty.

Two horns sounded from the rim and the tone was one men had learned in harbour: recall to lines; do not press. Cael's pennant rose and dropped and rose again in the code Ori had posted. The ropes at the anchors took strain in the right way. Two squads had stepped a pace beyond their posts on momentum and snapped back at the recall.

"Reset," Tamsin said to Ori, as if she could order the whole war with her mouth. She ordered her own feet and the man behind her. She listened to the next pulse. She walked through it without trusting it to leave her timing alone.

The fight became narrower in that hour and harder in the small rooms between large acts. The enemy's engines did not make men bleed straight away. They made men miss the beat that let them move without earning the fall. The answer to that could not be a shout. It had to be a hand raised one breath later and a drum that struck a down when a man wanted to strike an up. Lethriel's slate filled with straight lines in the place where she would have used her throat in other years.

Tamsin and Ori descended toward the strange light while the edges of the war got less glorious and more honest. The way in stayed open.

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On the choir raft, while the rim held, "Stagger your hands," Lethriel wrote in thick, clear marks, and drew two dots under a flat line and three beneath them, but offset. The boys matched her wrist's turn. The weather edge stayed. They did not bring storm to bear; they held air where men needed it, and they did it with scribble and drum and breath.

"Give ground at two," Brakka said, and he did not say retreat as if it were disgrace. "Hold at three. Hold your breath for three and then you give the board back one. You get it on the next pass." He put two anchor crews on that count and held a third with Aldren's Eight where he could guarantee a place for men to come to. A coil smoked and he turned it from tie to brace in his head and did not show the thought on his face. The clamps sang a little. He had a word for that hum that no one else knew, and he spoke it to the metal in his chest rather than out loud.

"Don't look clever," Garin said to a boy who could not stop grinning when a hook missed him. A strap crossed his right shoulder to stop the world from knowing what it cost him to hold his sling and he made a joke about the way the boy's hair stuck up after the last gust. It was unkind in a way that a lad could hold in his mouth and turn into obedience. "Two," Garin said. "Three. Turn. No show." The boy turned with his whole body. His grin went away because there was nothing to grin about.

A pennant flapped in a wind that was only a wind and not a command. It carried Senate colours near the far end of the line of hulls that had appeared late on the horizon when the dragon wedge had already taken the first brunt. Cael's jaw moved. It did not need to be a word. He turned his head an inch and the wing captain saw the movement and then dropped her hand to set two riders to the choir's left,

where the late hull challenged their cover. There was no speech about politics. There was a griffin on a line where it needed to be and boys who were not going to die because he turned from that pennant and put cover where it belonged.

Inside, Tamsin and Ori crossed a span whose inscriptions blinked on and off under the influence of the pulses from the shuttered frames above. The lines did not vanish. They went thin and then thicker. The shard at her belt steadied into a hum she had not heard before, a held note that sat right at the centre of her body. "We're near," Ori said, and it did not sound like a thing a man says to earn a laugh. It sounded like a mark on a slate.

A single adept stood at a junction with a net slung over his arm. It did not look like rope. It had weight where it should not have. He cast the net at the span and it fell to eat the place where a foot would try to stand. The adept did not think he had to fight a woman and a tall map man. He thought he had to cast once and watch bodies make the sound he liked.

Tamsin stepped left and did not put her boot where a boot wanted to go. Ori pulled a marked chalk stone from training from his pocket that a boy had given him without knowing he had done something large. Ori threw it underhand into the net where a rope□man could see the knot asked to be hit. The net woke when it felt contact and held the absence it wanted to make for a body that was not there yet. It fell into itself. The adept did not notice that he had set his own snare in earnest. He took a step. He fell through what he had made. It was cleaner than a cut. It left no blood.

"Go," Tamsin said, not because they were cowards but because they were wise.

They reached a door that was a door in name and not in shape. It opened into a space that did not sit where the rest of the world sat. The walls carried marks in stone that had been set when men still knew how to live under what those marks asked of them. There were spans

suspended by rules rather than by rope. The place where the rule lived was a stone that was not stone in the way dock stones are stone. It held instruction. It asked for witness.

"Breath," Tamsin said. They took one together without counting. It felt like three because it was meant to.

She stepped inside with the shard at her belt and the other shard under Ori's coat where it sat under his breath and not under his pride. At the threshold, its hum caught and returned her next breath in measure. She did not call for quiet. The air carried a low, even hum and a faint weight against the chest. The place had its own quiet that could break men who tried to command it. She did not speak the Law. Not yet. She walked toward the place where it would be placed when the time came and did not lie to herself about cost. She put her foot down where the world told her what to do. The seam of her steps held.



# Chapter 14

## The Spire of First Weight

The chamber's air thin and cold on the tongue. The floor was a quilt of instruction plates set within the circling stone, each engraved with old strokes that carried a faint, even hum. At the centre rose the Fulcrum Spire, not tall, but exact, cut in clauses from base to shoulder, its faces joined by tight seams that had not moved in an age. Brass rails led to it over two steps of stone. The light here did not flicker. It sat low and steady, pinned by the cut of the words.

Tamsin moved within the ring and set her palm on the nearest plate. It answered with the same low tone that had sat in her chest since she had first carried a shard along a failing span. The tone was honest. It did not swell. It did not beg her to hear more than it was. Ori stood off her right shoulder with his slate tied down and the cracked lens banded to his head by twine. Dust gritted under his boot and stopped complaining because the place did not permit stray sounds to keep their own will.

"There," he said softly, indicating a recess cut at the Spire's base. "The sockets are true."

With the oilskin unlooped from her belt pouch, she eased the first shard out with her thumb around the edge, not over the etched face. Old cuts across her knuckles pulled where cold had settled in them on the height. She set the shard in the left-hand recess and breathed once toward it. Stone settled. The plate under her palm raised its tone by the smallest part of a note.

Ori slipped his free hand inside his coat where she had pressed the other shard days ago with a flat palm and the words under breath, keep it under your breath. He eased it free, careful not to flex the cracked lens

that kept his eye true enough. He passed the shard to her without flourish. She fitted it to the right-hand recess and pressed until the chalk-dry edge of its cut took the lip and seated. The seam that met both fragments took light through its letters. The light did not blaze; it steadied. She unhooked Aldren's lantern from her belt and set it at the base rail, cowl lowered, brass to brass.

Rings of writing woke around the base, words she had seen in dreams where she had watched spans breathe and return. The low light made them legible in the way a clean cut is legible under a craftsman's thumb. Ori wiped grit from a dulled line with the heel of his hand and read where the wake made sense.

"No law holds without a living witness," he said. His voice did not rise. The words set themselves in the air with the same weight as on the stone.

For a breath it was only the line, the iron of it in the room. She felt her ribs quicken against the belt. Aldren's hand in time past had tapped that place, not to comfort, but to mark where count lived. Eight breaths. That was the safe word he had taken with his life to make a place for them to pass. Eight. Twelve was the edge. He had said it steady with the lantern's brass under his thumb and died to give the truth of it.

Tamsin placed her palm closer to the engraved face. The letters held their depth under her skin. The shard at her hip warmed and pushed nothing. It lay with her and heated the short space between ribs and hand until she felt warmth fill a part of her chest that had been cold since the Frost-Heights. She drew a breath on two to listen to what her body knew and let it out on three.

The chamber took a tremor through its bones. Something large met a held place and lost. The shock ran through the plates under her boots and up through the Spire. Dust lifted from an edge and fell back at once. Far overhead, the horn that had called windows since dawn found a wrong pitch and then corrected to something thinner and flatter. Tamsin looked

to Ori. His jaw had set long before this. He did not need to say delay kills to make it true in the room.

“If I fall, you take the word out,” she said. “Bear witness. Lead the turn. You know the counts for horns and flags. You bind them to the breath you carry.”

“Under sky,” he said. He put two fingers to the plate and a breath to the dust he had wiped, as if he might be included by doing the smallest, truest work he was permitted.

She tied and untied the short length of line at her belt, once. It shut the hand that wanted to reach for a rope where there was none to carry. She set that hand flat on the Spire instead and held three there until her pulse matched the hum that ran through the cut letters.

Another tremor came, this one longer and warmer, as a dragon fell through a canceled pocket and broke on a lower rib. A wash of heat moved through the void and into the ribs, the heat of fired copper and burned meat. The sound that followed could not be carried by a man’s mouth. It was a heavy, final thing that did not live, ending on a metal edge that held. The chamber did not shake apart. The plates took it and held. A harness strap snapped. But the warning thrummed through Tamsin’s teeth all the same.

The drum faltered. On the choir raft, a second missed, then caught the count. One beat came late across the horn like a missed step on a wet plank. Tamsin tasted old soot and spent oil where the sound met the stones. Then a new pattern spread. It did not ride on voice. It rode on hands. She could feel it in her wrists. Staggered. Kept. Barely, apprentices beating the late hand pattern.

She counted once, then again, and did not speak her fear aloud. Two is for listening. Three is for weight.

“Under oath and under sky,” she said into the Spire. The words came low and clean from where the count lived, not gilded and not hurried. “I hold. Tension held by covenant. Load shared by willing hand. Anchors

answer to witness. Gravity's instruction returns on my breath. Count heard. Count kept."

"No life for show. No island for a table."

The first breath went to its place. One. The plate under her palm steadied, not on a guess, but in answer. Two. She listened. The ribs of the chamber shifted the smallest way as if a long-kept joint had seated. Three. Weight given, not as a push, but as the rightness that a body can give when it stops telling lies to itself about what it is doing.

The tone that had lived low in the stones woke in full. It did not leap. It bloomed across the ribs until the space pressed against her chest and then held there, even. Out along lines she could not see, cables took a tighter bite on their pins. Wood that had been cooked too hard last night no longer cheated underfoot. The far hum at Windharp's main mooring would have lifted a hair and become honest again. Along the eastern arc, tether-engines choked and winded down when their pull found a post that no longer lied about its own strength. Little sounds returned where nets had eaten them. A banner somewhere that had been caught half-twisted fell open, snapped once, and lay steady with its cloth showing the truth of its weave.

Ori's knees bent without ceremony. The floor had tilted toward a lie and then corrected. His body sorted itself and made itself square to the truth that returned under him. He hissed a breath between his teeth and then let his jaw loose so his count would not crack. He stood and set his open palm to the plate next to hers in witness, the other hand on the slate at his waist so it would not chime against a rib and spoil the counts outside.

The link from her lungs into the world was not a thought. It was a set. It ran from her throat and rib to the Spire and then out into the lines where men stood. Freedom narrowed to the exact width of that hold. The narrowing did not cut her. It gave her a clean edge to live against. Calm ran through her like cooled metal. Her back settled. The knotted line at

her belt lay still.

“You cannot leave,” Ori said. He said it as one says a wind mark written on a mast. He did not ask her if she understood it. He declared it so he would not lie to anyone when he left.

Tamsin’s inhale and her nod were together. This was not a place for tears. There would be water and salt later when costs were counted and boys read names off a board in a hall with a cowl-lamp burning clean. Here she held her ribs and her palm and the count she had spoken, and that was sufficient.

Out on the rim, Brakka’s voice reached the chamber because it was made to carry on truth and not merely loudness. “No more cut and catch. Anchor and brace! Give ground at two, hold at three!” Men repeated him. Horns spoke the same phrase the way Windharp had told them, not with art, but with a clean fold of sound. Clamps were set deeper into rails where strain now lived honestly. A coil that had smoked before was put to brace, not tied where it would lie about being a tie.

Above, a dragon cut across a layer that no longer moved when an engine told it to. It banked on a real edge, found it willing, and pressed. A wyrm’s snout broke off from the place it wanted to be and thrashed into nothing that would hold it. The choir did not throw anything brighter than what the covenant allowed. They held a thin veil that stabilised, then set it to the count that celebrates a hold, and then they sat with it by count as Tamsin’s breath marked the hum under their feet.

A horn on the air layer gave the phrase that meant rescue for a fallen rider. Cael’s hand cut the air; the horn gave the rescue call. It was a clean two long and one that turned down. Windharp had named it in harbour two nights ago. Nets went out not to catch glory but to catch bodies before they became stories. Rescue had been made a priority where pursuit had been the habit.

“Two,” Garin’s voice came across the ribs. It had a catch in it that came from the chest and not the throat. He did not hide it because there

was no time to make words about it. He wiped his cheek with a rough knuckle. "Three. Turn. No show."

The outer shell began to give in ordered rings rather than in wild rips. Tamsin felt the knock of one plate failing against another, then the next, each falling away from the posted line. It sounded like a proper dismantling. There was relief in the slow order of it that hurt the same way a joint hurts when a bone goes home.

Ori turned to her then and bowed his head under the cold ring of sky that showed through a broken rib. It was not theatre. It was a measure offered to the right place.

"Under sky," he said. "I carry this count to horns, flags, and boards. I align our tables to your breath. If your breath fails, I count eight and hold the line in your name until I can set the next witness."

"Go," she said.

He backed away, not turning until the step that took him off the innermost plate. He put his palm down once more on the carved words that required a living witness to hold, as if by that touch he could put his thin weight behind her ribs, and then he moved at a measured pace that needed no drum.

Between the regular cycles of the hum, a quiet arrived. It was not rest. It was the kind of quiet that eats the small and honest sounds first. No grit hissed where a heel lifted. No strap creaked under load. No breath touched the lip of a plate. Tamsin did not look up. She set her shoulder blades against the fact that she had made and kept the count.

It stepped into the chamber. Light did not follow him in. It bent out and away and failed to return to ordinary places, edges of letters cooling toward absence. The crown on his head had edges that made the eye fail at counting because there were too many, and none of them reconciled with the others. His cloak took the bright from anything it could touch and offered back nothing. The neat absence at his feet was a place where dust would not settle.

He looked at Tamsin and did not see a person. He looked at her hand the way a man in a bad shop looks at the mouth of a clamp to see if the teeth will bite clean. He let his eyes track the join where her palm sat against the cut of the Spire. His gaze went to her ribs where the breath ran and to the brass at her feet where the lantern stood grounded with its cowl lowered and honest.

The hum did not stutter. The hum held exact. It did not answer him because he had not been given a breath to govern it. Tamsin counted and kept the count, unornamented, and the Spire held by that measure.

Beyond the open ring, a banner snapped once as the strain changed and then fell still in the new order. The cloth lay against its brace without fuss. Horns that had called danger took a new cadence that meant repair. Men would be reminded to fetch wedges and lay them thin side first. Nails would be taken up and put down. Coils would be retagged now that some had been moved to brace rather than tie. The world had work again that was not only survival.

The Null King raised his hand. He did not begin with a blow. He drew his palm a fraction toward himself, as if gathering an answer that would be composed of subtraction rather than substance. The first word he spoke was not a threat. It was the beginning of a promise.

Tamsin's palm, marked by old burn and rope bite, remained where it had been set. Aldren's lantern stood at her feet with its cowl lowered and its guard rings dull where hands had held them and where polished spots had lost their shine in the last days. She drew one breath, then another, each measured, each heard by the Spire and by her own chest.

Far off, bells rang once, then twice, in the cadence that meant work called and no panic. She heard them, and she kept her place, and the hum held steady in her bones.

# Chapter 15

## Unmaking the Null

Aldren stood within the ring without an honest footfall. Light thinned where he stood and did not return to ordinary corners. His crown refused counting. The edges did not meet each other. His cloak ate the bright that lived on copper and stone and gave nothing back. Dust would not settle at his feet.

He inspected her hand as if metal and flesh could be measured as a tool. His eyes were the colour of unlit stone. They did not shine. They assessed. The neat absence around him tried to persuade the eye to trust subtraction.

“You would be free,” he said, and the words were clear of echo because the place would not lend him any of its sound.

Tamsin kept count. She did not remove her hand. She allowed the breath to go and return. On the return, she said, “Name what you mean.”

“No witness. No pleading hands. No bells that drive men to need. No tangle of kin.” His head bent the smallest part of a degree toward her fingers. “Spans that answer one breath. Yours. Lines that do not fail because no other foot may touch them. You will walk without danger because there will be no other weight to cheat you. This chamber is a post without a town. There is no duty here, only the clean edge of truth.”

“Truth without a hand on it is not a post,” she answered. “It is a hole.”

He did not change his stance. “You mistake company for virtue. I offer you art. No line slack, no plate lying, no man’s mistake bent into your weight. Your count, kept without interference. You will sleep without being woken by bell codes. You will never again have to shout



‘cut’ and carry the ruin of it. I unmake only what binds you. Call it a private sky.”

She let herself hear what he had said the way she had learned to hear the hum of a line and not be fooled by the tone of a man’s voice. Private sky. A span that never needed repair because no one else walked it. No child running early. No apprentice taking a step on two and apologising to the air while she backed him into a safe place. No man with his pride stuck in his throat needing to be told to let go of a bundle and keep his life. No tether-crew on a tower cutting wrong and having to learn in three breaths. A clean seam with no mark of use.

“Under sky,” she said, and the old words made a place in the air. “Bridges exist so bodies can pass. Law exists so we can keep from lying about where weight is. If no one else walks, there is no bridge. It is show. I am not spending a life for show; I am holding so others may pass.”

He did not step; he had no need. His influence was a pulling away rather than a hand put upon a thing. “I would spare you their numbers,” he said. “Ratios obey me. Ceilings, spans, costs, counts listen when I speak. You will breathe without ledger marks scrawled upon your ribs. I will take the ledger away.”

“Lives are not numbers,” she said. “Breath is not a ledger. You can pull at figures until the ink wears thin. A woman will still put her foot down and need a hold that tells the truth. You cannot cancel witness.”

“You have made yourself a post.” The crown tilted. “You have placed yourself in a law that will not allow you to leave. You should thank me. I will remake the room by removing it. No witness, and your cost ends. The seam goes to clean.” His hand drew back the smallest part, as if summoning a pulling away the way a man calls a rope to hand before he commits to a lift.

The hum held. She felt it hold in the bright skin on the heel of her hand and in the tendon that lived along the inside of her forearm where tool use had made it more rope than flesh. She saw words on the Spire

deep under her palm and did not look at them. She had read them with the skin of her hand when she set it down. No law holds without a living witness.

“You do not understand the word,” she said. “Witness is not a mark on a roll. It is a person who will not leave when the line lies.”

He drew his hand again toward himself, subtraction cupped like a habit. Then he threw the act outward. The edges of letters chilled. Her tongue tasted iron, not from blood but from the lack of it. The chamber made no sound in answer to his command. No answer was needed. It had a kept breath. The hum did not climb, did not drop; it stayed exactly where she had joined it.

He looked at her mouth because that was where the breath came from. He looked at her ribs. He looked at the guard rings on the lantern. He did not look at her eyes. She did not need him to.

“You cannot cancel a living body without naming it murder,” she said, and she did not offer him the courtesy of calling his language Law. “Name it and do it if you can. Do not lie and say you are only tidying a number.”

“Numbers obey me,” he said, and his voice thinned for one syllable, not from fear, but from being denied the shape of the room. “Your count is a number.”

“My count is my breath,” she said. “They are not the same. Under oath and under sky.” She pressed a fraction, not to increase pressure on the plate, but to remember her body’s place. “Power shapes the wielder.”

He raised his hand and opened it. It was a small motion. If a man did it at the bench it would mean pass me the tongs. Here it meant unbind. The crown around his head showed a fine set of lines her eye could not help but count. They were not scratches. They were failure lines, a crack-web crossing the broken angles. They ran in directions that did not agree with each other. They did not meet to become sense. The neat absence that had been an argument around his feet drew inward and

folded upon itself. Dust settled at his boots, then slid, then sat like any honest dust on an honest floor.

He lifted his other hand and did not find a seam he could tear. He stepped for the first time, a gesture that could not shake the plates because the plates had been set by a breath that had been kept. He had been sovereign of what was not there. Here there was a held thing. The world did not leave him a lip to grip.

He moved too quickly for most men to follow. Tamsin had watched too many apex moments on spans to be fooled by clean speed. It was only a lunge. There was no answer for it in the chamber because the chamber was not a person he could tackle and it was not a law that would yield to a change in tone. The ribs of the place took on no tremor at his strike. Her palm did not slip. Aldren's lantern did not move.

He went without a sound; the hum held. It was the absence he had praised returning him to the truth of itself.

Dust settled honestly, even where his feet had been. The absence that had pretended to be neat was gone. Light came back to the same corners in the same way it had done before he entered. She lifted breath on two, returned it on three, and did not try to make herself larger than the world. She was a person with a hand on a plate doing the work that had been asked of her.

Far off, bells rang once, then twice. Work-called. No panic.

She did not look up from her hand. She had no need. She was not a captain. She was a witness. If the boys outside were wise they would carry this rhythm to their flags and horns and boards and to whatever tables men would sit around after. That was Ori's work. She had given it to him when she could still step. He had said "Under sky," and she had believed him.

She did not think of freedom as a walking away. She thought of it as a place where another body could step without falling. She counted the next breath and listened. The Spire answered. She gave weight.

The air above the rim still had weak spots where the enemy's machines had left their flavour behind. Prince Cael lifted his hand to shade the sun and did not call triumph. A gryphon and rider on the left-hand side of strata three fell half a length into a thin pocket that a man with a soft mind would have called nothing. It was not nothing. It was a remainder. The beast made no cry. The rider kept his weight forward and did not kick at the air. He had been taught to trust the next count and not his panic.

"Hold screen," Cael said, and the captain answered with a lift of her chin and put two riders to the left without leaving a hole in the right. Horns did not carry well in the new quiet, but the signal the choir raft used went clean when men did not try to decorate it. Two short and one long. The front horn answered; the wing slid half a pace into the right place.

At the raft's rim, Lethriel had her slate but her hand did not move to it. Her throat bandage had pulled through where it had rubbed. She lifted two fingers to set a flatness, then, without looking at herself, spoke one line. It did not carry. It did not need to. It reached the bodies of the youths around her. They had been trained to hear pattern, not noise. She gave them the hand before and after to show them where to put it.

Tamsin's second, the drummer she had left in her stead on the raft, struck the frame drum on two and three without ornament. The youths' wrists turned and laid a thin edge. The griffin and rider found it. The beast's chest rose into a place where air returned something when it was pressed. The rider brought the mount into the kept band with three small motions of knees and hand. Breath showed in three white puffs and then went clear again.

The saved rider circled once. He put his palm to his breast strap and inclined his head toward the raft. His mount's pinions made a small sound like cloth being folded by a careful woman. Three other riders

mirrored him, two for the coverers and one for the youth whose hand had come late yesterday and had learned today where not to be late.

Cael brought his right hand down. “Land, low. Rescue band first,” he said. He had learned long ago to talk as if men were tired. The captain sent two down. They did not dive. They stepped through layers the way a careful person walks down stairs with a child behind him.

Lethriel’s throat leaked fresh red through the cloth. A younger hand, careful and exact, held the slate ready for her to write the next adjustment. She did not write. She smiled once in a way that did not ask for an answer, then held both palms low to settle the edge and let it sit. Her voice did not return. The edge no longer needed her voice. It had hands and a drum and had learned restraint.

Across the rim, Brakka’s call carried clean. “Stow the last. Brace, not tie. Deepen clamps. Thin side first,” he said. Men repeated him in the voice of a trade. Coils that had been named in the night were retagged with cloth rags to show what they were now, not what they had been for. A boy with a clean face wrote BRACE in block on a slate and read it back to his partner to prove he had not put flourish on it. Clamps were seated with two turns and a stop. A coil that had smoked earlier was set to brace a board rather than lied about as a tie.

Cael put two fingers to his lips and blew the rescue: two long and one that turned down. Not the call for victory. Healers to attend the place the wing would land. Two bodies were already moving with slung kits. One had a hairline of copper on his hands that had come off clamps because he had been too near the work when he should only have been watching. They moved to the platform he indicated with his left hand and kept their eyes on the path.

He stepped from the raft to the rim platform when the captain allowed him, not before. A strap came off something and found his hand by habit. He sat on the bench bolted to the brace post and put his good knee down, then the other, to take the ground. He took one breath under

his cloak and then stood. His right hand shook once before he stilled it.

“Rescue two and three. No chase.” He did not raise his voice. “Ration water. Check straps on riders, then on youths. Keep them paired.” He gestured the pattern and the horn carried it down two posts. A young rider handed a water skin to a choir youth who had gone grey around the mouth. The youth took two mouthfuls and gave it back without argument.

Garin sat three boards away, his right arm held close in the sling that had become part of him. A recruit had his fingers in the wrong place on his own strap and went to pull. Another recruit took his hand and put it where it belonged without saying anything about it. Garin watched and allowed himself one sound that a man makes when it would be worse to keep it in his chest. Then he pointed with his left hand at a hook sitting wrong on a coil and the boy whose hook it was turned the whole of himself and the hook moved because the body moved.

“Good,” Garin said. It was the sort of good that a working man says when there is no space for performances.

On the far line, a dragon and rider came down to a mooring that had not been used for dragons in any living person’s memory. The rope crews had thrown a line across as if to a barge. They had been told not to show awe. They did not. They warily treated it as heavy work with a mind. Two boys pulled on a breast strap to shift the beast a half-third where its weight would sit without making a false lip under the plank. The captain of the wing nodded without smiling and set a hand on a young rider’s shoulder before moving on to check the next mooring’s pins herself. The beast’s breath came in a warm fog that went away when it met the air.

The bells began ringing in the pattern that had been named at harbour when the armada was made: one, then two. Work-called. No panic. Cael felt the change at the edge of his jaw, where the habit of clenching had lived for three days. He did not let it go all at once. He allowed it to come away like old pitch being warmed and scraped clean in strips rather than in a satisfying tear that would take good wood with it.

He looked toward the centre where the plate had opened for the law team. He could not see inside. He did not need to. He knew a seam when he heard it. He touched his breast strap not as a salute to any banner but to the count that had been set by a person's breath. Under sky.

"Healers to the third," he said again. "Bring a board for the wing's fallen." He did not say burial. He said board. Men would need wood under their hands to do the lifting and the tying that came next.

"Under sky," the captain said, and her tone ran clean as a line when the twist is even and the lay is right.

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With the work-called cadence steady along the rim, Ori began his walk with his slate strapped to his waist and the cracked lens tied to his temple by twine. The lens had held through the morning. He had wedged paper under the tie where it had cut into the skin. He was aware of it the way he was aware of an extra notch on his thumb when he marked shear. It did not interfere. He made note of it and did his work.

Light behaved. That was the first thing. It went where it was supposed to go and then it stopped. It did not run off edges into nothing. It did not carry someone's step farther than it should and then fail to return it. The wrongness that had lived in the shell was gone. Edges had come back. A man could put a boot down on a board and read its answers and trust them if he had learned to listen when a board spoke.

He stopped by a choked tether-engine that hung with its feed throat wedged. Oil drip had dried on the support brace instead of vanishing. Two sappers had their hands on bolts that had threatened them three hours ago but that now were only bolts. One said "ready" and the other answered "take" and they moved the load a quarter without sending any of that load toward the next post by accident. A sapper passed a bin for stripped bolts; the feeder cage went to scrap. A clerk wrote down the coil's

name and then drew a line through the word TIE and wrote BRACE in block above it. Ori marked the way the letters had been made without flourish and allowed himself satisfaction.

He touched the rim post with two fingers. The hum sat in his bones. It was not loud. It was not thin. It was present. He had carried patterns in his head for years that had not been written down. This was different. This was a living thing that moved across distance without being a signal in the way soldiers meant it. It was a harmony of craft acts, not a broadcast. He wrote nothing about it on his slate. He did not have to. He knew if he started to write he might lie about it by trying to make it into a map. Maps hold more than distance, his master had told him once. They held the temptation to pretend to know what you could only witness.

At the next platform, two boys had laid coils for the choir to sit on. Children had taken the habit of perching like birds at the edges of work and being told to get down and let the men and women do their jobs. A child sat on a coil and watched his mother put a strap right. He put his small hand to the plank and said softly, "Two. Three." He did not look at his mother when he did it. He looked at the place where her foot would go next. She did not tell him to stop. She adjusted the strap and answered the count by stepping in the right place without looking at him either. When her boot came down, he repeated, "Two. Three." under his breath. He grinned for half a heartbeat and then made his face clear again because he had seen men look a certain way around grief and he was learning to keep his joy small while he was in the same space as another person's cost.

A banner came loose where old thread had given out under new truth. It tore from its lashing and would have flown into bad air yesterday and taken a boy who chased it. Today it caught on a taut line that did not lie. A hand reached, and the cloth was brought in and folded and set on a crate. A woman touched its pattern and said a house name without demand.



Ori raised his eyes. The dragons had made one last circuit and were finding places to stand. Rope crews had thrown new lines across moorings and were learning how to call to beasts that had not been called to in anyone's memory. A handler raised a palm and a dragon answered as if it had been trained by someone who understood the difference between telling and asking. A second handler mirrored the cue; the beast eased a step and the planking held. Warm breath made steam that drifted and thinned in the cool. The wedge leader did not roar. The leader placed weight where wood would take it and then cleared the edge so the next could come in without wasting the lay.

He went to the inner threshold and did not step onto the plate. He had promised not to. The words cut into the metal at the base of the Spire had been woken earlier. The lamp at its foot had no flame. There was warmth in the brass where the guard ring met the plate. The warmth was not heat as men think of heat. It was a presence that suggested a hand had been there very recently and the metal remembered the meeting. He pressed the heel of his palm to the stone next to the lamp and felt a trace of that memory. He did not name it something it was not. He nodded to it and lifted his hand.

"Tamsin," he said. Not aloud. He said it in a place inside himself where he said the names of things that he was responsible for and must never lie about. He put his palm to the low stone beside the threshold and then made himself move because there were windows to set and edges to draw and boys to keep from cheerful wrong acts.

He walked out under an honest sky. He marked two small arrows on his slate that would keep a rim post crew from wasting time attempting to pull at a plate that had seated and no longer wanted their hands. He wiped one decorative curl he had almost allowed himself to draw and turned it into a straight line. He tied a grey rag through a coil tag so a boy who could not read would still put his hands on the right metal for the job he had been assigned.

The bells held to work-called. One. Two. Then space enough for a hand to move without rushing, then again. He looked toward the choir raft and saw Lethriel seated with her hands flat, eyes open. She did not speak. The youths were doing the work with their wrists under a sergeant's eye who had been told to guard their slates. The sergeant leaned over to read one and nodded because his mouth would have disturbed more than his nod would have assured.

No one spoke about victory. There were names to write on a board and there were bodies to lift onto planks. There were coils to stack and there were clamps to deepen. There was a Spire with a hand on it and there would need to be watches here and gardens there and a way to share the labour so that one person's breath did not have to be the only thing that kept the world from lying in future seasons.

Ori put his slate against the mast and tapped the frame twice, a habit to mark the next set of windows in his body. He drew a small cross beside a square to remind a tired crew not to stand there when they got to that point. He shook his head when his hand wanted to make the mark prettier. He wrote it plain. WAIT BREATH RETURNS.

He let the hum sit in his chest and then in his knees and then in his feet. He did not try to take it into his head in a way that would have made it into a concept. He allowed it to live where work lives. He thought of Aldren for one count and then let the thought go because the proper way to honour the dead was to do your craft with your mouth shut and your hands clean.

He found Rell at the rear of a file with his palm an inch over the rail at two, lifting at three. Rell looked at him and did not smile and did not need to. He lifted his palm the right height for two and lowered it for three, and a boy who had wanted to be clever moved his hand from two to three without making the world about his own wish to be seen.

"We will need a watch book," Ori said to him. "Two mouths. No song. No ornament."

Rell nodded. "Under sky." He held his palm steady and the line answered him.

Ori looked out across the archipelago that had nearly taught itself to lie. On distant lanes, hands rose on two and set on three in the same rhythm. He watched posts and spans and platforms and rails begin to align to a breath he could not see and could not measure with a tool. He saw men and women choose not to run while they were being given the chance to feel that the danger had passed. He saw them choose work in the right order: rescue, repair, ration, record. He wrote those four words on his slate and then rubbed them out because he did not want a boy to see them and think a list was a truth.

He breathed. He counted. He went to the next post.

The hum held, steady and kind.

# Chapter 16

## The Age of Binding

The bells at Windharp gave the gathering notes, two low and close; not alarm, not show, only the sound that knew what comes after is work. Prince Cael Aeronar stood with his hands on the brass rail that faced the square and felt the hum return through the metal into his bones. He had known that hum thin and wrong in the months behind. Today it sat low and honest.

The table on the quay had no cloth. A shallow bowl held cut rope lengths, each with a seal knot for biting. Seals lay already on pegs from votes given in the days since the Zenith fell quiet. The clerk set a fresh board on trestles; the ink block thudded once beside it. To the left, a coil of emergency braid marked ALDREN'S EIGHT lay with a grey rag tied through its tag. Beyond, the wing square showed griffins asleep in their harness rings; dragons held moorings on the outer pylons, weights shifted to boards that could answer them.

Cael raised his strap-crown in his palm for a breath and then settled it on his brow. The crown was leather and three small brass rings, nothing that would flash. He had asked the smith to cut away any extra that would serve pride before the square. He would not hang weight on a thing that did no work.

"Under sky," the clerk said. "The treaty of tended spans."

The crowd fell into simple stillness. Hands, not weapons, stood ready: clamps and slates. The Matriarch of Windharp sat at the edge of the table with her ledger and did not speak. She had given permission for this to be called without needing to be seen guiding it.

“Clause One,” the clerk read. “Maintenance is sacred. Posts, plates, cables, rails, moorings, braceboards, and moorers’ boards are held by covenant. No table eats while posts go hungry. No hand is taken from repair while there is grain to set a planning board. Any who starve maintenance are held from council until repairs are restored. Under sky.”

Cael nodded once; he felt his jaw ease from its old habit. “Under sky,” he said, and lifted his palm. He did not throw his voice to the wind. He spoke as if to one crew on a span.

A murmur answered him, low and even. Hands touched the rails where they stood. Riggers and fishermen and women who worked the ledgers set fingers to metal, wood, and line. Vows spoken into the living material mattered. The treaty would be kept or broken in those materials, not only in the clerk’s hands.

“Clause Two,” the clerk said. “Open spans. The harbour’s first duty is to the commons across all isles. No house binds a span to private use while another island starves. The Matriarch’s ledger will show all movements. Houses that hoard are named. Under sky.”

A lord in a clean coat kept his eyes on his boots. He had argued once for choice lanes for his own hulls. He had watched three houses leave the hall rather than give their levies. He had stayed then. He stayed now and pressed his palm to the rail with the others.

Cael kept his hand on the rail, warming it with the heel of his palm. “Windharp serves not as a wall,” he said, “but as a gate kept wide. Under sky.” A crown that does no work does not sit.

On the square, Brakka Copperweft shifted his bandaged hands and leaned his shoulder against a crate. The dwarf’s beard ties were dull with verdigris, but his eyes had an edge as clean as a new drawplate. He stood among coil racks marked with names spoken into the melt two days ago. He had refused a chair, saying he trusted his legs more than a plank.

The guards at the edge of the crowd shifted. A small ring of marines opened; Speaker Veyana Strake entered under their watch. She wore no

pins in her hair and had no bracelets on her wrists. Brass cuffs lay on a tray before the table, etched with Senate seals. She looked at them, then kept looking at the wood.

“Speaker,” Cael said. He did not bow. He touched the rail with two fingers. “Under sky.”

“Under sky,” she answered in a flat voice and held out both hands. The sergeant fastened a single leather loop around them without pulling hard. Veyana lowered her head. The ink-handed clerk moved his board so she could place her name. She signed where the treaty demanded names for the ban that would come. At the rail, an aide set his wind-pin on the tray and stepped back.

“Clause Three,” the clerk said. “No isle is marked to be loosed while hands remain to pull and brace. Any who lay such plans are named for exile from spans and tables. Under sky.”

A long quiet followed. Veyana’s breath showed only with a thin lift and fall of her shoulders. She bowed her head and touched the rail with her bound hands. “Under sky,” she said, and for the first time her voice had less steel and more gravel. A cautious lord half-rose with a murmur; the ink-handed clerk tapped the ledger, and he set his palm to the rail.

The sergeant opened the exiles ledger kept for this clause. He read her name into it with the reason and marked it in iron ink in the same block hand as the quay placards. She stood while he read it back, then stepped aside when he closed the board.

Cael felt the discipline it took not to speak beyond what the clause required. He wanted to ask her what she had thought when she wrote her orders for cutting islands loose. He did not ask. The treaty would answer that now.

He lifted his strap-crown from his brow and fitted it again, a plain gesture no one would mistake for triumph. “Let the record hold,” he said quietly. “And let the work follow.”

The clerk read the next: the creation of a council for work on spans, not only at table. “We seat craft at the same height as crowns.”

“Master of Lines,” Cael said, and looked to Brakka. “Do you take this seat?”

Brakka’s mouth tugged upward once at the corner. “I take it,” he said. “Under sky and under load. I will say where a line lies and where it tells the truth, and I will not lie for a house that wants its ships stacked pretty when the plates are wrong. Thin side first.”

A light rippled the square when laughter came and was held low. Cael extended a ring of brass scratched by hands that had gripped it often; it was not cut new for a symbol. Brakka slid it up to sit against the thick hinge of his thumb. He did not look at it again. He looked at the coils with the names tied through their tags and the clamps that would need seating by men who would be too tired later if the council erred now.

“Warden of Spans,” Cael said. “We restore the office as it was meant to be held: no house colours, no private tables, and a mandate to teach across every isle. Sir Garin Cloudfall.”

Garin stepped forward with his right arm still in the sling. He stopped before a rack where a hook□staff stood. It had no crest. He took the staff with his left hand and set it to the deck with its ferrule in a worn mark where other wardens had set theirs once. He half smiled, or maybe it was only the line of his mouth easing when he set that weight down. “Under sky,” he said. “I’ll teach short turns and two for listening until they can say it back without looking pleased with themselves.”

A handful of dock boys grinned and then wiped it off their faces when he lifted his chin.

“Keeper of Patterns,” Cael said. He did not look for a flourish to fit the title. “Lethriel Rainvein. You will keep the storm covenant and teach the edge without brightness. No rod to hearts unless the door breaks.”

Lethriel stepped into the clear between the crates and the brass rail, her throat wrapped, coil□harp case shut and strapped. She lifted one hand, palm flat to the square. The youths of the choir ring mimicked the motion without noise. She touched her palm to the rail and then set a slate on the table with a simple evening pattern drawn on it: a flat line with three measured dots.

“Cartographer□General,” Cael said. “Ori.”

Ori came forward lank and hollow□cheeked under his too□thin coat. The twine still held his cracked lens in place. He had a slate tied to his belt with chalk marks already forming the skeleton of routes the treaty now required. He took a small oiled slate seal from the clerk and did not smile. “Under sky,” he said. “I will keep drafts that serve feet and breath. If a curl tries to creep onto a line, I will wipe it away.”

“Under sky,” Cael said. He did not raise his voice. He let the breath of the square bring the words where they needed to go.

He looked to the Matriarch. She wrote a number and a word in her ledger and lifted her eyes just enough to meet his. There was no blessing. There was an instruction only her house ever used when the work mattered beyond appearance. Take less pride than your youth wants. Take more responsibility than your fear would let you refuse. He inclined his head.

The clerk drew a line across the board when the last clause was read. He blew once on the ink and set it to dry.

“Ring the bells,” Cael said.

The bell hands did as they had been taught at harbour muster before the lift. One, then two. Space, then again. The sound ran out over the water and along the planks and into the posts. The square transformed the way a line transforms when a count enters the feet. Men and women slung coils over shoulders and picked up wedges. A girl fetched a tar pot lid. A boy raised a placard reading FLAT THIN ONLY and handed it to the Keeper of Patterns with a look that said he understood, then dropped



his eyes lest pride push him to show.

Veyana remained where she was until the sergeant touched her elbow and she turned and went with the guard ring through the crowd. No one spat. No one jeered. She had signed. The treaty would work its own correction through days and hands.

Cael stood for a breath longer with his palm flat on the rail. He had argued his crown into a strap and three rings to remind himself and others that the weight of the office mattered only if it held something that mattered more. “Work,” he said, and he stepped down from the rail to check the mooring pins himself.

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The Fulcrum chamber held heat and cool and weight in ways that felt true to a body. Tamsin stood with her palm set to the plate under the cut words. She breathed on two and returned it on three. At each relay entry she stretched two by a half□breath to catch variance and then let three land. She did not count aloud when the rise of fear lifted in the chests of those who entered. She let the hum show them where to stand and how to move until the breath in them eased by imitation. A watch hand moved early on two; Tamsin held two a hair longer; the hum steadied.

Aldren’s lantern stood at the base rail with its cowl down. The guard rings were warm from the metal around them. A child would have reached to touch and learned something from skin to brass. The ward sergeant had set a simple board the length of a forearm between the lantern and the place where men would put their feet. He had placed it not to hide the light but to keep idle hands from testing what did not serve them.

The watch□relay came at the change between afternoon and evening, ten people with kit and a rhythm that matched the room. They had brought a tune for the change and left it with the guard outside. They

carried flasks, bread warm at the seam, and greens suited to high air. They set a low table just beyond the instruction plates, placed food and water on it, and then opened a book with lines drawn for two mouths per watch for each of the hours they would hold. A girl set her finger to the column that read NO SONG, block hand like the quay placards, and nodded at her own handwriting. On the first page a line read: No song in this room; hands and breath only.

Tamsin's stance had not shifted since the last relay. She had learned where weight could rest without lying about it. The skin of her palm had warmed where the plate answered her and had no blister and no open tear. Her eyes shone with a thin wetness from the high air and the concentration. When she blinked, it was slow, and the hum did not waver through her bones.

With a small escort, Cael stopped at the chalked bar the ward sergeant had set and unfastened his strap□crown to hook it on his belt. He did not enter with words the room did not need. He stepped as one who had been taught to carry weight without leaving it for others to take when he passed.

"Tamsin," he said. He dropped his voice until it held only clean function. "Grain lanes run. Lines sit true at the harbour's outer posts. The council of work sits under sky. We have made the open□span clause our measure."

Her breath rose and returned in the measure she had set the day before. She let it carry his words back to her without breaking their shape. "Good," she said when the third returned. It was a small word that fit in the room. "Keep the watch book. Keep the order: rescue, repair, ration, record."

"Under sky," he answered. He looked to the lantern and lifted his hand to touch its guard ring in salute. He did not touch it. He let the warmth he could feel on the air serve. "For what weight my word bears," he said, and did not try to dress the phrase. "Thank you." He said her

name. No title.

She did not lift her eyes from the place where stone, brass, and bone spoke to one another. She gave a small smile that warmed and then rested.

Brakka arrived behind Cael with two apprentices carrying lengths of brass-backed oak and a bag of quiet washers. He smelled of tar and a fine smoke that had nothing to do with fire and everything to do with craft.

“I won’t touch your plates,” he said, as he always said when he entered. He did it not because she feared him but because he feared his own hands might try to do too much. He gestured with his chin to the grating that had been set outside the plates to support the watch’s feet. “Three more to seat,” he murmured for the sergeant. “Two turns, stop. If the watch shifts weight on change, the grating will take it and not put a lie into the room. We will make the idle sway go away.”

The sergeant nodded, and Brakka showed with his bandaged wrist where the washer would sit. His voice had a slow patience. “No squeak,” he said. “No chatter. If we must move in the dark, this does not tell on us.” He laughed under his breath at his own fuss and then swallowed it because the room taught all who entered the scale of their sound.

Lethriel stepped to the threshold with two youths of the choir behind her. She wore her throat bandage clean and tight. She knelt and placed a slate where the sergeant’s board met the stone, just inside the chalked bar but nowhere near the plates. On the slate she had drawn a pattern for evening; a flat line and three dots spaced under it, then a second flat line lower to catch edge noise. She put her palm on the floor, then on her chest, then on the lantern case, making sequence without sound. The youths mirrored her and kept their breathing at the slow even pace she showed with two fingers.

Garin managed the relay, checking straps, checking where people placed their feet, and correcting with a hand rather than a shout. A boy

had come with the relay. He had gripped a strap as if it were the only thing keeping him from falling though the planks were sound. Garin leaned close to set the boy's eyes where they ought to be.

"Two is for listening," he said. "Three is your weight. You keep your mouth closed because you think noise keeps you safe. It doesn't. Doing the right work does. Watch." He lifted his palm at two, let it fall at three. The boy's shoulders lowered half an inch. That was enough for a first hour.

Ori stood by the chalk bar with his slate in both hands. The cracked lens gleamed a little in the thin light; twine made a line across the hair near his temple. He waited for Tamsin's next breath to fall before speaking.

"North□east run counts honest again," he said. "There is a lee at Green Pylon's shoulder that holds for six in every twenty. I have marked a wait symbol on the mast board at Vael and Windharp. I have written out the wait rules for those who don't read." He stopped. He had more, and he cut it down. "There is a window past Black Ring West that opens and closes to the same breath as this room."

Tamsin let both of them see the small lift of relief that ran across her mouth and stopped before it could become a show. "Good," she said again. "Make the marks plain. No flourish." Her eyes moved to the lantern, then to Lethriel's slate, then back to the plate.

A woman from the garden crew came with a tray of damp greens and set it where Ori had stood a moment ago. She looked at Tamsin with a steady face and then looked down to arrange the leaves. "These are quiet," she said to the sergeant, who would pass the words later to others. "They grow in thin air and don't want to be sung to. They drink by mist. We will keep them." She left, and the tray's rustle lived on the edge of hearing.

Cael stepped back at the sergeant's signal when the slate bearing the evening pattern was placed. He picked up his strap□crown and fastened

it without looking. He looked at the breath that had anchored much more than this room and set his hand to his breast strap. “We will keep spans open,” he said. “If I fail it, remove the strap from my head. Under sky.”

“Under sky,” the sergeant said, and wrote it into the watch book at the bottom of the page, square letters in the same block hand as the quay placards. The page would stay in the book whether the prince kept his oath or failed it. The page would outlast a man.

Tamsin kept her breath. The hum answered. Her eyes were wet and clear. The weight she held did not crush. It sat through her, the way a line sits through a post that was cut and seated by hands that knew why the job mattered. She set her shoulder blades against a fact of the world and did not move.

Outside, the bells had taken up the work□called cadence. In the chamber, the hand pattern on the slate held the edges even. The watch changed with no steps that told on themselves. Aldren’s lantern stood and did its true work without flame.

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The work□called cadence ran the posts; it matched her count across the gap.

Ori ran his palm along the mast board on Vael’s market court and left it there for a breath to feel the hum. It was present. Not alarm; work□bell. A reminder that the board under a body matters and that you do what you promised to do.

Vael had been a place of bad sound when the market span failed. It had smelled of fear and the sweet order of fruit crushed under boots. Today the air held hot copper from clamps and the iron tang of old nails pulled and set to new holes. Stalls stood in half the court. The other half held the training plank and the practice line. The bell clappers had been re□leathered.

A child no higher than Ori's waist stood with both feet on the line and arms raised too stiff. Garin stood near with his hook□staff grounded. His sling held his right arm as it had since the day the Zenith's rim swallowed the brave and careless in the same mouth. He said nothing at first. He let the child watch the line, then the post, then the coil. Then he said, "Two," and raised his palm, and then "Three," and lowered it and tipped his chin. The child wobbled on the last inch before the take and then held. Garin's mouth did a tight thing that might one day be ease.

The bells rang the work□called cadence. One, then two. A space long enough to adjust a rope slip without a man feeling his own panic push him. The sound went across the court and up the strakes to the rebuilt stalls. A woman looked up from a stall of bread and nodded to no one in particular and moved two loaves to the front because the boys who lifted clamps would come by hungry when their watch changed.

Prince Cael stood at the dock edge without the ribbon of guards that had once made a space around him as if he were a stalled boat that other boats had to move around. His strap□crown sat steady where it belonged: a reminder, not a throw. He kept his hands behind his back and watched the child align to the count. He let himself smile when the child's foot found the line on three and stayed there. The smile stayed small; the court remembered the thunder corridor and the man who had not lived to see this day.

Brakka took the weight for a moment when the child stepped past the midpoint and the line changed its whisper, the coil's tag in his hand to check it against the board mark his own hand had made. S□lay, brace□board. Annealed between second and third draw. No chatter. He put his ear close to the line but did not touch it. The sound pleased him. He let out one laugh, a clean small sound that had no scorn in it. "Good," he said. "Good craft for small feet. That's what this was for."

Lethriel moved her palms a fingerwidth and set a thin veil across the open corner of the court where a draft had gathered enough to unsettle a beginner. Dust fell in a settled way. A child's hair moved and then did not.

She did not speak. A youth at her side made the same motion, his face concentrated but not tight with the need to show. She tapped the back of his wrist and lowered his elbow a degree.

Ori took his clean oilskin and wrote at the top: FIRST DAY OF THE AGE OF BINDING. He did not put flourishes on the letters. He wrote the watch for the day: mornings with Garin's short turn drills; afternoons with pattern hands under Lethriel; evenings to inventory coil tags and retag the liars. He wrote the bell cadence and then wiped the extra dot his hand had made when the bells sounded again. He noted the four words, rescue, repair, ration, record, at the edge of his oilskin and left the public slate plain of them. He set the slate where any hand could read the hours, or any child could put a finger on a mark and ask his mother what that one meant later.

A runner in Windharp green with dust on his boots came into the court with a strap to his chest and raised his hand until Ori saw him. The boy came with the quiet of a man who had learned not to waste an arrival with noise.

"Watch note," he said. He passed a folded scrap to Ori. The ink had been pushed hard but the hand was steady.

Ori read it and did not hold it only to himself. "Witness steady," he said. "Eyes wet and clear." He held the note so that Garin, Cael, and Brakka could see the plain words, the watch sergeant's hand. He did not add to them. He left them plain. He set the note at the corner of the mast board under a nail and touched it once.

Garin's chin lifted and then lowered. Cael's hand went to his breast strap for one beat, then fell. Brakka set the coil tag back in place and moved his bandaged wrist across it as if blessing a new tool.

A child on the line looked toward the mast board and almost forgot his feet. Garin snapped his attention without anger. "Two," he said, "and then you take three. Don't make a story out of your step. Step." The child stepped. The line responded with the small sound of weight answered

honestly. The child's grin flashed and faded as he remembered to keep his joy small near the work.

The bells ran their cadence up the narrow lanes and along the rebuilt boards that had sagged and lied months ago. Banners had been mended. They did not stream. They hung with their patterns clean and their threads honest. The griffins on the outer strake shifted and settled. The dragons beyond them turned their heads and blew warm breath that did not bite. No one cheered. Men and women moved tools, shifted coils, counted breaths, and made lists. The sound of feet along rails matched a room far above where a single hand held the law to a counted breath.

Ori stood with his hand on the mast board and traced a small cross near a square he had marked where a tired man might stand too long. He wrote beside it: WAIT BREATH RETURNS. He looked out past the court to the lines between islands, now taut and true. The archipelago held. He let himself see what had been given and what was being asked. He raised his palm at two and let it fall at three for the child on the line. The child answered without looking for approval.

Evening gathered. The market stalls closed their shutters. The training plank emptied but the line stayed rigged, ready for morning. The last bell of the day sounded the soft double that called hands to go home, eat, sleep, and return. On a height no one could see from here, a woman stood with one hand on a plate and watched that the world did not lie. Down here, men and women kept faith with that hold by doing the small acts that would make tomorrow hold again.

The sky□archipelago lay steady in its bindings, and the air over the isles held a clear salt coolness. Banners mended and rang no false signal. Bells called to the work of keeping. The hum ran through posts, rails, and bodies and did not require speech. The bells kept the work□called pattern across distance.