



SORAN'ESH

M.L. SEBASTIAN

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*This idea started in 2018.
Without my family to stir my imagination,
this would have never been possible.*

*Kellie — I'm sorry my late nights on this disrupted.
But I did it. It's done.
Love you babe.*



The Continent of Citoren

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Introduction

*“United by purpose and bound by honor, the
Knights of Citoren shall stand as guardians of our
land. To the Shaman, I entrust the sacred artifact, a
testament to our alliance and the balance of power.”*

—King Elerion Vel Aeros—

Pronunciation Guide

Citoren (sih-TOH-ren)
Lysara (lie-SAH-ruh)
Drayven (DRAY-ven)
Gavric (GAV-rik)
Elyra (el-EYE-ruh)
Kareth (KAR-eth)
Malisohak (MAL-ih-so-hak)
Sylvaren (sil-VAH-ren)
Vel'thari (vel-THAR-ee)
Soran'esh (sor-AHN-esh)
Thal'as (THAL-ahs)
Aetheri (ay-THEH-ree)
Iskari (is-KAH-ree)
Lyskai (LIS-kai)

CHAPTER 1

The Unsettling Stillness

The branch was warm. Bark did not generate heat — not at this scale, not perceptibly — and yet Elerion's palm registered a diffuse radiance rising through the lichen, steady and unmistakable, like pressing a hand against sleeping skin.

King Elerion Vel Aeros crouched on a moss-veiled limb of a Whisperwood, forty feet above the forest floor, his bare feet pressed flat against bark he had known for six hundred years. He lifted his palm. Nothing on the skin; nothing visible in the lichen. He tried a patch farther along the branch.

Warm there, too.

For twenty minutes he had been tracing a drift in the Thal'as, the forest's bioelectric web. Usually he could read its signals without thinking: the fading at a junction, the strength where roots met, each pulse arriving when it should. Now the rhythm had slipped a fraction out of alignment. Wherever he checked, he found the same small error.

Below, two young Sylvaren were arguing. They were barely past their first century — children, really, though Elerion had learned not to say that aloud after it produced wounded silence followed by several days of aggressively competent performance.

“Here, Lyra.” Faelar jabbed a finger at a secondary branch. “Look at the leaf margins. Everything past this junction is starving. We need to prune it.”

Lyra laid her palm against the silver-tinged leaves. “And send all that flow through the smaller branches? They can’t carry it. You’ll starve those too.”

Elerion looked down at the discolored leaves. A local fault. Something he could trace to its source.

“Leave the blade where it is, Faelar.”

He dropped from the branch, landing between them with the care of someone who had fallen out of enough trees to develop strong opinions about footwork. Through the soles of his feet he felt the same faint drift.

Elerion pressed his palm against the trunk and let his own Thal’as attune to the tree. He followed the signal through the cambium, past Faelar’s branch and the smaller pathways Lyra wanted to protect, down to the first root divergence. There: two growth cycles out of phase, catching the flow between them.

“Come here,” he said. “Both of you. Put your hands on the bark. Tell me what you feel.”

They obeyed. Faelar’s brow furrowed almost immediately. “There’s a — it’s oscillating? Like a vibration, but irregular.”

“A Soran’esh. A shadow-knot.” Elerion traced a spiral of lighter fibers. “New growth winding across the old. The signal reflects at the junction and meets the flow coming down. Feel it catching?”

Faelar moved his hand lower. “There.”

“A standing wave. Energy trapped here instead of reaching the leaves.”

Lyra ran a finger over the swollen bark. “And the tree grows denser around it. To dampen it?”

“Yes. But that narrows the channel and makes the interference worse. More growth, more interference, until the junction calcifies and everything downstream starves.” He drew his curved Celestium blade, its edge faintly luminous. The river mineral resonated with the Thal’as; he could feel the trapped oscillation through the hilt. “Faelar, cutting the branch won’t remove this. Lyra, leaving it alone won’t preserve it. Watch.”

He inserted the blade beside the knot. The Celestium gave a clean tone as he excised the tangled growth. The canopy shivered. Beneath his other hand the oscillation collapsed, and the flow resumed.

He kept his palm against the trunk.

The junction was clear. He traced past it, through the smaller branches, waiting for the familiar rhythm to settle. The drift persisted. It came through the roots beneath his feet as well, too faint for him to tell where it began.

“Master?” Lyra was watching his hand.

He sheathed the blade. “You have, between the two of you, approximately one competent forester. I expect you to achieve that ratio individually by next season.”

Faelar looked like he was trying to decide whether he’d been insulted or praised. Lyra kept her hand on the bark.

“Go on,” Elerion said. “And trace the flow before either of you cuts anything.”

He waited until they had gone, then rested his forehead against the trunk. The shadow-knot was gone. The warmth remained. Behind the restored flow he could feel a second frequency, faint and unfamiliar, extending beyond this tree into the grove.

He straightened and listened. The Siloria — sun-singers — were calling from the branches, but lower than they should, the intervals drawn close. Wind stirred the Lorian leaves. Their little bell-notes sounded flat. The grove was still making all its familiar sounds; he could not find one at its proper pitch.

He listened for a sun-singer to return to its usual pitch. The next call was lower still.

He began walking toward the Draythyr River.

Beneath the Eldrin trees he passed a glyph of a sun ringed by leaves: the summer whose harvest had fed every community from the eastern hills to the western river basins. His fingers found the carving by habit. Such records usually held a little of the carvers' Thal'as, a charge that outlasted the hands themselves. Today it was faint. He pressed into the grooves, then took his hand away.

The Draythyr River appeared through the trees, its surface catching the mottled light. Elerion crouched at the bank and dipped his hand in.

The water felt heavy. It flowed freely between his fingers, yet seemed to press against them more than it should. He held his hand still in the current. Something dissolved in it, perhaps, too dilute to cloud the water. He cupped a palmful and brought it to his nose. Beneath the familiar mineral scent was the smell of a blade left too long in wet soil. He touched his tongue to the water. Bitterness — not the clean bitterness of tannins leaching from leaf litter, but something sharper, more astringent, with an aftertaste that clung to his soft palate and suggested chemistry he couldn't identify.

In six hundred years, he had never tasted anything in the Draythyr he couldn't identify.

He spat the water out, wiped his mouth, and stood. On the far bank, a row of Nia'lira — moon-blossoms — held their buds closed against the daylight, waiting for dusk. They looked normal. He found this less reassuring than he would have liked.

The gathering place was a small clearing ringed by thorny Keshar bushes, furnished with woven mats of Eilin reed. Three Sylvaren were already there when Elerion arrived: Aethal, a crafts-woman whose specialty was weaving living vines into structural tools; Morwen, a musician whose flute could coax overtones from the Eldrin trees themselves; and Elara, the elder healer, who had forgotten more about Citoren's plant pharmacology than most apothecaries ever learned.

"Elerion." Elara made room on the mat beside her. "The Thal'as in the herb glades has been fading since this morning. Across the whole spectrum. Aethal?"

Aethal held out a pale length of reed. "Cut at dawn. It's lost a fifth of its strength, perhaps a little less. And look at the color." She turned it in the dappled light. "They're losing their green."

"My flute won't hold pitch," Morwen said. She didn't elaborate. For Morwen, that was an extensive report.

Elerion sat and described the warm branch, the drift that had persisted after he cleared the shadow-knot, the metallic taste in the river. Elara reached for Aethal's reed and bent it between her fingers.

"A mineral seep would be strongest near its source," he said. "This was in every pathway I checked. Even the healthy ones."

"The herb glades too," Elara said. "I went farther in. It didn't diminish."

"Then it may be travelling through the Thal'as itself."

Elara stopped bending the reed.

They sat with that for a moment. Morwen turned her flute over, running her fingers along it. Aethal worried at the edge of a half-woven basket. A Keshar leaf detached from its branch and drifted to the ground. The breeze that carried it was several degrees cooler than the season warranted.

Then the ground moved.

A single blow came through the roots beneath them. Every branch in the clearing rattled; Siloria burst from the canopy. Half a second later the sound reached them, a deep, tearing crash from the forest's interior. Elerion had felt earthquakes. None had struck once and stopped.

Elara pressed a hand to her chest, checking her heartbeat. Morwen's knuckles were white on her flute.

"Northeast." Elerion stood. His pulse was hammering hard enough to obscure what he could feel through his feet. "Two, maybe three miles."

Aethal was already on her feet. "Something hit the forest."

"Yes." Elerion was moving. "Elara — gather your apprentices. The trees will need treatment. There may be injured animals."

Elara rose with the help of her vine staff. "And if we find worse?"

"Then we'll need the apprentices for something worse. Either way, bring them."

They split. Morwen and Aethal ran to raise the alarm among the nearer settlements. Elerion headed northeast, keeping just below a run. He watched the ground. Elara would have enough to do without treating him for a broken ankle.

Liras clusters trembled in the still air, their fronds chiming out of tune. Between the trees the light had turned amber. The metallic smell grew stronger as he walked, and he kept breathing through his nose, trying to place it. He knew the scent of Celestium deposits, of river sediment. Neither came close.

An Eldrin lay across the forest ahead, its trunk wider than Elerion was tall. It had stood for at least a millennium. The roots still gripped the earth, but the trunk had snapped twenty feet above them. At the break, heat had left the heartwood pale and dry. Browning traced the leaves of the fallen crown along the Thal'as pathways. He could read the network in the damage.

He pressed his hand to the stump. Frequencies crowded over one another, none holding long enough for him to follow. He pulled away. The bark was warm. That same wrong warmth.

A narrow ravine cut across his path, freshly opened by the concussion. A stream ran at its base, and the water was milky — calcium compounds leached from fractured stone, Elerion judged, plus whatever suspended particulates the shock had liberated from the riverbed upstream. The air felt thick and charged, though no storm had broken. He crossed on stepping stones with the automatic balance of long practice.

On the other side, a growl stopped him. It was low enough to vibrate in his sternum. Shal'kara emerged from the Keshar undergrowth, red eyes bright above lank, bristling bodies. Shadow howlers hunted by night and kept to deep cover. Here was a whole pack, in open ground, in the late afternoon.

He reached for the carved whistle at his belt — slowly, because Shal'kara tracked movement. The whistle produced a frequency that interfered with the howlers' echolocation, disorienting without harming. He had used it perhaps a dozen times in six centuries. All their knowledge of acoustics, and here he was with a dog whistle. He put it to his lips.

The crystalline note cut the air. The Shal'kara flinched and hissed, their heads turning toward sounds he could not hear. One by one they slipped back into the Keshar. Elerion lowered the whistle and allowed himself a breath.

The metallic scent coated his tongue. Around him the leaves were blanching. Flowers hung from stems that had lost the pressure to hold them upright. He listened past his own footfalls. Even the insects had stopped.

Then the tree line ended, and he saw it.

Something had punched through the canopy and excavated a crater thirty meters across. Smoke rose from carbonized earth. Shattered trunks radiated from the impact point, their broken ends charred and splintered. At the rim, the soil had fused into rough glass.

At the center lay the source.

Half-buried in the churned earth lay a mass of metal the size of a small dwelling. The waning sunlight moved across it in colors Elerion had never seen in any mineral; some seemed to come from beneath the surface. Small arcs hissed into the scorched soil. The air above it wavered. He extended a hand, expecting heat, and felt a tingle in his palm. The fine hairs on his forearm rose.

Several Sylvaren had reached the crater before him. Faellar stood among them, pale. Beside him Lyra had clenched both hands at her sides.

Near the rim, Elara knelt beside a patch of Anar'a, the harmony blooms. Their petals usually fitted together in precise interlocking shapes. Now the edges curved away from one another at angles Elerion had never seen a Citoren plant produce. Nothing was torn. Elara lifted a petal for him to see. It glowed a dim, bruised purple.

“Look at the veins.” Elara turned the petal. They forked almost as they should, then departed from the familiar pattern, as though the plant had been made to follow two plans at once. “This grew in the last hour. The impact didn’t bend it into this shape.”

“The metal?”

“It’s sending something through the Thal’as. Instructions, if these are anything to go by. The blooms are growing where it tells them to.”

Elerion followed the altered veins with his eyes. Each fork was joined to living tissue. The bloom had supplied its own growth; the network had told it where to put it. There was nothing foreign for the forest to reject.

“Look.” Faelar pointed to a dead Siloria on the ground. Its feathers were ash-gray, bleached of every other color. A faint violet light remained in its eyes. Lyra crouched and cupped it in her palms, then flinched and almost dropped it.

“It’s warm,” she said. “The body is warm. It’s been dead — I don’t know how long, but the rigor is full. It should be cold.”

That same warmth, in the small body between her hands.

He approached the metal and held his hand an inch above a dark, matte patch. The tingle sharpened until it was almost painful. Small arcs leaped to his skin and grounded through him into the earth. He kept trying to read the sensation as heat. His nerves would give him nothing he could name.

Elara pulled on protective gloves — heavy leather treated with Celestium dust, a crude Faraday cage for the hands — and pressed her fingertips to the metal’s surface. The gloves singed. Dark burn marks appeared near her knuckles. She pulled back and studied the blackened leather.

“Celestium should have shielded me.” Elara held out the singed glove and turned it toward the light.

Elerion looked at the blade at his belt. That morning he had used the same mineral to restore a tree's flow.

The smell of scorched earth and uprooted trees could not cover the sharp metallic reek. At the rim, Sylvaren arriving from the surrounding settlements gathered close enough for Elerion to hear them:

“...we should excavate it, remove it from the forest entirely...”

“...or bury it deeper. Let the earth contain what we can't...”

“...the ancestors carved warnings about sky-fallen metal. This isn't the first time...”

Elerion listened. Excavation, burial, the ancestors. He could offer no better answer.

He knelt and crumbled a fistful of soil. The impact's heat had driven out the moisture; it had probably killed everything living in it as well. He rubbed the dry grains between his fingers. This ground would have to begin again.

“Elara.” He stood, brushing the sterile dirt from his hands. “What's the propagation rate?”

“It seems to move as fast as the Thal'as itself,” Elara said. “Using the same pathways.”

“Then it's already everywhere the Thal'as reaches.”

“Yes.”

Ninety minutes since the impact. At native propagation speed, the signal could already have reached every connected root and branch.

But the branch had been warm before the crash.

Elerion tried to fit that into the sequence. The grove, the river, Elara's failing herbs — all before the ground shook. They had heard the arrival of the metal. He could no longer assume they had witnessed the beginning of its effects.

Faelar swallowed. “What do we do? Can we — purge the signal? Filter it out of the network?”

“I don’t know what would filter it,” Elerion said. “Destroying the object might release more of whatever it’s sending. Leaving it here lets it continue.” He looked at Elara’s gloves. “We need to learn what we can handle.”

Lyra set the dead Siloria gently onto a bed of leaves. “We have to protect the forest,” she said. Her voice was steady, though her hands were not. “It’s our duty. Our life.”

“Yes,” Elerion said. “It is.” He had nothing reassuring to add.

“I’ll pull the ancient records,” Elara said. “If the glyphs describe a real event, perhaps someone recorded what they tried. Even what failed would help.”

“I’ll map the crater and the damage beyond it,” Faelar said. “See where it stops. If it stops.”

“I’ll catalogue what’s changed,” Lyra said. “Plants, birds — everything we can find. We need to know what the signal is doing to them.”

Elerion nodded. Faelar moved off along the rim. Lyra knelt beside Elara’s blooms, careful where she put her hands.

The first stars emerged above the broken canopy. Their light struck the alien metal and fractured into spectral patterns that moved across the surface like something alive. The gathered Sylvaren stood at the crater’s rim, some weeping, some rigid with anger, all of them staring at the thing that had fallen into their world without invitation or explanation.

The Thal’as shuddered through Elerion’s bare feet. He had known its slow pulse all his life. Now a second rhythm pressed against it, out of phase, gaining speed.

Through his feet he could feel the forest relaying the signal, distorted at every junction. He needed to feel it at the source. Elara’s scorched gloves lay beside the blooms. He looked at them once more, then set two fingertips against the metal.

Energy crackled against his skin, sharp and cold. Beneath the static, something repeated. He held contact long enough to feel it return — the same intervals, too regular to be noise. At his touch the sequence changed, then resumed, as precisely as a system registering an input.

He withdrew his hand. The tingle faded slowly from his fingers, as though the metal were reluctant to release the connection.

Around him, the forest held its breath. He waited for the two rhythms to settle. Would the forest find a balance its people could survive?

He suspected that answering it would be the work of more than one lifetime. Fortunately, or perhaps unfortunately, the Sylvaren had lifetimes to spare. Whether the forest did was another matter.

• • •

In the days that followed, Elerion had the main mass brought beneath the oldest Eldrin, along with the fragments the handlers could recover. They used Celestium-edged tools and insulated wrappings, working in short shifts. Some still came away with symptoms the healers could not explain. In the sanctum the Shamans could keep watch. He hoped the dense roots would divide the metal's output among enough living paths to spare them the worst of it. He had no proof that they would. They might give the signal a better way into the forest.

He entrusted the vigil to the Shamans because their work reached into the spirit realm as well as the physical forest. They might notice a change he could not. He told them what he had felt before the impact, and what had happened when he touched the metal. Then he left it in their care.

Moss returned to the crater, then ferns and saplings. Leaf litter covered the fused soil. Within a generation, a traveller could cross the site without recognizing it; within three, only the Shamans and the keepers of the glyph-records could place it exactly. The telling changed as it passed into song and carved bark. Elerion became the king who had touched the sky-metal and chosen to understand it. The forest grew over the scar. Beneath the oldest Eldrin, the Shamans kept listening.

CHAPTER 2

A Thousand Years Later

The forest had grown over the crater. It had not grown over the Withered Plain.

That wound came later. In the decades after the star fell, fungi bloomed out of season and the groundwater near the impact site acquired a taste no one could account for. A century later, scouts returned from the northern forest with reports of Umbraliths. They disagreed about what they had seen. The creatures occupied darkness, seemed to move within it, and resisted any description that another witness could confirm. Then whole hamlets emptied. Their buildings stood unburned. No one came back from the trees.

The Sylvaren formed the Knights of Citoren and armed them with Celestium from the Draythyr River. The native mineral resonated with the Thal'as, reinforcing its signal where a blade cut through corrupted tissue. Such wounds sealed cleanly. The Knights knew that much from using it. They knew considerably less about the material that had fallen from the sky.

Cornered by Umbraliths in the ancient groves, they used it anyway.

They poured their magic and the forest's living essence into a large shard of star-metal, trying to carry its energy through the Thal'as. Witnesses described the brilliance as seeing without eyes.

The Umbraliths vanished. Everything else within a twelve-league radius vanished with them. Where trees had stood, ash settled on black earth, and the forest's signal stopped.

For decades nothing grew on the Withered Plain. Animals that crossed its boundary lost their way and circled back, as if they could no longer hold the ground ahead in mind. Beyond the edge, the Thal'as carried nothing. Around it, surviving roots slowly found other paths.

Three generations later, someone tried again. More carefully, they said.

By the Draythyr, Sylvaria rose from the living roots of Eldrin trees. Mages coaxed wood into spirals around polished stone, allowing for the trees' preferences; a structure that fought its Eldrin seldom kept its shape. Nia'lira draped the terraces. River water passed through courtyards where algae changed color with the Thal'as current. Residents read the pools as they read the weather. Crafters made resonance fountains whose harmonics revealed faults in the network, and floating lanterns whose paths followed the local flow.

The palace enclosed the oldest Eldrin and the sanctum beneath its roots. The largest star-metal fragments remained there under the Shamans' watch. Chambers filled with their records. Above, an academy taught the Knights and forest mages how to work with Celestium and the Thal'as. Its graduates could map a signal's path or diagnose a failing junction. Questions about star-metal went below, to the Shamans. Their answers rarely survived an attempt to repeat the experiment upstairs.

For a time the patrols found little to trouble the city. Then a flood swept the Draythyr's lower banks. Its water gleamed like oil and left a residue that scorched farmland. Roots grew upward

through the deposits. Bark wound in spirals opposite to the usual grain. Many blamed the buried artifact; no one could explain how it had agitated the river.

Fael'in began to sicken, their symptoms changing between examinations. The hollow chambers that gave Liras trees their voices warped as the wood grew. Black pigment spread through leaves whose cells were still alive. In the Enchanted Wood, more trees fell silent each year, and the Anar'a blooms faded toward grey.

The Purifiers offered an answer people could act on: destroy the foreign metal and let the forest heal. Their following grew with each failed crop. The Traditionalists argued that a thousand years of contact had bound the artifact into the Thal'as. Pull it out now, they warned, and the forest might lose the very arrangement keeping it alive. They fought in council, in academy pamphlets, and sometimes in the remote groves. Neither faction could show what would happen if it got its way.

Beneath the palace, the largest fragment continued to emit a signal the Shamans could match to no season, moon cycle, or change in the city above. Roots had grown around it for a thousand years. The Shamans could measure what it emitted. They had yet to explain why.

• • •

By King Theron's reign, Sylvaria's beauty could no longer disguise what was happening beyond its walls. His only child, Princess Lyrian, had grown up with the decline. A healthy forest belonged to the stories she was told. The Thal'as itself was as familiar as her own balance: she felt its pathways and gaps in her body, often before she understood what they meant.

She knelt at the edge of the Withered Plain, one hand flat against the cracked, chalky ground.

The boundary should have been clean. Four hundred years of surveys agreed: at the edge of the Plain, the Thal'as stopped.

Except today, she was picking up something on the other side.

The pulse was too regular. No hesitation, no small variations as it passed through living tissue. She waited for the next one. It came at the same interval, as evenly as a metronome beside a heartbeat.

She pulled her hand back and stared at it. Her fingertips tingled with residual sensation, a faint pins-and-needles that faded over several seconds. The ground where she'd touched it looked the same as it always had: grey, chalky, dead. But the signal persisted at the edge of her awareness like a word she couldn't quite remember.

She wore a simple tunic of finely woven green cloth, her silver-streaked dark hair tied back in a braid. At her side hung a practice sword, its Celestium edge catching the flat light. The Celestium felt normal — its familiar resonance a low warmth against her hip, like a tuning fork pressed to the bone. Whatever the anomalous signal was, the Celestium wasn't reacting to it. The Celestium should have caught any change in the Thal'as. Its silence left her with a pulse she could feel and no way to place it.

"You know," came a familiar voice from behind her, "most people visit scenic overlooks. You come to the ecological disaster site."

Lyrian didn't turn. "Faelan. How long have you been watching?"

"Long enough to watch you kneel in toxic soil and commune with dead ground." He moved to stand beside her, the interwoven Celestium plates of his Knight's armor catching the light in segmented blue-silver patterns. His distant ancestor Faelar had been Elerion's pupil. The name had survived in the histories. Faelan seemed happier when no one mentioned it. "Find anything?"

“Something that shouldn’t be there.” She stood, brushing chalk from her knees. “There’s a signal coming from inside the Plain. Periodic. Regular. Not Thal’as.”

Faelan crouched beside her. He could not sense the Thal’as directly, but years spent studying its channels had taught him where a signal ought to travel, and where it ought to fail.

“Not Thal’as,” he repeated. “But you sensed it through your Thal’as connection?”

“Through it, or alongside it. I’m not sure. It’s like hearing a conversation through a wall — you know someone’s talking, but the wall is filtering everything except the rhythm.”

He studied the chalk without touching it. “The boundary layer here — the Knights’ surveys always showed it as a hard cutoff. Signal on this side, nothing on that side. If something’s propagating through the dead zone, it’s using a medium the Thal’as doesn’t interact with.” He paused. “Or it’s using the absence of the Thal’as. The dead zone isn’t just empty — it’s a gap in the network. Gaps have their own topology.”

Lyrian looked at him. “That’s either very insightful or complete nonsense.”

“In my experience, those aren’t mutually exclusive.” He straightened. “We should log this. And you have a summons.”

A messenger hawk had descended while they spoke, landing on a nearby stone with a precision that suggested the bird, at least, was having no difficulty navigating. A small parchment was tied to its leg. Lyrian unrolled it and scanned the neat Sylvaren script.

“My father. Urgent news. He wants me back at the palace.”

Faelan’s brow furrowed. “Then we should go. You can tell him about the anomaly.”

“I can tell him I sensed something inexplicable in a place known for being inexplicable. I’m sure that will be exactly the kind of actionable intelligence the war council craves.”

“You’d be surprised. Gavric’s been pushing for years to get someone with your sensitivity to do a systematic survey of the boundary. He thinks the dead zone is changing.”

“Gavric thinks everything is changing. He’s been a Knight for six centuries. At that point, change is the only constant you trust.”

As they left the Plain, the pulse weakened in abrupt steps. Lyrian counted her paces between each drop. There were rings of reception here; she would map them later.

• • •

Ten leagues north, Sir Gavric and the forest mage Elyra followed their patrol route through Citoren’s undergrowth.

Gavric had spent six hundred years being professionally difficult to kill. He moved through the undergrowth with scarcely a glance at his footing, Celestium plate worn over leather. Long exposure to the Thal’as had left the metal opalescent. Metallurgists still argued about whether the change went deeper than the surface. Gavric knew the older blades held their edges better. He had left the rest of the argument to them.

Elyra walked beside him in a cloak of living leaves, her Liraswood staff producing a faint green luminescence that served as both light source and diagnostic instrument. The staff’s glow shifted in response to local Thal’as conditions — brighter in healthy zones, dimmer where the signal degraded. She’d been reading these shifts for four centuries, and she was good enough at it to notice when the staff did something she hadn’t seen before.

It was doing something she hadn’t seen before.

“Gavric.” She stopped walking. “Look at this.”

The staff's glow cycled between bright and dim at regular intervals. Elyra knew the local oscillation of a shadow-knot. This reached through the whole staff, repeating with the precision of a signal lamp.

What could impose that interval on the Thal'as?

They had set out before dawn to investigate reports from the northern fringe. Now sunlight slanted into a small clearing where a family of Fael'in drank from a stream. Every animal froze at once. Their ears locked forward, pupils wide. Elyra held still. Fael'in ran from danger; she had never seen them stand and wait for it.

A moment later they bolted, every body turning in the same instant.

Gavric watched them go. "Something made them do that."

Elyra nodded, gripping her staff as its oscillation continued. "The Thal'as feels... modulated. As if something is imposing a pattern on it. Like —" she searched for the right analogy, "— like someone shouting through a pipe that was designed to carry whispers."

They advanced cautiously and found the source within minutes. A patch of disturbed earth, roughly three meters in diameter. The soil had taken on a grey tinge that Elyra recognized immediately — the same dead coloration found at the Withered Plain's boundary. But they were ten leagues from the Withered Plain. This was healthy forest. Or it had been.

The smell reached them as they approached: ozone, hot copper. Elyra knew Celestium's cold river-stone scent. This was the smell of something heated far beyond any temperature the grey ground ought to have held.

Elyra knelt. Her staff pulsed harder, keeping the same interval. When she reached into the Thal'as, a signal drove back through her own, too strong for the forest's rhythm to hold. She recoiled. The native pattern was still there, buried beneath it.

Spiraling lines crossed by three diagonal slashes marked the soil. Elyra could find no cut, no scorched edge. Grains were settling into the lines as she watched.

"It's active," Elyra murmured, and she didn't mean the soil.

Gavric rested a hand on his sword. The grey soil recalled the Plain, but this damage was advancing without a detonation. He watched another grain shift into the spiral.

"We need to report this to the King," he said. "And I want Lyrian to see this. Her sensitivity might tell us things our instruments can't."

Elyra traced the outline without touching the soil. Eyes closed, she followed the imposed rhythm deeper into the Thal'as. A pull caught her there, vast enough to make the familiar network seem a few roots in open ground. She could feel no limit to what lay beyond it.

Then the signal cut out, and her staff went dark for three full seconds before resuming its normal glow. In those three seconds, the forest around them was absolutely silent.

When Elyra stood, her legs were unsteady. Gavric offered an arm without comment.

"Let's go." She kept hold of his arm.

As they left, Elyra looked back once. Grains of soil were still settling into the spiral.



For eight hundred years, the palace mages had negotiated with the Eldrin. A corridor required persuading a root to grow elsewhere; a chamber needed space the trees might reclaim the following season. Rooms changed dimensions. Passages bent. The palace cartographer's office was the busiest department in the government, and they were never caught up.

Within a grand hall formed by intertwining trunks, King Theron sat upon a throne carved from living oak — one of the few elements of the palace that had been shaped by hand rather than grown by request, and the Eldrin had never entirely forgiven this. The high-ceilinged chamber smelled of polished bark and fresh flowers, which was the Eldrin's way of saying they were in an agreeable mood. When the trees were unhappy, the chamber smelled of tannins and wet soil.

Theron had spent the morning reading reports of the forest's decline. Each ended where the last had: no cause established, no remedy found.

Lord Valerius stood before him in dark robes embroidered with silver. He wore no Celestium. His authority came from knowing which expert to quote, and when.

"Your Majesty," Valerius said, "the outlying provinces have passed the point where reassurance will suffice. The crop failures are real. The sickness is real. The Purifiers are offering explanations — wrong ones, certainly, but explanations nonetheless. We are offering patience, and patience, I regret to inform you, does not feed families."

Theron's fingers drummed the arm of his throne. "And what do you propose, Valerius? Something specific this time, rather than another diagnosis of my shortcomings?"

Valerius paused. “Specific. Very well. The Shamans have spent a thousand years studying the artifact and produced volumes of documentation that, by their own admission, they do not fully understand. I propose we engage the academy’s material scientists — the Celestium metallurgists, the Thal’as cartographers — and give them access. Fresh eyes. Different models. The Shamans think like theologians. We need engineers.”

Theron could see the merit in it. He could also see Valerius waiting for him to acknowledge that.

“And the Purifiers?” Theron asked. “Your proposal would involve increased interaction with the artifact. They’ll claim we’re doubling down on the very thing they want destroyed.”

“The Purifiers,” Valerius said, “will oppose any action we take that doesn’t involve throwing the artifact into a volcano. Governing by their approval is not governing — it’s paralysis wearing the mask of caution.”

A herald announced Princess Lyrian before Theron could answer. She entered at a dignified pace, though the chalk on her knees and the breath she was trying to steady suggested she had been less dignified outside. Faelan followed a step behind.

Valerius inclined his head, his expression resetting to neutral with practiced speed.

“Father,” Lyrian began, “I’ve come from the Withered Plain. I need to report an anomaly — and I received your summons.”

Theron exchanged a glance with Valerius. “Gavric and Elyra are en route with their own findings. The artifact may be stirring. What anomaly?”

“A periodic signal propagating through the dead zone. Non-Thal’as frequency. Regular spacing. I couldn’t identify the medium.”

Valerius raised an eyebrow. “And you’re certain this isn’t simply the boundary’s normal behavior, perceived with greater sensitivity? The Plain has always been anomalous. That is, quite literally, its defining characteristic.”

“The Plain’s anomaly is the absence of signal,” Lyrian said. “This was the presence of one. They’re different phenomena.”

“All the more reason,” Valerius continued, redirecting smoothly, “to expand our investigation beyond the Shamans’ traditional methods. Your Majesty, the Princess’s observation supports exactly what I’ve been arguing. We have new data. We need new approaches.”

Lyrian had not even finished her report. “Lord Valerius, I haven’t offered an interpretation yet. I’ve stated an observation. Those are different things too.”

Faelan, from his position by the door, developed a sudden intense interest in the architectural details of the ceiling.

Theron raised a hand. “Enough. Lyrian, your observation is noted and will be included in the briefing. Valerius, your proposal for expanded access will be discussed in council — with the Shamans’ input, not as an end-run around them. Until we have Gavric and Elyra’s report, I will not sanction any change in approach. We’ve suffered enough from haste.”

Lyrian bowed her head and waited for Valerius to leave.

Valerius bowed to the king. He did not look at Lyrian as he withdrew.

Theron beckoned his daughter closer, lowering his voice. “Lyrian. I see the look. You want to investigate further.”

“I want to understand what I sensed. The signal wasn’t random. It was structured. That implies a source with organization. And if there’s an organized source inside the dead zone—”

“Then we need to know what it is before anyone else decides what to do about it.” Theron rubbed his forehead. “I won’t forbid you from investigating. But tread lightly. And take Faelan.”

“I was planning to take Faelan.”

“Good. He has the useful quality of being difficult to kill and the even more useful quality of occasionally talking you out of things.”

Lyrian almost smiled. “I’ll be careful, Father.”

“You’ll be thorough,” Theron corrected. “Careful would mean staying here. We’re past careful.”

Outside, Faelan fell into step beside her. “That went better than I expected.”

“Valerius tried to annex my data.”

“He does that. What’s the plan?”

“Keeper first. Then the sanctum. If there’s a new signal propagating through the dead zone, the artifact might be the source — or it might be the receiver. Either way, Keeper will have been monitoring it.”

“And if Keeper gives us the same non-answer they always give? Something about thresholds and deep time and patience?”

“Then I’ll ask more specific questions. Keeper responds to specificity. It’s vagueness they find unworthy of engagement.”

“You’ve cracked the code.”

“I’ve been working on it for twenty-three years. I’m a slow learner.”



Two guards stood at the entrance to the inner sanctum. Beyond them, smooth stone gave way to roots compressed over centuries into a living wall. The seal was older than the present palace. The guards stepped aside for Lyrian. Faelan followed her to the threshold and stopped.

The air was damp, its temperature steady. Lyrian knew those conditions from other chambers underground. Here she had the sense of entering a room full of sleeping people, although she could see no one yet.

“I’ll keep watch out here,” Faelan said. He had once told her that the sanctum had more corners than its walls allowed. She had thought of that every time she entered since.

Old colonies of fungi lit the roots. They had grown here under the artifact’s emissions, and their light had defeated every instrument Elyra brought to measure it: no two agreed on the wavelength. “Spectrally impossible,” she had called it. Lyrian could see well enough by it. That had never seemed much of an answer.

The largest fragment of the crashed vessel rested on a dais of Eldrin roots. The tree had grown them around it without prompting. Color shifted beneath the star-metal’s surface, hues Lyrian could see but could not hold in mind once they changed. Its mass remained constant. Its temperature stayed exactly two degrees below the surrounding air, however warm or cold the chamber became. Those were the only measurements on which the instruments agreed.

Near it knelt the Shaman known only as Keeper.

Emerald thread caught the fungal light in Keeper’s robes. White hair escaped the hood above a carved wooden mask whose expression altered with the angle: grief from here, serenity when

Lyrian moved a step to the side. Through its narrow openings, Keeper's eyes found her. A faint shimmer hung around the robes, leaving their edges difficult to place against the roots.

Some said Keeper was as old as the monarchy itself; others insisted they were a succession of shamans who inherited the same title, the same mask, the same unsettling gaze. Keeper answered to either account without correcting it.

"You're early," Keeper said, without turning. An echo reached her before the words did. "I expected you this afternoon. The signal is stronger after the sun passes zenith."

Lyrian stopped. "You know about the signal."

"I have been monitoring it for eleven days. It began as a single pulse every four hundred and thirty-seven seconds. As of this morning, the interval has compressed to three hundred and twelve seconds. The progression is not linear." Keeper rose. Lyrian saw the movement begin, then found them standing, as though she had looked away during the rest. "You sensed it at the Plain's boundary?"

"Through the ground. Through my Thal'as connection, but the signal itself isn't Thal'as."

"No. The Thal'as is merely the medium through which you perceived it — the way glass is the medium through which you perceive light. The signal originates in the star-metal." Keeper gestured toward the artifact. "Not this fragment specifically. All of it. Every piece of star-metal in Citoren — the fragments in the sanctum, the shards distributed through the forest, the traces dissolved into the Draythyr's mineral bed — they are oscillating in phase. Synchronized. The star-metal is communicating with itself."

Lyrian looked down at the floor, at the ground beyond it in her mind. She looked at the artifact. Its surface iridescence was doing something she hadn't noticed before — the color shifts were periodic. Regular. Matching a rhythm that she now realized she'd been sensing all day, below the threshold of conscious attention.

She stepped closer to the fragment. The Celestium in her practice sword responded first — a warming along the blade's edge, the native mineral reacting to the proximity of its alien counterpart. Not alarm. More like recognition. The Celestium had been forged in the Draythyr, where star-metal traces had leached into the mineral bed over centuries. She wondered whether those traces had something to do with the warmth. Celestium had been useful long before the star fell.

She stopped two meters from the artifact. The Thal'as, ordinarily continuous at the edge of her attention, began to break up. Signal, gap, signal, gap. The star-metal's pulse was cutting through the Thal'as like a strobe through ambient light.

At one meter, tightness spread from her sternum along her ribs. Her pulse quickened. She tried to take a full breath and found the muscles along her spine had braced without her noticing. Her palms were damp.

She knew fear. This came close, but beneath the constriction was the almost-familiar feeling of a face she could not yet name.

She raised her hand toward the star-metal's surface. Keeper watched, motionless.

At contact, the room inverted.

The roots stayed where they were. Beyond them, stars opened in arrangements she had never seen above Citoren. The distance between them seemed to pass through her as time, millennia compressed into less than a second. At its far end, something became aware of her. She felt its attention begin to turn.

She yanked her hand back. The room snapped to normal. Her fingertips were numb, a deep cold that faded over several seconds, the star-metal's unique thermal signature lingering in her nerve endings.

"It recognized me," she said. Her voice was steady. That troubled her more than shaking would have. She waited for the fear to catch up, wondering whether the calm was hers.

Keeper's mask dipped in what might have been a nod. "You carry Elerion's lineage — a bloodline that has been immersed in the Thal'as for a thousand years. The artifact has been immersed in the Thal'as for the same duration. You have been marinating in the same medium. It would be strange if there were no recognition."

The phrasing was odd. Lyrian latched onto it. "You said 'recognition,' not 'resonance.' Resonance is a mechanical process. Recognition implies —"

"Agency. Yes." Keeper turned back to the artifact. "I have spent lifetimes — and I use the plural advisedly — studying this material. Star-metal does not behave like matter. It does not behave like energy. It behaves like something that has preferences. When Celestium is introduced —" Keeper gestured to Lyrian's sword, "— the star-metal's behavior becomes more coherent. More directed. The Celestium lattice acts as a kind of grammar, giving structure to the star-metal's otherwise chaotic expressiveness. Alone, star-metal is noise. With Celestium, it approximates language."

"And the alloy?" Lyrian asked, thinking of the armor in the deeper vaults, the relics of the Knights' experiments. "When they're combined?"

"When they're combined," Keeper said, and for the first time Lyrian heard something in that echoing voice that sounded like caution, "the interaction produces properties that neither material possesses alone. The star-metal's conductivity aligns with bioelec-

tric signals — the same signals that carry emotion, pain, and intent through a living body. The Celestium filters and focuses this alignment. The alloy doesn't just resonate with the wearer. It reads them. And it writes back."

They watched the artifact through another pulse. Its iridescence contracted, then spread. Lyrian counted the interval against the rhythm Keeper had described: three hundred and twelve seconds. If the progression held, it would be shorter tomorrow.

"What changed?" she asked. "Why now? Why after a thousand years of relative dormancy?"

Keeper was quiet for long enough that Lyrian began to wonder if the question had been heard. Then: "Perhaps nothing changed here. Perhaps something changed there." The masked face tilted upward, toward the stone ceiling, toward the sky beyond it. "The star-metal fell from somewhere. The signal is being answered."

Lyrian stepped back and folded her arms. "I want to know what's answering," she said. "We keep arguing about what the artifact means. Now there's something to follow."

Keeper's robes whispered against the floor as they turned. "If you walk that path, child, walk it with your instruments calibrated and your assumptions visible. The old tragedies began with people who were certain they understood what they were doing. Be uncertain. Uncertainty is not weakness — it is the only honest response to a system this complex."

Lyrian held the masked gaze. "I promise to be uncertain. Rigorously, methodically uncertain."

Something in Keeper's posture shifted — amusement, perhaps, though with the mask it was impossible to confirm. "That will do."

• • •

Faelan pushed away from the corridor wall when she emerged.

“Well?” he asked.

“The star-metal is communicating with itself. All fragments, synchronized. The signal is accelerating. And Keeper thinks something external is answering.”

Faelan stared at her. “So. An alien intelligence calling home, and something picking up.”

“That’s the alarming interpretation, yes.”

“Is there a non-alarming interpretation?”

“Not that Keeper offered.”

They walked in silence through the colonnade. Evening light filtered through the Nia’lira vines, casting blue-shifted shadows that moved with the Thal’as current. The effect was usually beautiful. Tonight, Lyrian noticed that the shadows moved a fraction of a second before the vines did, as if the light were arriving from a slightly different version of the present.

She catalogued the observation. Added it to the growing list.

When they reached the courtyard, Gavric and Elyra were already there, conferring with King Theron and a cluster of Knights. Gavric’s face carried the expression of a man delivering news he’d rather not have confirmed. Elyra held her staff protectively, its glow cycling in that same oscillation pattern.

Gavric inclined his head as she approached. “Your Highness. We found grey soil in the northern patrol zone. The same metallic smell. Elyra watched a symbol form in the earth.” He indicated her staff. “Show her.”

“Could it be the same signal I sensed at the Withered Plain?”

Elyra held out the staff. “Compare the intervals. Ours may be stronger because of star-metal under the site.” Lyrian waited through its cycle, then nodded. The spacing matched.

“Then it could be the same source,” Faelan said.

“Yes,” Elyra said. “But I don’t know what it wants. The native signal is still there beneath it. Something is making the forest carry a different pattern.”

Theron watched the light swell and fade along the staff. “Can it make the forest do anything else?”

Lyrian told them what had happened in the sanctum — the artifact’s response to her touch, the perceptual expansion, the impression of vast distance and answering attention. She described only what she had felt, leaving out the explanations she could not support. No one in the courtyard spoke when she finished.

Valerius, who had materialized at the periphery with his characteristic timing, stepped forward. “All the more reason —”

“Lord Valerius,” Theron said, without looking at him, “if you say ‘all the more reason’ one more time this day, I will have the guards escort you to a comfortable room where you can compose a written proposal instead.”

Valerius closed his mouth and bowed.

“I’ll call a council meeting at dawn,” Theron announced. “Shamans, Knights, academy researchers. I want to hear what each of you has found, and what you can show the rest of us.”

Gavric nodded. “About time.”

As the group dispersed, Lyrian caught Faelan’s eye. They would leave before the council met. She already had her father’s permission to investigate; the signal was giving her less time than he knew.

That evening, soft moonlight draped Sylvaria in silver. In her chambers — a suite grown from the branches of an old Eldrin oak, whose walls breathed with the tree's slow respiration — Lyrian sat by a window carved from living wood, cross-referencing three sets of data by candlelight.

The first: the historical Thal'as surveys, going back six centuries. Baseline signal strength, propagation speed, attenuation rates at key junction points. She'd requested these from the academy archives and received them with the archivist's note that she was the first person to check them out in forty years.

The second: Keeper's emission logs, opened to her that evening. The pulse was new; the increase in output was not. It had been rising for at least thirty years, well before her birth. She ran a finger down the dates. The Shamans had kept the figures. They had not made them public.

The third: her own notes, including the reception rings she had mapped at the Plain. These she trusted least. The Vel'thari literature warned that heightened sensitivity could distort perception, and she had felt calm when she ought to have been frightened. How much of what she had recorded belonged to the signal, and how much to what it was doing to her?

Outside, the Liras sounded through the dark, their thin voices falling short of the ranges recorded in the old surveys. Lyrian listened, cross-referencing the harmonic quality against the survey data. The degradation was consistent. Linear. Predictable.

Except — she frowned, returning to the star-metal logs — the artifact's output increase was not linear. It was exponential. Two curves, one declining linearly, one increasing exponentially, and they were about to intersect. If the star-metal's output overtook

the Thal'as, would the pattern Elyra found in the clearing spread through the whole network? She traced the curves to their crossing again.

She set down her pen, then picked it up and checked the figures again.

A quiet knock. She opened the door to Faelan, wearing a cloak over his Knight's armor. "I've gathered supplies," he said, holding up a small pack. "Sample collection vials — Elyra's design, Celestium-lined, should isolate whatever we collect from Thal'as interference. A Celestium dagger for channeling. Rations."

"You brought rations."

"Gavric's first rule: never investigate an unknown threat on an empty stomach. You lose a full standard deviation of cognitive function after sixteen hours without food, and most bad decisions in the field are hunger decisions."

"That sounds like something Gavric would say."

"It's a direct quote. He made me memorize it during my second year."

She took the pack. "We leave before sunrise. While the council is convening, we'll investigate the site Gavric and Elyra found, and at least two others where the old surveys record similar irregularities. I want to know what they look like now."

Faelan nodded, stepping inside. "I'll stand guard. Get some rest."

As he turned to leave, Lyrian spoke. "Faelan. The curves intersect. Star-metal output versus Thal'as baseline. If the current trends continue, we're looking at weeks, not months."

He stopped. Turned. He kept his hand on the door. "Weeks until what, exactly?"

"Until the star-metal's signal becomes stronger than the forest's own. What Elyra found in that clearing could happen everywhere."

Faelan looked past her at the open logs.

“Then we’d better not waste the morning,” Faelan said. “Sleep. I’ll wake you at fourth bell.”

After he left, Lyrian stood at the window and compared the stars with those she had seen through the artifact. Some constellations almost fitted. Others would not fit from any angle she could imagine. She was trying to recognize another sky.

She returned to the figures. Whatever had looked back at her from that other sky, these were the changes she could put before her father: the weakening Thal’as, the shortening intervals, the few weeks before one signal overtook the other.

And unseen, in the sanctum’s depths, the star-metal pulsed — three hundred and nine seconds now — answering something no Sylvaren instrument could detect, on a frequency no Sylvaren model could explain.

CHAPTER 3

The Invasion Begins

Gavric woke to silence, and silence in a forest meant something had stopped everything else from making noise.

He opened his eyes and listened for the missing sound. Bird-song and insects were gone; nothing stirred in the canopy. Even the pressure of the Thal'as in his bones had faded. He had woken to enough sudden silences to know what a predator could stop. This reached beyond any one creature's hearing.

He rose beside the Lorian glade where he and Elyra had made camp after returning from their report to Theron. His joints resisted; he worked them loose. He had slept in his Celestium plate. It was cool against his skin, though the Thal'as usually kept the metal at his body's temperature.

He breathed through his mouth, then his nose. No pollen, no damp fungal scent from the floor of the glade. The air tasted flat, like water stripped of its minerals.

Elyra stood with her Liras-wood staff upright, its faint glow flickering without a rhythm. Yesterday it had kept an interval she could count.

"Gavric," she whispered. "Even the wind is holding its breath."

Dawn reached the leaves above them. Dew hung at their tips, heavy enough to fall, but he watched several drops without seeing one let go.

He waited through several breaths. No bird resumed its call. Elyra's staff kept flickering.

They set off. Twigs cracked under their boots, loud enough to make Gavric place each step more carefully. A storm would have stirred the canopy. Fire would have sent the small animals fleeing. Nothing moved.

The Anar'a grove had gone grey. Normally its petals carried shifting pinks and blues, each bloom responding to the local Thal'as. Elyra bent to one whose petals still held their shape. All the color had left it.

She touched the bloom. Her staff brightened, then nearly went out. A hollow resonance lingered through the wood.

Gavric set a hand on her shoulder. "Overnight." He had noted the grove on patrol yesterday. Twelve hours ago its colors had been clear.

A few steps later, Fael'in stood rigid among the trees, their weight caught on legs that should have taken the next stride. Their pupils were wide. Gavric counted more than thirty breaths in a minute. They could not keep that up for long.

Elyra knelt and reached toward the nearest animal. Its eyes followed her hand. The rest of it never moved.

"Yesterday they broke free," she said. "These are still held. They're endurance runners. They should be running. Look at its eyes — it can see me. Something is preventing it from moving."

"Let's move," he said. "If they're broadcasting something that can do this to wildlife, I'd like to know what it's doing to us."

Gavric flexed his sword hand. His fingers obeyed. He could feel the ground through his boots, distinguish every edge of the leaves ahead. Yet the fear he expected was missing. Perhaps he had put it aside, as he had learned to do in combat. Perhaps something had put it aside for him.

He couldn't tell which. That bothered him more than either possibility alone.

As they pressed on, the light turned coppery green. Gavric looked at his own hand. The warmer colors had drained from his skin, as though some part of the sunrise had failed to reach it.

Elyra looked up through a gap in the branches. "The sky," she said.

Clouds met at sharp angles overhead. Jade light spread through them from within. Elyra followed one luminous edge until it joined another, too straight and too deliberate a line for wind to have made.

"That's not weather," Gavric said.

"No." Elyra's staff had stopped flickering. She raised it toward the canopy, then lowered it to a root. No light. Whatever Thal'as remained was too weak for the staff to register.

They could hear their own breathing.

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In Sylvaria, the morning stopped one trade at a time.

Hammers struck Celestium with a dull clank. Smiths drew back from their anvils. Without the clear ring that told them how the metal would yield, they could not judge the next blow.

Shopkeepers came out beneath the wrong light. In the courtyard pools the algae had turned blue-grey, a shade absent from every scale used to read the Thal'as.

Families sheltered inside. Rooms grew cold, then warm. Water faltered in the channels. The living-wood walls had stopped their slow movement, and the stillness offered less comfort than the families had hoped.

In the training yards, Seren watched her novices lose their form. A blade swung too far; another fell short. Their Celestium swords still had weight and edges, but the response they had learned to feel through the hilts was gone.

“Keep your stances,” Seren said. “If trouble is coming, you’ll need form you can trust when the tools stop cooperating.”

High above the street, Elder Rowan stood on a balcony that no longer swayed. For five centuries she had felt the Eldrin breathe beneath her feet. She reached into the Thal'as and found only a fading echo.

She leaned over the balustrade. The small enchantment that would carry her voice to the street took twice its usual effort. Without the network to bear it, the cost fell on her.

“Prepare yourselves. Something stirs in the sky — something not of this world.”

• • •

Some distance from Sylvaria, Gavric and Elyra saw the sky come apart.

Lines of violet, gold, and jade crossed the coppery haze. They shifted without losing their angles to one another. Gavric watched a whole section of cloud move like a fitted piece sliding into place.

“Those look like stress fractures,” Elyra said. “The atmospheric boundary is being subjected to a shear force. Something on the other side is applying pressure at specific points, and the sky is cracking along the stress lines.”

Gavric watched the shapes converge. “Stress fractures in what?”

“In whatever separates here from there. The boundary between Citoren’s local spacetime and —” She stopped. The theoretical framework she was reaching for didn’t exist in any Sylvaren textbook. “I don’t have a model for this.”

The lines converged. Gavric felt a vibration build in his chest plate and spread down the armor to his hands. The Celestium warmed past comfort. He had felt it react to star-metal before, but never to something so far above him.

Then the sky tore.

A seam opened overhead. Light from its center arrived out of step with the light along its sides. Gavric tried to follow an edge and could not make it join the sky beyond. Looking away did not clear the flaw from his vision.

Then came the roar. What remained of the Thal’as carried it through him as a high whine, sharp enough to blur his sight. Elyra clapped a hand over one ear; it made no difference.

Metallic shapes descended through the seam, changing color too quickly for Gavric to hold their outlines. Vessels. No sails, no wings. They came down without any visible effort to slow themselves.

The largest vessel touched down. A tremor crossed the soil and rang in Gavric’s teeth. Nearby Eldrin trunks groaned as interference spread from the landing point through their roots.

The hull unfolded along seams he had not seen. Inside was the same shifting iridescence. Star-metal. He had seen a fragment resting in the sanctum; here it carried a vessel and opened to let its occupants out.

Figures emerged.

They had two arms, two legs, proportions close enough to Sylvaren that Gavric began looking for weapons. Then an unmoving figure's armor rippled. Material slid across its chest while the body beneath remained still. Beside it, another suit thickened at the shoulder.

Smooth masks covered their faces. Emerald light shone from narrow visors, and Gavric's chest plate warmed sharply. The resonance pulled against itself, two notes he could not bring into accord.

They stepped forward together. The same stride, the same turn of every masked head. Gavric waited for one to adjust its footing. None did.

Malisohak.

He knew the name from raid reports. This did not feel like remembering it. The word arrived whole, with a force that made him close his teeth.

Elyra flinched beside him. She'd received the same transmission. "That was — they just —"

"I know." Gavric gripped his Celestium sword. The metal was warm, almost hot, its resonance field destabilized by the proximity of the Malisohak's star-metal technology. "They made us hear it. Through the star-metal, perhaps. The artifact reaches people through the Thal'as. Their equipment may do the same."

He was guessing. The captured messages had named weapons and movements. They had not prepared him for a word he could not keep out of his own mind.

Where the Malisohak walked, brown earth greyed. Grass blades curled into spirals, still growing as their roots rose to the surface. Elyra drew back. She had watched grains of soil rearrange yesterday. This crossed the glade at a walking pace.

More vessels came down beyond the trees. Their landings sent interference through the roots, and fires opened inside the Eldrin trunks. Bark split along the grain. Sap hissed out through the cracks, burning before it reached the ground.

The forest screamed.

The dying trees drove a surge through the remaining Thal'as. Elyra staggered, clutching an arm that had no burn on it. Gavric caught her. His own armor was nearly too hot to bear.

Within an hour, at least five hundred vessels had come through. Arcs leaped from the rift into the surrounding cloud. The ozone caught in Gavric's throat.

He estimated twenty to fifty Malisohak from each vessel. The landings spread across the forest instead of gathering around Sylvaria. If the spacing held beyond what he could see, they were laying out a grid.

"We can't let them establish infrastructure," he said, more to himself than to Elyra. "If they're setting up a star-metal resonance grid across the forest, the Thal'as network is finished. We need to disrupt their landing zones. We need to warn Sylvaria."

Blood ran from Elyra's nostril. She wiped it away, set her feet apart and raised the staff. "We fight. But we need to understand what we're fighting."

They didn't have to wait long for a lesson.

The nearest Malisohak patrol — five figures moving in their characteristic unified stride — had detected them. Or, more precisely, had detected the Celestium Gavric was carrying. The star-metal armor on the lead figure began shifting color, cycling through its iridescent range and settling on a deep crimson that oriented toward Gavric like a compass needle finding north. The Celestium's resonance field was a beacon in the star-metal spectrum.

Elyra acted first. She channeled what remained of the local Thal'as through her staff, conjuring thorned vines that erupted from the soil — the forest's immune response, weaponized and directed. The vines wrapped the lead Malisohak's legs with the crushing force of root systems that could crack stone over decades, compressed into seconds.

The armor turned green where the vines held it. Through her staff, Elyra felt their signals cease at the points of contact. The roots farther out were still alive.

"It's telling the plants to die," Elyra said. "Through the Thal'as."

The Malisohak raised a staff-like weapon toward her. Light gathered at its tip. The beam struck before she could turn aside, throwing her against an Eldrin trunk. A vibration tore through her ribs. She tried to breathe and could not tell which part of her chest would no longer move.

Gavric charged. His Celestium blade, despite its destabilized resonance, was still the sharpest thing on the field. He slashed at the lead Malisohak's midsection and connected.

Light broke along the cut, bright in one place and dark beside it. Under his blade the shifting armor turned rigid. A fracture ran through the fixed patch.

White fluid seeped from the wound and vanished in the air. Gavric had time to see it shine, then it was gone.

He drove the blade deeper into the rigid patch. Green lines branched through the armor. The Malisohak gave a sound that seemed to come from its whole body; Gavric felt the answering vibration in his plate.

The Malisohak laid a hand over the wound.

Armor flowed in from either side, covering the fracture. The green lines faded beneath a fresh iridescent layer. Less than four seconds.

“They regenerate,” Gavric gasped, falling back.

A second Malisohak struck at him. As he parried, he saw that the repaired patch was dimmer than the armor around it. It did not shift as readily. The Celestium had left something behind.

Six more Knights of Citoren burst into the glade, drawn by the energy discharges. They formed a wedge, Celestium weapons catching the tarnished light. A young Knight — barely twenty seasons, his armor still bearing the bright sheen of recently forged Celestium that hadn’t yet developed the opalescent patina of age — hurled a spear at the wounded Malisohak. The spear took it in the left shoulder, and the impact produced the same interference phenomenon: crystallization radiating from the contact point, luminous green fracture lines, the Malisohak staggering.

White fluid escaped. At the wounded Malisohak’s sound, the other four quickened their advance.

The spear came free and the armor flowed over the hole. Two dull patches now, where Gavric and the young Knight had struck. The Malisohak lurched as it turned.

“The Celestium works,” Gavric shouted to the other Knights. “It doesn’t kill them outright, but it degrades their armor’s adaptability. Hit the same section repeatedly — stack the crystallization. They can’t fully repair Celestium damage.”

The problem was surviving long enough to deliver those concentrated strikes.

A beam struck the young Knight who had thrown the spear. His Celestium pauldron shattered with a discordant ring. Where the beam reached the exposed shoulder, muscle locked beneath unburned skin. He fell with his eyes open, trying to move. Gavric could see the effort in his face.

Gavric hauled the young Knight behind the formation’s defensive line. “It’s neural disruption,” he called to Elyra, who was constructing a Thal’as barrier — a harder task now, with the network degraded, requiring her to manually sustain what the forest normally provided passively. “Their weapons target the nervous system. The Celestium armor blocks it partially — the resonance creates interference with their signal. But if the armor fails, the wearer’s motor system gets hijacked.”

Braced against the trunk, Elyra lifted her staff. Each breath caught in her ribs. A dome of green light rose between the Knights and the next volley, flickering under the impacts. Iridescent patches spread where the bolts had struck. She forced more energy through the staff, sweat running into her eyes.

“Fall back!” Gavric roared. “We need to reach Sylvaria. We can’t win a war of attrition in the field.”

The Knights retreated through Elyra’s barrier, which held for thirty seconds — long enough to buy distance, short enough that the iridescent patches had consumed nearly half the structure’s surface by the time it collapsed. The Malisohak advanced through

its remains, their armor flashing crimson as they absorbed the barrier's residual energy and incorporated it into their own systems.

As he ran, Gavric looked back. The attackers' armor brightened where the barrier failed. Had they taken its energy? He had just watched Elyra exhaust herself holding something they could use.

He looked for the young Knight among the retreating helmets and could not find him. Behind them, the glade burned from within, Eldrin trunks splitting along their grain as their sap ignited. Knights who couldn't move lay motionless, their nervous systems locked by Malisohak weapons, conscious and unable to flee. The forest's scream in the Thal'as had diminished to a whisper — not because the distress had lessened but because the network carrying it was being consumed.

• • •

The smaller settlements fell with a speed that exceeded even Gavric's worst projections.

The Malisohak didn't besiege. They irradiated. Each landing zone became an epicenter of star-metal frequency propagation, the field expanding outward at a rate that correlated with the density of star-metal deposits in the local soil — traces from the original crash, distributed over a millennium of geological process. Where the soil was rich in star-metal residue, the field propagated faster, co-opting the deposits as signal amplifiers. The forest was being turned against itself, its own distributed star-metal contamination serving as the infrastructure for its occupation.

Mages hid villages behind phantom undergrowth and false slopes. Malisohak patrols swept hand-held instruments toward the cover. At each pulse, a little of the illusion faded. Through thinning leaves, families saw the masks turn toward them.

Families fled. Some made for Sylvaria. Others ran deeper into the forest, toward the oldest Eldrin stands where the Thal'as had historically been strongest. But the Thal'as was failing everywhere, the signal degrading faster in the presence of the Malisohak's field, and the deep forest was no longer the refuge it had been. The oldest Eldrin were the most affected — their massive root systems, which served as the Thal'as network's primary conduits, were being co-opted first, the way an occupying army seizes communication infrastructure.

More than five hundred vessels now occupied the canopy, their star-metal hulls creating a mesh of overlapping resonance fields that was, effectively, a replacement network — a star-metal Thal'as, alien in origin and alien in purpose, being laid over the native system the way a new road grid is laid over demolished farmland.

Running through the smoke, Gavric tried to count the vessels again.

He could not keep them apart in his mind. A hull glimpsed between two trunks might be one he had already counted, or another beyond it. The fires were real. So were the Knights who had fallen. But something had put a name into him without asking. What else could it put there?

He kept running. Sylvaria needed what he had seen, including how little he trusted the count.

• • •

In Sylvaria, the transition from unease to siege took the space of a held breath.

Lyrian and Faelan had meant to leave before sunrise. They had still been inside the city when the sky opened. Now Princess Lyrian stood on the palace balcony, the fires visible now as orange

lines drawn across the horizon, backlit by a sky that churned with geometric disturbance. Black smoke rose in columns whose spacing was too regular to be natural — each column marking a landing zone, each zone a node in the emerging star-metal grid.

Keeper stood beside her, staff gripped with white-knuckled intensity, eyes distant behind the mask's slits as though perceiving the catastrophe through a lens that showed not just what was happening but all the ways it could have happened differently. The air around them carried its characteristic shimmer, but today the shimmer was agitated — flickering rapidly, as if Keeper's threshold state between physical and spiritual existence was being stressed by the same interference that was degrading the Thal'as.

"We always knew something might come through that rift," Keeper said. Their voice carried its usual temporal smearing, but the echo was sharper now — less like reverberation and more like duplication, as if two versions of Keeper were speaking the same words from slightly different moments. "The star-metal fell from somewhere. Somewhere is a place. Places have inhabitants. The only question was always when, not whether."

Lyrian's hands gripped the balustrade. The artifact shard she wore as a pendant — a sliver of star-metal set in a Celestium frame — was warm against her sternum. Not the warmth of Celestium resonance. The warmth of star-metal activation. The alien material was responding to the Malisohak presence, and through the Celestium frame's imperfect filtering, she felt the response as a spreading heat that blurred the boundary between the pendant's temperature and her own. Where did the metal end and her skin begin? She couldn't tell, and the inability to tell produced a sensation that was not pain, not comfort, but a wrongness at the interface between self and not-self.

“They’re using star-metal technology,” she said, forcing her attention outward. “The vessels, the armor, the weapons — it’s all derived from the same material as the artifact.”

“Of course it is.” Keeper’s mask turned toward her, and for a moment the expression carved into the wood was unambiguously grim. “The artifact fell from their sky. They have come to collect what they lost. Or to finish what they started. The two motives may be indistinguishable.”

Below, three million citizens occupied the spectrum between controlled evacuation and outright panic. The palace courtyard was a study in competing priorities — families seeking shelter behind living walls, supply wagons gridlocked in thoroughfares, children’s cries forming a continuous high-frequency layer beneath the deeper sounds of barked orders and horn signals. The Knights of Citoren assembled in the main avenue, their Celestium armor forming a blue-silver line that flickered in the tarnished light, each Knight aware that the metal they relied on was operating at diminished capacity.

Theron was in the war council chamber. Lyrian wished she could reach him, but the courtyard below was filling and she was the only member of his family the people there could see.

Keeper placed a hand on her shoulder. Through the carved mask: “The artifact in the sanctum beneath the oldest Eldrin resonates with their presence. The crash site where it first fell healed over with new growth long ago, but its pulse remains — deeper now, and synchronized with whatever signal these beings are transmitting. We stand at the threshold of prophecy. Whether you cross it as an actor or an observer depends on the next hour.”

Keeper’s hand was solid on her shoulder. She steadied herself beneath it.

She descended into the courtyard. The scene was chaos organized by desperation — every action purposeful, every purpose uncertain. She hoisted herself onto a chunk of carved root, the improvised stage placing her above the crowd's eyeline.

She had no speech ready.

“People of Sylvaria. What's happening is real. The fires are real, the invaders are real, and I won't pretend I understand what we're facing, because I don't. Not yet. What I know is this: we have walls, we have weapons, we have each other, and we have a forest that has survived a thousand years of things it shouldn't have survived. We defend. We learn. We adapt. And we do not let the fact that we're afraid mean that we've already lost.”

An older blacksmith raised his hammer. Archers began checking their strings. At the courtyard entrance, people turned to make room for those still coming in.

Faelan appeared at her elbow, blood streaking his forehead from a wound she hadn't seen him receive. His armor's Celestium plates bore iridescent patches where star-metal energy had impacted — the same degradation pattern Gavric had observed. He'd already been in contact.

“Outer wards are compromised,” he reported. “Their weapons degrade the Celestium reinforcement in the walls. I watched a section of the northern rampart lose its resonance over about ninety seconds — the star-metal frequency just... ate through the enchantment. The wall itself is still standing. It's still Eldrin heartwood. But without the Celestium reinforcement, it's just wood.”

“How fast are they advancing?”

“Hard to say.” He hesitated, and she recognized the hesitation: he was questioning his own assessment. “My perception might be compromised. The star-metal field does something to cognitive

processing — everything feels faster, more overwhelming than it might actually be. I counted twelve Malisohak at the northern contact point. That's a patrol, not an army. But it felt like being overrun."

Lyrian looked at Faelan's wound. He had faced twelve of them and felt an army. Gavric would be returning with his own count. She needed both before she could trust either.

"We assume our perception is unreliable," Lyrian said, making the decision aloud. "Every assessment gets checked against at least two other observers before it becomes strategy. Nobody makes decisions alone under their field."

Faelan nodded. "Gavric's going to love that protocol."

"Gavric's going to be the first person to confirm it works. He's been operating in compromised Thal'as conditions all morning."

She beckoned the city guard's captain. "Barricade the main avenues. Choke points — we funnel them. Post archers on elevated positions. Concentrate your fire. Make each target take several hits before you move to the next. We need to see what holds and what breaks."

"Your Highness." The captain bowed. "We'll set it up."

A vessel passed overhead. Jade projectiles struck the upper ramparts, breaking the Celestium reinforcement. Released light streamed from the failing enchantments into the impact points. The bolts brightened as the walls went dim.

Bark and splinters rained into the courtyard. People screamed and ducked against one another. Lyrian bent over the carved root, protecting her head. She could not separate the fear the impact deserved from what the pendant drove through her. She needed them moving before the next volley.

She turned to the enchanters. “Use the barriers to buy time. Raise one, fall back, raise the next. I think they’re taking energy from whatever we hold in place. Don’t feed a barrier once that iridescence begins to spread.”

The lead enchanter paled. “They... absorb our magic?”

“They convert it. You saw the last strike brighten as the wall’s enchantment failed. I think it used what the wall released. Think of it as —” she searched for a model they’d understand, “— as fire consuming wood. The wood slows the fire while it lasts. But feeding more wood doesn’t put out the fire.”

The enchanter nodded, face set. “Disposable barriers. Layered retreat. We can do that.”

“This is it,” Faelan said, drawing his Celestium sword. The blade’s resonance had steadied somewhat since the morning — or he’d adapted to the altered baseline. Either way, he held it like he intended to use it.

From the walls, Sylvaria’s defenders launched their response. Arrows with Celestium heads — the metal’s resonance making each arrowhead a tiny interference device — arced toward the passing vessel. Some struck and produced local crystallization effects on the hull’s surface. Others were deflected by the vessel’s active star-metal field, which shunted them aside with casual efficiency. The city’s ward dome, maintained by the collective effort of the mage corps, flexed under repeated energy impacts — each impact introducing iridescent degradation that the mages could see spreading through their enchantment like an infection through tissue.

In the palace, Theron and his advisors argued about the artifact. Some pushed for immediate deployment — the star-metal fragment in the sanctum was the largest in Sylvaren custody, and if it could be harnessed, it might counter the invaders’ technology

with the same frequency. Others remembered the Withered Plain and calculated the cost of getting it wrong. The debate was not resolved. It couldn't be resolved with the available data. They were making decisions about a system they didn't understand against an enemy they had known through scattered raids and captured messages, under a perceptual field that might be distorting every assessment they made.

From the courtyard, Lyrian could see the light failing along the ward dome. Whatever her father decided, it would have to reach them soon.

She pressed her hand to the pendant at her chest. The star-metal shard was hot now — not painfully, but insistently, a warmth that pulsed in sync with the Malisohak vessels' energy signatures. The Celestium frame filtered the sensation into something her nervous system could process without being overwhelmed, but she could feel the star-metal reaching through the filter, trying to make contact with something deeper. The Vel'thari mechanism, she realized. The alloy's ability to read and write bio-electric signals. Even this small fragment, framed in Celestium, was attempting to interface with her emotional state. She felt it as a pressure behind her sternum — not fear, not confidence, but potential. The pressure of something waiting for a response.

She tried to hold one question at a time. Where could the archers concentrate their fire? How long did a barrier buy them? What had Faelan actually counted? Each answer gave her something to do with her hands and voice.

The pendant cooled. Marginally. The star-metal's pressure eased, as if her focused state had given the alloy something coherent to work with, and the coherent state required less amplification than the chaotic one. The Celestium filter hummed at a frequency she felt in her teeth — a clean resonance, the two materials briefly keeping time together.

Three seconds later, another volley hit. Heat drove through the pendant's frame. For a moment every direction seemed to contain a threat. She held to the count Faelan had given her: twelve at the northern contact point. Twelve, until someone could show her more.

She let go of the pendant. She could examine it when no one was shooting at her.

At the city's walls, the first Malisohak ground troops disembarked. Their star-metal armor flickered as they advanced, testing the ward dome with directed bursts that produced expanding iridescent patches in its surface. The mages poured energy into repairs and watched the energy be consumed. Disposable barriers, Lyrian had said. The mages began implementing the strategy — thinner barriers, quickly raised and quickly abandoned, each one buying ten seconds of delay while feeding the minimum energy to the attackers.

Distant horns signaled more landings at the outer districts. The fire line on the horizon had advanced. The columns of smoke were closer now, their spacing still unnervingly regular, the grid pattern becoming visible from the palace elevation.

Keeper appeared on the balcony above the courtyard, having moved from the main balcony to a position overlooking the defenders. Their staff was raised, and they began chanting in old Sylvaren — not an enchantment but a resonance invocation, using their voice to generate Thal'as-compatible frequencies that the degraded network could amplify. The effect was subtle: a slight warming in the Celestium weapons of the Knights below, a marginal stabilization of the mages' barrier enchantments. Not a weapon. A signal boost. Keeper was using centuries of Thal'as attunement to temporarily reinforce what the Malisohak's field was degrading.

“For Citoren,” Keeper murmured, and the words carried through the thinned Thal’as with more clarity than any enchanted amplification. “For the Anar’alla.”

The phrase spread — not magically, but humanly, person to person, Knight to archer, mage to citizen. “For the Anar’alla.” The forest’s Great Harmony, invoked not as a prayer but as a frequency: a bioelectric signal generated by three million nervous systems simultaneously focusing on the same intent, producing a collective pulse that, for a moment, outpaced the star-metal’s interference pattern. The Celestium in every weapon, every armor plate, every enchanted structure resonated with it. For a moment — one shimmering, unstable moment — the native system reasserted itself.

The warmth failed. The next bolts struck, and the mages gave ground again. Lyrian had felt the change, however brief. The native rhythm could still reach them.

Lyrian raised her sword. Across the courtyard, Faelan met her eyes and lifted his own.

“For the Anar’alla.” Her voice held. She had no time to ask why. The defenders answered.

At the gate, the defenders braced for the next advance. Behind them, families pressed toward shelter. Lyrian kept her sword raised until the nearest archers had found their targets.

By dusk the archers had fallen back to the inner stair. Keeper caught Lyrian at its foot.

“Come. There is something you can wear.”

The equipment room beside the stair had lost its door. Beyond it, the Vel’thari lay in an open chest, underarmor folded beneath the plates. Keeper set his staff against the wall and lifted the breastplate. An empty mount sat over the sternum.

Lyrian looked down at her pendant.

“The frame fits here,” he said. “The rest gives it more living paths to work through. That will not spare you what they carry.”

A bolt struck above them. Dust fell into the chest.

“Will it let me keep standing?”

“I hope so. I cannot promise what standing in it will cost.”

She set her sword within reach and pulled the underarmor over her smoke-stiff clothes. Keeper worked the clasps while she steadied each plate. Then she lifted the pendant over her head. He took its frame off the chain and seated it in the breastplate.

The clasp closed. A cold line ran from her chest to both wrists. Somewhere above them a root beam split, and she folded around the pain of it.

Keeper held her elbow. “We can still take it off.”

Through the doorway she could hear the archers calling for room to retreat. She waited until she could straighten, then put on the second gauntlet.

“Help me with this one.”

Keeper fastened it. She picked up her sword.

The sky burned. The forest screamed in frequencies only the connected could hear. And in the sanctum beneath the oldest Eldrin, the artifact pulsed — two hundred and eighty-seven seconds now — keeping time with something vast and approaching, its star-metal surface reflecting a sky that was no longer entirely Citoren’s own.

CHAPTER 4

Escape and Revelation

The palace was dying, and it was dying wrong.

Lyrian had grown up inside these walls. For twenty-three years she had known which arches creaked in the rain, which corridors flowered first. Whisperwood timbers had been coaxed into those arches over generations, living bark fused with quarried stone, Thal'as threaded through every beam. Now the sap boiled inside the sealed grain. Each timber split with a wet crack, and the exposed heartwood flashed blue-white.

Each break arrived in Lyrian's chest as a sharp cold spot. The Vel'thari conducted it straight through her, like a tooth being pulled from a jaw that was not hers. Six major beams in ten minutes. Her body had counted.

A seventh beam snapped above them. Embers rained down. Whisperwood smoke was sweet, almost floral, until it caught at the back of her throat. She pressed against a blackened wall. The Vel'thari tightened around her ribs, and beneath her gauntlet the living bark sweated luminous sap.

Steel clashed deeper in the palace. Knights were falling back through the corridors, Malisohak squads advancing behind them through the fire.

Her heart had slowed. She could not tell whether she was growing calmer or the Vel'thari was doing something to her. Either way, she could move.

"Princess, we must leave." Keeper stepped around a collapsed archway, leaning on his staff of living Liras wood. Soot streaked his face. "They are in the east wing and the north corridor. Listen."

Another crack, low beneath their feet.

"The root cellar. Perhaps eight minutes before the central span falls."

Eight minutes. The grand staircase crossed beneath that span. The eastern passage ran under the failing gallery.

"I'm with you." Her voice was steadier than she expected. The fear was still there, banked like coals behind the cold of the armor.

Keeper led her into a disused antechamber behind a tapestry. The woven golden age of Sylvaria was burning from the bottom up, yellow and green smoke streaming from the dyes. He brushed the cloth aside. The wall beyond appeared seamless.

He pressed three stones. Living wood groaned against its grain, and a hidden door slid open. Cool air carried the taste of limestone and old fungus.

"Inside." His staff cast a pale glow into the throat of a cramped stone tunnel. "Hurry."

Lyrian looked back once. Broken suits of armor lay among scorched rugs. Over them the ceiling sagged. Another cold spot bloomed beneath her breastplate.

She ducked through the passage. Behind her, Keeper triggered the closing mechanism, and the door ground shut. The clang of falling beams resounded through the walls. For one breath she was certain the tunnel would collapse on top of them. It held. The stone here was quarried, not grown. With every step away from the living walls, the palace's distress faded in the Vel'thari.

She coughed until her chest hurt, one trembling hand braced against the stone. Her knees would not quite hold still.

The palace was dying above her. She could no longer distinguish its distress through the Vel'thari, and that absence was worse than the pain had been. Like going suddenly deaf in the middle of a conversation.

Keeper's staff flickered, casting enough light for them to see each other. "Princess," he said. "Listen to me. Whatever is happening above us, we cannot stop it from here. Our path is below. The artifact calls."

Lyrian nodded. Swallowed. "All right," she managed.

Don't look back. If you look back, you will stop moving, and if you stop moving, you will not start again.

• • •

They descended rough-cut steps. In the staff's light, Lyrian kept seeing other corridors: flowers growing from the walls, children chasing Sola sprites between the courtiers. She still tasted the smoke.

Escape. She put her foot on the next step.

The passage narrowed. Childhood stories placed these escape routes after a siege five centuries ago. Rough stone, no living wood: whoever had built them had wanted walls that could survive the loss of the forest.

The Vel'thari answered Keeper's staff with a faint phosphorescence. An echo arriving in the wrong color. Beyond it, darkness.

Her heart hammered again. The armor drew tight and cold, and its Celestium veins flickered out of time with her pulse. She tried to slow her breathing. If the buffer failed, the star-metal would give the fear straight back to her, stronger.

She did not want to find out what that felt like.

Should I have tried to rescue my father first? Or helped the knights hold the gate? She pressed a hand to the cold wall, trying to ground herself. Keeper had insisted this path was their only option. She had to trust him. *I have to believe that by doing this, I am saving more than just myself.*

At the next narrowing, both shoulders scraped stone. She stopped. There was no room to turn, and suddenly she needed to turn. The armor tightened with her chest.

Breathe. Slowly. Through the nose.

She breathed. The armor eased a little. She edged forward.

Some passages curved like blown glass, stone softened by old druidic work; others bore the marks of chisels. She twisted sideways where she had to. Each scrape of the star-metal sent sparks up her spine.

She wanted to ask Keeper how much farther. Her throat was too raw from smoke to form the words.

She listened behind them. Nothing followed that she could hear.

They went down a steep, crumbling staircase. At the bottom her boot plunged into stale water, and the armor turned the cold into a shudder that nearly buckled her knees.

"Princess," Keeper finally spoke. "Are you managing?"

She took a moment. "I will manage. Are you?"

He nodded. "These passages have not been maintained for generations. The old accounts describe traps and illusions meant to deter intruders." He paused, listening to a faint rumble of distant

destruction. “And we cannot rule out the possibility that the Malisohak will find these routes. Their scanning technology was designed to locate star-metal signatures, and you are wearing a significant quantity of it.”

A beacon. She looked down at the faintly lit metal.

“Then let us keep moving,” she said.

• • •

They reached a junction. Three paths: one sloping up to the left, one descending right, one straight ahead. Keeper held his staff aloft. The gem at its tip responded to something in the air — a resonance Lyrian could feel through the Vel’thari as a faint directional pull, like standing in a current.

“This way.” He pointed to the descending path. “The artifact’s residual field is stronger below.”

Deeper. More stone above her, and more stone between them and the Malisohak. She followed.

A fallen ceiling blocked the passage. They climbed the rubble, feeling for stable footholds among broken timbers and masonry. Near the top, Keeper’s foot slipped. Lyrian caught him beneath the arm. Warmth shot through her gauntlet; her grip held when she had expected it to fail. She dug her heels in, suddenly aware of the stones shifting beneath them, and hauled him up.

Beyond the rubble, a rotted door barred a small chamber. Its glyphs showed stars and the radiating lines of an impact. Lyrian read the inscription: *Guarded, sealed, forgotten.*

“Optimistic of them,” Lyrian muttered.

Keeper almost smiled. He laid his hand on the door, murmuring something low and complex. The glyphs flared, then dulled to tarnished grey. The hinges relented with a groan, and the door drifted open into a gust of must and mildew.

A short hallway lay beyond, lined with bas-reliefs: the founding, the forging of Celestium weapons, the star-metal falling. Lyrian touched the carved figure of a leader kneeling before the alien fragment in a crude precursor to her own Vel'thari. The sculptor had cut the metal differently from everything around it. Even in stone, it did not belong.

Awe and fear, preserved together. She wondered what the carvers would have made of the ships above the palace.

Keeper studied a panel depicting mages around a swirling orb. "Long-forgotten binding rites," he murmured. "Part of me fears we may be forced to reinvent them."

Another rumble from above. Dust sifted from the ceiling. Cracks appeared in the stonework.

"Come," Keeper said. "The palace above may not exist much longer."

They hurried. A floor slab sank under Lyrian's boot. She sprang back at the crunch, catching Keeper's robe as spikes shot from the walls. Heat flooded her legs. The rusted mechanism jammed halfway, leaving them facing a corridor like the inside of a jaw.

"Still functional after five hundred years," she said, her voice shakier than she wanted.

Keeper let out a breath. "They expected it to outlast them."

"It nearly outlasted us."

They edged past the spikes along the wall. Lyrian's legs were still hot, her hands bitterly cold. She could not find a single name for what she felt.

Past the trap, they found a chasm spanned by wooden boards hammered in place centuries ago. Half were rotted through. No guardrails. The drop below was invisible in the darkness, which was worse than if she could see the bottom.

Keeper tested a board with a cautious foot. It snapped. The sound of it falling lasted a long time.

“Lovely,” Lyrian said.

Keeper lowered his staff toward the gap. Its light found no bottom.

“I would rather see it,” Lyrian said.

She went first, sliding her boots from board to board. Some groaned; others yielded softly under her soles. The armor sharpened her sense of balance, but every step was still a guess about rotten wood. Her last carried her to stone.

Keeper followed, his free hand against the damp wall. Near the end, a board cracked. He lurched. Lyrian caught his sleeve, warmth flaring along her arms, and held until he found another foothold.

They leaned against the corridor wall, trembling. Not speaking. There was nothing useful to say.

“Onward,” Keeper finally whispered.

• • •

Later — she had lost track of time — they heard a scraping sound ahead. Metallic. Grating. Had a patrol found the passages?

Keeper extinguished his staff to a faint ember. They stood motionless, breathing as quietly as their damaged lungs allowed. The scraping drew closer, then receded. Collapse sounds, probably. Or something living in these catacombs. They never found out. When silence returned, it felt worse than the noise.

When the scraping stopped, she tried to loosen her grip on her sword. Her fingers would not open. She worked them free one at a time.

It amplifies what it finds. She knew that. Knowing had not kept it from locking her hand.

She lost count of the turns. Somewhere ahead, the artifact pulled at the metal she wore. She could feel a direction now, even when she could see nothing beyond Keeper's staff.

She tried to hold the palace gardens in her mind. Open air, room to move. Then she remembered what was happening to them.

At the next narrow place, she followed Keeper before she could stop herself.

• • •

At long last, the corridor widened into a battered chamber. Rubble choked the space. Keeper probed a debris pile with his staff.

"Careful." He withdrew the staff. Small stones rolled after it. "The rest may follow."

Lyrian scanned the perimeter. Her gaze found a crack in the far wall where faint light seeped through — warm, almost golden, miraculous after the lightless labyrinth.

"That is our exit," Keeper said. "The eastern grounds. We can reach the forest from there."

They climbed over fallen supports. A scorched beam crumbled beneath Lyrian's hand. It had been part of a living walkway. The Vel'thari found nothing left in it.

Dust caked her eyelashes. Beyond the crack waited the ships, the soldiers. She went toward it anyway.

She squeezed through. The stone scraped her breastplate. The Vel'thari snagged on an outcrop — one alarming second where she imagined being stuck here, wedged in rock, while the world burned on both sides. She twisted. Freed herself. Tumbled into air and smoke.

Outside, the night sky glowed the color of infection. Ash drifted in lazy spirals. The courtyard behind the palace's eastern wing — she recognized the layout, though recognition required effort because most of the landmarks were on fire or had already collapsed.

She heard a crash and turned in time to watch a tower fall. One of the palace's proud spires, the one that had soared above the gardens where she had played as a child. It went slowly, almost gracefully, shedding sparks in a long arc. Then it hit the ground and the grace was over.

She turned away. Tears cut tracks through the soot on her face.

An Eldrin stood beside the courtyard, its scorched bark peeling in long curls. The signal beneath it faltered. Through the Vel'thari she felt the neighboring trees reach around the broken connections, taking up what they could, then falter themselves.

She put a hand against the trunk. Another connection went cold.

Keeper's hand settled on her shoulder. She covered it with her own. A little warmth returned to the metal.

Then a voice rang across the smoky courtyard.

"Your Highness!" Gavric limped toward them, half his armor missing or dented beyond use. Blood had dried down one side of his face. Even as he reached her, his eyes kept returning to the palace.

Behind him, a small band of knights held a ragged defensive line. She spotted Lady Elyra with her staff, braids destroyed, face smeared with grime. Sir Drayven cradling an injured arm, jaw set. They were covering a group of wounded soldiers on makeshift stretchers, trying to put distance between themselves and the ruin.

"Gavric." She hurried forward. "You are alive."

He managed a bow that was mostly a controlled stagger. “We feared the worst when the central span went. I am — relieved is not a strong enough word.”

She allowed herself a fragile smile. “Almost did not make it.”

“The palace is gone, Highness. They control everything above the root cellar. We held the north colonnade until they flanked us through the burning corridors.” His eyes came back to hers. “Through the fire. They walked through it.”

“Is there anything left to defend?”

“Not this wing.” Gavric looked past her toward the smoke. “The lower citadel terraces still hold. So do the river wards. We get these people to them.”

She turned to Keeper. “The artifact?”

The Shaman’s face was grim. “Not from here. Not from these walls. The Malisohak have overwhelmed the wards as if they were not there. We must reach the crash site. That is where the connection is strongest.”

Gavric and Elyra exchanged a look. “We will hold them off,” Elyra said through gritted teeth. “Buy you time to reach the forest.”

“Do not throw your lives away,” Lyrian said.

Elyra gave her a tired smile. “If we stay here, they encircle us. If we draw them toward the garden, you have a way out. We will keep moving.”

Lyrian gripped Gavric’s forearm. “Thank you,” she whispered.

Gavric’s eyes glistened. “Fulfill your calling, Highness. End this.”

She held his gaze a moment longer, then turned away before her composure fractured entirely.

Gavric watched Lyrian and Keeper disappear toward the treeline. Then he turned to the remaining knights.

“Form on me. Staggered line, shields to the front. Drayven, take the left with anyone who can still grip a blade.”

He scanned the burning grounds. The stone colonnade might hold for a few minutes. Beyond it, the garden wall narrowed the approach to two abreast, and the bridge over the ornamental canal offered another place to turn and fight. Three positions between the wounded and the forest. He had to get everyone through all three.

“Three minutes at the colonnade, no more. Fall back through the garden wall. They can only come two abreast there. Then the bridge. Hold until the stretchers are over.” Gavric looked along the line. “No one holds alone. No one dies for a position we plan to abandon. Clear?”

“Touching speech,” Drayven muttered, readjusting his grip on his sword with his good arm. “Really makes a man feel valued.”

“You are valued, Drayven. Specifically, I value your ability to make noise on the left flank while Elyra does the actual work.”

Drayven grinned and took his place.

Elyra planted her staff against the scorched flagstones and closed her eyes. When she opened them, pale threads of energy were already unspooling from her fingertips. A fog crept across the courtyard, thickening with unnatural speed, curling around rubble heaps and the legs of the wounded. Within the murk, shapes formed — spectral silhouettes of knights in formation, phantom sword-arms catching the firelight. To any Malisohak patrol rounding the palace corner, the courtyard would appear fully garrisoned.

“Their scanners will see through it,” Elyra said. Sweat beaded at her temples. “Sixty seconds once they get a good look. If they keep approaching as cautiously as before, perhaps four to six minutes.”

“That is enough,” Gavric said.

“You know the route?”

“Since I was a cadet. Sketching defenses was the punishment for talking in formation.” He raised his shield. “Thirty years. I know the route.”

The first wave of Malisohak shrieked somewhere beyond the colonnade, drawn by the glow of phantom blades. The battered column moved. Shields covered the stretcher-bearers. Elyra wove fresh mirages behind them with every backward step: illusory archers loosing volleys from collapsed parapets, false barricades of overturned carts that dissolved like smoke the moment the Malisohak reached them. At the garden wall, Gavric called a stand. The narrow passage worked exactly as he had calculated — the Malisohak compressed into a two-abreast column that three knights could hold for ninety seconds of brutal, efficient fighting.

“Fall back,” Gavric ordered, and they fell back.

At the bridge, the same geometry applied. Three knights held the narrow span. The rest crossed. Then the rearguard withdrew under cover of Elyra’s thickening fog. By the time the Malisohak broke through the last illusion, the column had slipped beyond the treeline.

“Outstanding,” Drayven wheezed, leaning against a tree. “We should do that every day.”

“Perhaps next time we could do it without the part where the palace burns down,” a young knight offered.

“Noted. I will submit the request.”

At the forest's edge, Gavric braced a hand against an Eldrin. Something passed through its roots into his boots: low, insistent, pulling in one direction. He shifted his weight. The sensation remained.

"We will find Celestis Haven," he said quietly. "The forest is — routing us. I do not have a better word for it."

Elyra leaned on her staff and listened. Its gem glowed in answer to the roots. "This part of the network still carries signal. There is shelter that way." She looked back toward the bridge. "We follow it."

Together, they led the remnants of the guard deeper into the forest's ancient shelter.

• • •

Lyrian and Keeper pushed through burning branches into the forest. Beneath her feet, healthy roots withdrew from damaged ones. She felt each separation through the armor. The trees were cutting their connections to survive.

Overhead, alien ships still hovered, their shifting hulls gliding between columns of smoke.

Farther in, the old Eldrin canopies closed above them. Smoke thinned. These trunks were whole, yet the armor still carried cold impressions from the trees near the palace, passed along their roots. A bitter smell rose from unburned leaves.

Keeper kept to narrow trails. Twice the whine of patrols sent them flat behind thick trunks. They glimpsed knights retreating in small groups, some with civilians. Lyrian clenched her jaw and kept moving.



They had walked perhaps a quarter-mile when a figure broke from the smoke behind them—a city guard, half his uniform gone, the other half stiff with blood that was not his. He stumbled twice on roots before reaching them and went to one knee not from deference but because his legs had given out.

“Highness.” His voice was a rasp. The smoke had done something to it. “The throne hall.”

Keeper went still beside her.

Lyrian stopped breathing. The armor drew tight, then loosened so suddenly she swayed.

“Speak,” she said.

“Your father held the gate. We held with him. When the throne hall’s wards collapsed in the third hour of the assault, the Malisohak poured through the gate. They had been waiting for the wards to drop, not testing them. The king did not retreat. He gave the order for the council to fall back through the sanctum corridor and stayed at the gate himself with six of the Royal Guard.” The guard swallowed. The next words cost him. “I saw the energy bolt take him, Highness. The chest plate, then the throat. He did not—there was no time for words. The Malisohak overran the position within the minute. They did not stop to confirm. They moved on.”

The armor grew heavy. She felt it in her teeth, in the hollow beneath her breastbone.

She wanted to ask if he was sure. He was staring at her, waiting for whatever she would say to him. The chest plate, then the throat. She could not make him say it again.

“Thank you.” The words sounded ordinary. “Get to Celestis Haven if you can. Follow the Thal’as.”

The guard tried to bow and fell. Keeper caught him, lowering him against an Eldrin. Lyrian watched his chest until it rose. She watched it rise again.

Then she walked. After a few steps she looked back. The guard was still against the tree. She could no longer see whether his chest was moving.

Keeper followed in silence.

Three trees deep into the canopy, she said, without turning: “He held the gate.”

“He did,” Keeper said.

“He would have known the wards would fall.”

“Yes.”

“He stayed anyway.”

“Yes.”

The weight pulled at her shoulders. She shortened her stride, finding a way to carry it. Root, stone, another root. She watched where she put her feet.

She would do the thinking later. There would be a later.

• • •

Eventually they reached a clearing where remnant moonlight touched a shallow pond. The water’s surface was filmed with ash. Keeper paused, breathing hard.

“East,” Keeper said. “The original crash site is not far beyond the Draythyr’s bend.”

Lyrian stood with her hand against her breastplate. “Tell me what we will find.”

“When the star-metal fell,” Keeper said, “it opened a crater thirty meters across. The soil at the rim turned to glass. And around it, living things began to change. The metal resonated with the Thal’as. Later, our smiths combined it with Celestium from the Draythyr riverbed. The alloy had properties neither material possessed alone.”

Lyrian touched the Vel’thari’s chest plate. “You told me it reads the wearer. And writes back.”

“Yes. Star-metal reads your body’s signals and amplifies them. The Celestium buffers what comes back. Without it, pain becomes agony. Anxiety becomes paralysis. Sustained contact with raw star-metal would burn out a nervous system within hours.”

“But we are going back to the empty crater. How does that help?”

“Elerion had the star-metal moved within days, to the sanctum beneath the oldest Eldrin. But the ground remembers.” He gestured eastward. “The impact altered the crystalline structure of the bedrock. Even with the metal removed, the site retains a resonance. It answers the artifact more strongly than any other point in the open forest.”

“A relay.”

“Yes. The sanctum is lost to us for now. At the crash site we can reach its power through the bedrock. The connection has held all these centuries.”

She followed the connection in her mind: sanctum, bedrock, crater. Something she could still reach. The pressure around her ribs eased.

“I understand,” she said. “Let us go.”

Among the next cluster of trees, her hands began to tremble. She caught a trunk as the ground tilted. Keeper turned back.

“What is happening?”

She tried to answer. A surge passed through the Vel’thari, and the tree vanished beneath her hand.

Violet and silver stars turned in a void. Shapes moved at its edges, impossible to hold in sight. Something vast attended to her. She felt as though she stood at the edge of an ocean that knew she was there.

The falling star. She saw it enter the atmosphere, strike Citoren, flare in colors she had no names for. From it a luminous tether stretched into the void, farther than she could follow. It had not broken.

The Malisohak followed the tether, she understood. They did not discover the artifact. They were summoned by it.

The Wood spread beneath her, its living connections going dark as alien geometries moved across it. At their meeting point stood Lyrian in the Vel’thari. Power burst from her. The invasion recoiled. Then the image shifted, and the same force passed through the trees, leaving glass where the forest had been.

A soundless word formed in the space where language met physics: *Choose*.

Keeper shook her shoulder. She gasped and buckled against him. For an instant his silhouette spread beyond his body, something older and vaster reaching through him to hold her upright. She blinked. Only Keeper remained.

“A vision?” he asked.

“I saw the crash. A tether, still attached, reaching out beyond Citoren.” She clutched his arm. “They followed it here.”

Keeper's eyes sharpened. "The artifact is calling them?"

"I do not know if it meant to. But the connection is still there. It never stopped broadcasting."

Keeper absorbed this. "What else did you see?"

"I drove them back. Then I saw the forest turn to glass. The same power, both times." She loosened her grip. "There has to be a way to direct it."

"That is why we need the crash site. Its resonance gives us a reference, like a known pitch when tuning an instrument."

She stood without his help. Dizziness lingered. The warmth of the alloy seemed to reach beyond her skin; she had trouble telling where the armor ended.

"I can walk," she said.

Keeper waited while she took the first step.

• • •

They resumed their journey. The fires from the palace receded behind them, though the red glow stained the horizon like a wound that would not close. Occasional shrieks of forest creatures rose in the distance, counterpointed by the mechanical whine of Malisohak ships. The night felt infinite.

She could still see the glass spreading where she had stood. Each time the armor warmed, she wondered what it might do with that much power.

They paused in a small clearing. Keeper produced a flask of water and dried herbs. Lyrian drank. The water tasted of mineral sediment and old leather, but her throat accepted it gratefully.

"Thank you," she whispered.

“The palace can be regrown,” he said. “The forest has recovered before. But we have to stop the interference while there is enough of it left to recover.”

“How long?” she asked.

“Unknown. Weeks, perhaps. Perhaps less. The cascade failure is accelerating.”

She returned the flask.

Standing took more effort than she expected. Keeper waited again.

She followed his staff-light eastward. Behind them the palace still lit the sky. Regrown arches, flowering walls: he had said it as though she might want to picture them. She could think only of the gate.

Under the deeper canopy she could no longer see the glow. The Vel'thari remained heavy, warm in places and cold in others. She adjusted her stride and kept Keeper's light in sight.

She would have to learn to carry this.

Before dawn, Keeper stopped where the ground dipped beneath a tangle of ferns. He scraped away leaf litter with his staff. Glass caught the light below it, a dark curve under roots.

Lyrian had expected a wound she could recognize. Trees filled the hollow.

“Here?”

Keeper knelt and laid his palm on the exposed ground. “Wait for it.”

The shard answered beneath her breastplate. One pulse, then another, deep enough to feel in her heels. For a moment she could follow both. Then the return reached her wrists before she felt it in her chest. She lost the count. The ground seemed to tilt toward the buried note.

“Lyrian. Look at my hand.”

Keeper had lifted his palm from the glass. She could see the dirt pressed into its creases. She tried to hold that ordinary hand in sight while the armor urged her to lean closer.

She stepped back. The pressure tightened, then eased.

“Again?” she asked.

He shook his head. “You could not keep the reference. Neither could I, once the return strengthened.”

The palace lay behind them. She had walked all night to reach this place, and nothing there had stopped burning because she had found it.

“Then we stop,” she said.

Keeper covered the glass with the loose leaves. “Haven has shelter. We begin there, with less than this.”

They reached its wards after sunrise. Lyrian let Keeper unfasten the breastplate before she slept. The pulse remained in her chest long after he had set it down.

CHAPTER 5

A Time to Train

The first thing wrong with Celestis Haven was that nothing was wrong with it.

Lyrian noticed on the second morning. At the perimeter, where the ward shimmered between the Eldrin trunks, relief had begun to give way to something she could not name.

The Thal'as here was clean.

She had felt surviving patches elsewhere in the Wood: damaged, interrupted, carrying what signal they could. Here the Vel'thari found no interference at all. No trace of the failures spreading beyond the wards.

She set a palm against the nearest Eldrin. Its pulse was steady. She was still learning to read what the armor gave her, but this much she knew: the tree was not stressed. Neither was the next one.

Runes protected the ring of trees. Those explained why the Malisohak had not reached them. They did not explain why none of the surrounding forest's distress reached her.

Those signals traveled through the bedrock. No ward she knew could stop them. Either these wards did more than she had been told, or the network itself was refusing to pass the distress on.

She did not know which possibility was more unsettling.

The sanctuary filled a hollow inside the Eldrin ring. Legend placed the trees there before the star-metal fell, their bark carved by the earliest druids. Vines joined the trunks and closed overhead. Sleeping huts fitted among the root buttresses; terraced lookouts faced outward above a clearing broad enough for drills. A spell of silence muffled the perimeter in both directions.

She could see why they had come here. Shelter, cover, a place to stand. She left her hand against the bark a little longer, waiting for a falter.

She kept this observation to herself. For now.

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Four days after the palace fell, Gavric and Elyra emerged from the treeline.

The outer wards shimmered. Gavric came through leaning heavily on Elyra, one leg dragging. His chest plate and pauldrons were buckled by blows from half a dozen directions. Elyra's torn robes were stiff with blood.

She ran to them. Caught Gavric's free arm before his knees gave out.

"We made it." He lowered himself onto a mossy root, easing the bad leg out before him. "Elyra kept giving them someone else to chase. They followed for half a day. Lost us in the deep wood."

Elyra, swaying on her feet, managed a smile that did not reach her eyes. "The Thal'as network helped route us. Degraded signal, but enough to identify safe corridors."

She put her arms around them. Gavric leaned more heavily against her than he meant to. Warmth spread from her breastplate, and she held on.

Dame Lysara followed through the wards, raven-black hair pulled back, grey eyes already moving over the enclosure. Wounds had not bent her posture.

Lyrian had never met her. Lysara looked first at the canopy, then at the gaps between the trunks.

“Your Highness.” A short nod. “The southern line is lost. We brought sixteen fighters and what supplies we could carry.”

Her gaze returned to the canopy.

“Three thin places up there. Illusions would close them. And the northeast roots make a good killing ground. Caltrops, perhaps triggered wards. I will draw it out.”

By the time Lyrian thought to welcome her, Lysara was considering the next weakness in the wall.

• • •

Gavric could stand unaided the day after he arrived. The next morning he began her training. He still favored the injured leg.

Mornings with Gavric. Afternoons with Elyra. Drayven and Lysara took the evening sparring, and strategy filled the hours after that. Lyrian had little time to lie awake.

Under filtered sunlight, Gavric ran Lyrian through footwork drills adapted from the Kareth desert warriors — pivot-and-feint combinations designed to disguise the direction of an attack until the last possible instant.

“Watch.” Gavric pivoted, his cloak concealing the blade until it came out on the other side. “Make them defend two attacks. Then give them the third.”

She tangled her feet and fell twice in the first hour. Heat jittered through her limbs. The harder she tried to correct the pivot, the farther it carried her past her footing.

“You are fighting the armor,” Gavric said. “Calm down, or learn the movement with your hands shaking. I recommend the second. You will not always get a choice.”

“How?”

“Practice while angry. Practice while afraid. Practice while exhausted. The armor will amplify all of those states. Your muscles need to learn the movements under amplification conditions, not just under calm ones.” He paused. “This is, incidentally, why I am being hard on you. Not because I enjoy it.”

She almost laughed. “That is reassuring.”

“I do enjoy it slightly.”

She repeated the pivot angry, frightened, exhausted. Warm armor gave her more reach; cold armor shortened her stride. Gradually she stopped ending up where she had not meant to go.

One morning, she fainted left, swirled her practice cloak, pivoted right, and delivered a strike to a training dummy’s throat with enough speed that Gavric’s eyebrows rose.

“Good,” he said. From Gavric, this was lavish praise. “Again. Faster. And this time, I want you afraid.”

“How do you propose I achieve that?”

“I will be attacking you simultaneously.”

“Ah. That should do it.”

• • •

Afternoons with Elyra were a different kind of education.

Elyra taught beside a pool at the edge of Haven. The stream feeding it carried the clearest Thal’as signal Lyrian could find.

On the first afternoon, Elyra did not begin with exercises. She sat cross-legged at the pool’s edge, laid her staff aside, and asked: “What do you think the Vel’thari is?”

Lyrian considered this. “Vel’thari. An alloy of star-metal and Celestium that amplifies the wearer’s physical and magical capabilities.”

“That tells me what you hope it will do. What is it?”

“A weapon?”

“Closer. But imprecise. Try again.”

Lyrian looked at the veins of Celestium running between the star-metal. “A conduit. Between my nervous system and the Thal’as.”

“Better.” Elyra leaned forward. “The name, incidentally, is not ours. Vel’thari is Malisohak classification shorthand — Power Enhancement Array, in their technical lexicon. Their scouts catalogued it during early reconnaissance of Citoren, years before the invasion. The designation leaked to us through captured communications. It stuck, the way enemy names for things sometimes do, because it was shorter than our own ceremonial title for the artifact.”

“What is the Sylvaren name?”

“The Consecrated Union of Star-Descended Essence and Earth-born Spirit in the Service of Harmony.” Elyra’s expression was perfectly neutral. “You can see why ‘Vel’thari’ won.”

“I am wearing armor named by the enemy.”

“You are wearing armor *classified* by the enemy. There is a difference, but it is a difference worth sitting with. The Malisohak understood what the Vel’thari was before we did. Their material

science is — was — more advanced. They recognized the alloy's properties because they had encountered star-metal before. To them, it is a known quantity. To us, it is still partly mysterious."

Elyra waited until Lyrian looked up from the metal. "Keeper told you what it does. Now you need to know where it fails."

"The star-metal responds to the signals in a living nervous system," Elyra said. "Closely enough that some shamans believe it was designed for the purpose. We have not proved that. The Malisohak's ease with it makes me wonder."

"So the star-metal reads my nervous system."

"And amplifies it. You can become afraid of what the armor is doing, and it will amplify that fear as readily as the first."

"That sounds like a design flaw."

"If it were the only component." Elyra lifted a pale blue stone from the bank, silver veins running through it. "Celestium. It resonates with the Thal'as at a different harmonic. In the alloy, it shapes what comes back to you. The signal is still stronger, but the Celestium keeps it from becoming only noise."

Lyrian followed a pale vein along her forearm.

"But the buffer is imperfect," she said. Not a question. She had felt it — in the tunnels beneath the palace, the Celestium flickering, the raw amplification bleeding through at the edges.

"What happened?" Elyra asked.

"In the escape tunnels. When the fear spiked, the Celestium could not keep up. The star-metal started amplifying without filtering and I felt —" She searched for the words. "The armor got tighter. Colder. Like it was contracting around me. And the fear was not just fear anymore. It was — recursive. Fear of the fear. Like standing between two mirrors."

“That is the danger. The buffer saturates and the fear begins feeding itself. It can keep going after the thing that frightened you is gone.”

“What happens then?”

“In historical accounts? Madness. Catatonia. In one case, an early wearer became so consumed by amplified rage that she could no longer distinguish between allies and enemies. The Celestium in her armor had saturated completely — the veins went dull, like tarnished silver. The shamans had to physically remove the armor to break the loop.”

Lyrian looked down at the Celestium veins in her breastplate. Faintly luminous. Steady. For now.

“So the Vel’thari is both the weapon and the liability.”

“The Malisohak think so too. Their assessment recommends frightening or enraging a wearer. If they can drive you past that threshold, they may not need to strike you.”

The metal tightened. Lyrian looked down, then deliberately back at Elyra.

“Can the star-metal and Celestium work together without the strain?” she asked. “I have felt something close to it. Briefly. When I was genuinely focused on understanding something rather than reacting to it.”

“In calm focus, they can resonate in phase. The armor feels weightless. Your senses extend beyond it. The shamans meant it to work that way.” Elyra set the stone down. “Combat rarely gives you the conditions.”

“Then what does?”

“That,” Elyra said, “is what we are here to find out.”



Elyra had her stand in the pool, water around her ankles. Elyra watched the response pass through the alloy, staff in hand.

“Focus on a memory of fear,” Elyra instructed. “Sustain it.”

Lyrian called up the tunnel. The collapsing beams. The cold spots in her chest. The Vel’thari responded immediately: star-metal tightening, Celestium dimming, the armor contracting around her torso. She felt her breathing shallow.

“Look at the Celestium. Still lit. You are afraid, but you can move. Now remember the worst moment.”

The palace dying. The Thal’as network screaming. The seven beams she had counted through her body. The Vel’thari contracted further. The star-metal went brittle-cold against her skin. She felt the Celestium veins pulse irregularly — the buffer approaching saturation.

“There.” Elyra raised a hand. “The flicker. That is the threshold. Do you feel it?”

“Yes.” It was a narrow, precarious sensation — like standing on the edge of a drop.

“Good. Now pull back. Deliberately. Find something in the memory that you can control — a detail, a decision, a moment of agency — and focus on that instead.”

Lyrian searched. Found it: the moment she had lunged to catch Keeper on the rubble pile. The decision to act. The Vel’thari shifted — star-metal warming at her palms, the confidence profile blooming outward from her chest, the Celestium stabilizing.

“You brought it back,” Elyra said. “The fear is still there, but you gave it something else to amplify. You cannot switch it off. You can change what you attend to.”

“It can read me thinking about the fear?”

“Different parts of the mind take part. It reads all of them. One intense emotion is hard to buffer. When you can think about what you feel, there is more for the Celestium to work with.”

Water lapped against her ankles. She could still picture the falling ceiling. Her hands were warm now.

“I have a question,” she said.

“Good. Questions are the best thing you can do for the Celestium.”

“If the star-metal amplifies whatever it finds in my nervous system, and the Celestium filters the amplification — what happens when I feel two contradictory emotions at the same time? Fear and confidence. Grief and determination.”

Elyra lowered her staff. “We cannot reliably predict that. Sometimes they cancel. Sometimes they reinforce each other. One wearer felt grief and rage together: the star-metal brightened, the Celestium dimmed, and she could no longer tell where her skin ended.”

Lyrian remembered the forest after the vision, when she could no longer tell where the armor ended. She had thought it meant she was learning.

“Has anyone achieved the calm/focus state in combat?”

“Twice in the records. Both shamans, both trained for decades. Neither held it a full minute.” Elyra looked at her. “This was made for people who had spent lifetimes learning their own minds. You have had days. Be patient with yourself.”

“We do not have time for patience.”

“No. So we start with what you can recognize. The flicker. The cold. What you do just before they come. You caught Keeper once. You can learn to find that decision again.”

Keeper had named the danger. Elyra was giving her something to do when it arrived.

• • •

Day after day she worked with the pool, drawing on the Thal'as carried by the stream. Elyra asked for the same shapes under different strains.

On the first day the coil of water around her wrist fell apart. She thought about the shape, her stance, Elyra watching. The water splashed her face.

On the third day, she produced a stable sphere of water that hovered above her palm for four seconds before collapsing.

On the sixth day a braid of water climbed her arm. A distant boom broke her concentration. She thought of the palace, her father, people still out there while she practised. The braid froze. Ice cut her palm. Weight settled through the armor into her teeth.

"The change caught you," Elyra said. "A steady load is easier. Going from confidence to grief gives the buffer no time."

Lyrian bound the cut with a strip of cloth. The pool was smooth again.

• • •

Drayven was waiting when she reached the clearing that evening, a practice sword in each hand.

He grinned and made room for her on the moss.

"Come, Princess. Let us see what Gavric's morning torture has produced."

She raised her practice sword. His first flurry drove her back. She tried Gavric's pivots and found a blade waiting on either side.

“Move from the waist!” he called, blocking her parry as if it were an afterthought. “Do not telegraph. Your Vel’thari is broadcasting your intentions through your posture before you execute them — the star-metal changes your muscle tension in ways I can read. A Malisohak will read them too.”

She had been shrinking from him each time the armor grew cold. He knew which way she would move before she did.

She forced her shoulders loose. The metal still drew tight, but she tried to keep that out of her stance.

She timed a rolling sidestep, pivoted, and aimed a slash at Drayven’s side. He had to scramble to parry. His eyes widened fractionally.

“Well done,” he breathed. Then, quick as a hawk, he feinted high and tapped her thigh with his other blade’s flat. “But not good enough. Yet.”

She rubbed her thigh, grinning despite the sting.



Lysara watched from the edge of the clearing, saying nothing until Drayven stepped aside.

Lyrian attacked. Lysara moved so little that Lyrian overreached, expecting a retreat that never came.

“Stop trying to hit harder,” Lysara said. “They are stronger than you. Use what the armor tells you. The ground, my balance. Where can I move?”

“Gavric says the same thing differently.”

“Then listen to him.” Lysara settled into her stance again. “Where is my weight?”

Lyrian tried. She feigned a lunge, retreated, let the Vel'thari's enhanced awareness map Lysara's weight distribution through the vibrations in the ground, and struck from the angle that Lysara's current stance defended least effectively.

Lysara's eyes flickered with something that might have been approval. She blocked in time, but only barely.

"Yes," she murmured. "Use the reading. Then check it against what you can see."

She pivoted, reversed her grip, and tapped Lyrian's collarbone with the flat of her blade. The fight was over in a move so efficient it barely registered as a movement.

"Better. But they learn quickly. Expect a counter after two encounters."

"Then what is the point of mastering techniques?"

"So you can change them. They counter patterns. Learn what makes a movement work, and you have more than one way to do it."

Lyrian set her feet again. This time she looked at Lysara's before choosing her attack.

• • •

Evenings fell into a rhythm of strategy sessions around a rough-hewn table in the central pavilion. Battered maps of Citoren spread under lantern light, marked with rivers, strongholds, and ominous red crosses where Malisohak forces had established control.

Keeper marked hidden paths; Elyra crossed out the ones whose Thal'as was failing. Gavric moved troop counters along the remaining routes. Drayven found gaps in the deployments, and Lysara asked how long those gaps would stay open.

Lyrian learned to wait for Lysara's question before committing to Drayven's route.

One night, after an especially grim dispatch described Malisohak forces enslaving captured forest creatures through some form of neurological suppression technology, Lyrian braced herself and spoke.

"We cannot wait for them to come to us. Every day we train, they expand their control. We need to cut at the source — their command structure."

Lysara's brow creased. "Their command hierarchy is heavily shielded. Each commander we have observed is surrounded by adaptive security elements that counter our standard approaches."

"I am not proposing a standard approach." Lyrian leaned forward. "The Vel'thari connects me to the star-metal, and the star-metal connects to the Malisohak through the same resonance that brought them here. If I can strengthen that connection — calibrate it, as Keeper described — I might be able to locate their leadership. Not through scouts or intelligence. Through the physics of the star-metal itself."

Elyra looked up from the map. "I can help calibrate it. If the resonance is strong enough, we may be able to follow it to a target."

Keeper folded his ancient hands. "The risk of feedback overload increases with the strength of the connection. The stronger the link, the more emotional noise it carries. Lyrian's Celestium will be under extreme load."

"Then we train the Celestium tolerance," Lyrian said. "We have been doing exactly that. Elyra has been teaching me to manage the saturation boundary. This is the application."

Gavric proposed the tactical framework: Sylvaren illusions and Kareth misdirection to draw main Malisohak forces away from their command hub, while a small strike team — led by Lyrian — infiltrated under cover of the diversion.

“The Kareth method breaks the enemy’s sense of place,” he said. “Make them chase illusions, waste resources repositioning. Meanwhile, the actual threat approaches from a direction they are not monitoring.”

“Misdirection and precision,” Drayven summarized.

“And if they detect you?” Lysara asked. “I want times for getting in and getting out. A fallback at each stage. A point where you turn back.”

“Gavric insists on an exit strategy,” Lyrian said, glancing at the knight.

“We are not throwing our lives away,” Gavric confirmed. “We strike, we achieve the objective or determine it is unachievable, and we extract. No one stays behind for a heroic last stand. Heroic last stands produce dead heroes and no strategic benefit.”

“Reassuring,” Drayven said.

“I am a tactician, not a poet.”

Lyrian looked down at the route. “Finish the plan. Show me where we can still get out.”

One by one, they placed a hand on the table. “For Citoren.” Lyrian spread hers over the edge of the map.

• • •

Sometimes nobody wanted to be the first to leave the fire.

Drayven told campaign stories to the new recruits, enlarging the odds each time he told them. They listened. So did Lyrian.

Then Gavric surprised everyone by recounting a failure. Not a near-miss or a hard-fought victory. A genuine, catastrophic failure. “My first command mission,” he said, voice stripped of performance. “A patrol ambush in the eastern marshes. I froze. Not for long — three seconds, perhaps. But in those three seconds, a comrade took a spear that was aimed at me. He died in the extraction. I survived because he was standing where I should have been.”

The campfire crackled. Nobody spoke.

“I have spent thirty years trying to atone for those three seconds,” Gavric said. “The lesson is not that fear is weak. The lesson is that fear has a duration and a cost, and if you cannot reduce the duration, you must be honest about the cost.”

Elyra put her hand over Gavric’s. He left it there.

Lysara told of a desert queen who had won the tribes by repairing their defenses. “She knew how to break each stronghold. She showed them how to make that harder instead.”

She looked at Drayven. He gave a small nod.

Lyrian stayed until the brew went cold in her cup.

Across the fire, Lyrian kept finding Elyra’s face. The tilt of her head as she listened, silver in her hair catching the light. Sometimes Elyra looked back. Warmth fluttered beneath Lyrian’s breastplate, gentler than anything she felt in training.

Neither mentioned it. A hand lingered after correcting a stance. Lessons ran past the point where Lyrian had understood the answer.

• • •

In the final weeks Gavric shortened the intervals between attacks. Lyrian had to change direction before the warmth from the last strike had left her hands.

She learned to climb the Eldrin and strike from above, using branches and leaves to hide the movement until she dropped.

At the stream she shaped earth as well as water. She worked at illusions to conceal herself. Confidence held them steady; hope let them last. Fear tore at their edges. Frustration could scatter the whole mirage in sparks.

One afternoon an illusion held while she talked to Elyra about the alloy's structure. She forgot to count. The armor seemed to have no weight. When the mirage dissolved, Elyra was staring.

"Twelve seconds," Elyra said quietly. "That is longer than anyone has sustained the harmonic state in training conditions in over a century."

"I was not trying to sustain it. I was thinking about crystalline lattice spacing."

"You gave it something you wanted to understand." Elyra glanced at the place the illusion had occupied. "Perhaps that is your way in."

She tried to recover the feeling. The moment she tried, the weight returned.

• • •

The evening bouts grew faster. Drayven and Lysara gave her less warning and fewer pauses. She learned to strike with the warmth and move while the cold was still passing through her.

One night her practice blade reached Drayven's throat. She held it there, panting. Through the armor she could feel the shift in his footing as he conceded.

He grinned, breathless. "Well done, Princess. Remind me never to make you genuinely angry."

"You make me angry every morning at six."

"That is Gavric's doing. I provide the evening humiliation."

"You still pause between changes," Lysara said. "About a second. Enough for them. Close that gap."

"How?"

"Practice the transitions. Deliberately. Not just during combat — during everything. Walking, eating, sleeping if you can manage it. The transitions need to become as automatic as the states themselves."

Lyrian lowered her sword and tried the movement once more.

• • •

The plan crystallized. Lure the Malisohak main forces through a series of illusions and tactical provocations, opening a corridor to their command hub. A small strike team — Lyrian, Gavric, Elyra, Drayven, and Lysara — would infiltrate the hub to disrupt their command, while Keeper coordinated the larger diversion from Celestis Haven.

Lysara placed archers for the diversion and illusions at three choke points along the supply route. Intelligence suggested a gap in the sensors; it could not confirm one. She marked fallback positions two, four and six miles from the objective.

"If we are detected before reaching the outer perimeter, we abort," Lysara stated. "If we reach the outer perimeter but cannot breach the inner defenses within twenty minutes, we abort. If we breach the inner defenses but lose more than one team member,

we reassess and abort if the objective appears unachievable. In all abort scenarios, we fall back along pre-planned routes to rally point delta.”

“You are very reassuring,” Drayven said.

“I am very realistic. Realism preserves lives. Optimism gets people killed.”

Lyrian traced the unconfirmed gap with a finger. They had a route through it, and routes back. They still had to find out whether it was there.

• • •

The night before their planned departure, they shared a meal at the central fire. Recruits sat around the outside of the circle, quieter than usual.

Bowls of stew were passed. Drayven told a story about a donkey that was almost certainly fabricated. Lysara corrected three factual details in the story without looking up from her bowl. Gavric laughed — actually laughed, a sound so rare that Drayven stopped mid-sentence to stare at him.

“You made a sound,” Drayven said. “With your face.”

“It happens occasionally. Do not grow accustomed.”

When the meal was done and the recruits had retired, the core group remained by the diminishing fire. Embers glowed against the dark. The sanctuary’s impossible purity pressed in around them — that clean Thal’as signal, steady and strong, like a heartbeat that did not know the body was dying.

Lyrian waited until Drayven had finished scraping his bowl.

“We leave tomorrow,” she said. “I will not make a speech. You have all heard enough speeches. I will say only that each of you has taught me something I did not know about the armor, or the forest, or myself, and that those lessons are the reason we have a chance at all.”

Gavric inclined his head. “Serve Citoren. That is all.”

Lysara laid her hand over Lyrian’s on the log. “We stand with you.”

Drayven’s expression turned serious beneath the humor. “I will fight to the last. But I reserve the right to complain about it.”

“And we know more than we did,” Elyra said.

Keeper studied them with eyes that seemed, in the firelight, to contain more depth than a single lifetime could account for. “Hold fast,” he said simply.

For a while they watched the embers.

Eventually, the group dispersed. But Lyrian and Elyra found themselves alone by the embers, as they had on many evenings. Lyrian kept thinking it might be the last.

Elyra knelt to feed the dying fire. Flame caught on dry bark. Shadows moved across her face.

Lyrian moved closer. The armor warmed slowly, with none of the sudden heat she knew from a fight.

“Thank you,” she said. “Not just for the training. For explaining the mechanism. For treating the armor as something I could understand rather than something I had to surrender to.”

Elyra stood and brushed her fingers against Lyrian’s gauntlet. The warmth spread along her arm. Celestium lit beneath the touch, steady and pale.

“I can see when you are afraid,” Elyra said. Her fingers stayed against the metal. “You know that, don’t you?”

Lyrian nodded.

“You keep coming back.”

The fire settled behind Elyra. Neither moved away.

Lyrian rested her forehead against Elyra’s. The weight of the armor fell away. She did not try to name the feeling or hold it still.

When they parted, Elyra’s fingers slid from her gauntlet. Lyrian wanted to say something about tomorrow. She let her hand remain open between them instead.

• • •

They meant to leave at dawn.

In her hut Lyrian listened to the clean pulse beneath the Eldrin. All those weeks, and she still had no answer for it. She turned toward the wall, listening harder.

The armor lay quiet against her skin. She could feel its weight again, but it let her breathe.

Outside the wards, the plan would meet things they had not practised. She thought of the unconfirmed gap on Lysara’s map.

She closed her eyes. The forest went on giving her its perfect signal.

CHAPTER 6

Visions and Warnings

Gold and rose light filtered through the Eldrin canopy. Dew shone on the grass. On the morning they meant to leave, Lyrian knelt beside Elyra and tried to meditate. Her thoughts kept following the route on Lysara's map.

Since waking, she had felt the clearing draw closer. Warmth spread from her chestplate beyond the armor; the trees ten meters away seemed almost within reach. She knew that warmth from confidence. She did not feel confident.

Elyra sat cross-legged, hands resting on her knees. Lyrian tried to match her stillness.

"Breathe in," Elyra murmured. "And out. Don't force anything. Let the Thal'as propagate on its own frequency."

She eased her shoulders. Siloria birds registered as small points of warmth overhead. She felt sap moving faster on the sunward side of an Eldrin and, above that, the layered resonance of the wards.

The armor grew lighter. At the start of training she would have reached for Elyra. Now she waited, letting the two metals find their rhythm.

Wind gathered above her palm. She had not meant to summon it. Petals and dead leaves began to turn.

This is me? she wondered. *Or this is the armor, using my nervous system as a signal processor?*

Elyra's hand settled on her shoulder. "Steady. Notice the heat before you try to change it."

She tried to hold the small vortex. A petal caught the light like an ember, and she was back beneath the burning palace ceiling.

The vortex wobbled. Cold spread down her breastplate, drawing tight around her ribs.

She inhaled sharply and focused on Elyra's hand on her shoulder — the specific, grounding pressure of another person's touch. Slowly, the constriction eased. The vortex dissipated. Leaves fluttered back to the grass.

"It is reaching farther," Lyrian said. "The birds, the roots. Even the wards."

"The Celestium is letting you receive more without overloading you." Elyra watched the last leaves settle. "In theory."

"In theory' is not the reassurance you think it is."

A small, wry smile crossed Elyra's lips. "It wasn't meant to be."

Lyrian turned her hand over. The same material that had burned her home now gave her this. Weight settled beneath her sternum. She could not tell whether the memory had made the armor heavy or the heaviness had brought the memory back.

"What if I cannot stop it next time? What if someone is standing there?"

Elyra kept her hand in place. "Then we need to find the warning sooner. We keep practising."

Lyrian breathed until the pressure eased.

• • •

Then something changed.

Cold ran down her spine. The leaves lay still on the grass, but the warmth had gone from the clearing. She could not feel where the armor was sending it.

The plates drew sharply together, bracing for something she could not see.

Her eyes snapped open. "Elyra. I can feel them."

"Feel what?"

"The Malisohak." She pressed her chestplate. "South. A large movement, near the edge of the forest. I cannot see them, but something has changed in the signal."

Elyra's expression sharpened. "You're reading their bioelectric signature through the star-metal link?"

"Perhaps. Or it is building a picture from something else and giving me that. I cannot tell which."

"Then we check it another way," Elyra said.

If I can sense them... can they sense me?

Elyra rose. "I'll tell the council. We need to check the southern positions before anyone leaves."

The unfamiliar pattern lingered after Elyra had gone. It felt unsettled, fractured. Lyrian held still, wondering whether she was sensing the Malisohak's fear or merely her own.

She could not tell which.

• • •

The planned departure passed while the council reviewed the changed positions near the southern glades. By nightfall they were still in Haven.

Lyrian found no peace in sleep.

She had spent the day between the training ground and the council table. Now the route on the map would not leave her. Every time she closed her eyes, something moved across it.

The dream — if that was what it was — began without transition.

One moment she heard Haven's small night sounds. The next she stood on a barren plain.

Reddish clay cracked beneath a yellow sky. Grit shifted under her soles. The air tasted of metal and stale ozone, as though something had discharged in a sealed room. There was no room, no shelter anywhere.

No birds. No insects. No wind noise beyond a faint, directionless moan that seemed to come from the dust itself.

She reached for the Vel'thari. Its response was faint. The plain seemed to be draining it. Or perhaps the armor needed everything it had to make her see this.

Am I seeing the Malisohak's dead world, or am I seeing what the star-metal thinks I should see?

Ruined spires rose ahead. As she approached, their angles refused to settle. Metal and something like chitin met without a seam. They had grown together.

The shapes echoed Malisohak ship architecture. The same iridescent alloy, though here it was dulled and cracked like old lacquer. She was looking at a homeworld. A dead one.

Malisohak moved through the rubble, armor hanging loose on gaunt bodies. Behind cracked visors their eyes reminded her of refugees she had seen in the southern provinces. They watched her pass without expectation.

They're not attacking. They're not doing anything. They're just... enduring.

One figure separated from the rest. Black armor etched with violet patterns that might have been decorative or functional — she suspected the Malisohak would not have recognized the distinction. It moved with a measured dignity that survived its emaciation.

A voice arrived without sound. She could not identify a language. It simply meant things at her.

“We were once a proud people...”

Images crowded into her, more than she could take in one at a time.

A world called Xylos. Multiple suns. Oceans that shimmered with dissolved minerals she had no names for. Bioluminescent forests that grew under a sky permanently streaked with aurora. Cities of organic-metal spires — the same growth-substrate technology she’d seen in the ruins, but alive, functioning, beautiful in a way that made her chest ache. The Malisohak had not always been gaunt refugees. They had been gardeners of a magnificent, terrifying world.

The voice continued, carrying the bone-deep weariness of a species reciting its own eulogy: “Our civilization reached heights unmatched. We discovered a source of unimaginable power — the K’hara — that solved our energy needs, sustained our bodies, fueled the growth-substrate that was our technology and our architecture and our art. We believed we had tamed the cosmos.”

The capital, alive. Woven clothes changed color as their wearers moved through a festival. A child sat laughing on an adult’s shoulders; another adult reached up toward it. Light drifted around them.

The light changed.

K'hara was drawn from the ground faster than the planet could sustain. The growing spires calcified. Storms tore through the atmosphere as energy burst from the crust. Luminous leaves turned to calcium ash and blew away. Seas frothed. She felt the failures pass from one system into the next, each taking away something that had held the others steady.

Engineers grew evacuation ships while the cities failed around them, vessels meant to carry populations through generations of drift. In a hall, factions argued over leaving. On a balcony, others stood and watched the horizon erupt. They had chosen to stay.

"We became refugees. We wandered the void, searching for another fragment of K'hara essence that might let us undo what we had done. We never expected to find a world already attuned to that power. Your world. Citoren."

Then Citoren: the Eldrin, the rivers. She saw them lit from within, saturated with the energy the voice called K'hara. After the plain, the sight hurt.

The barren plain reasserted itself. The black-armored figure stood before her, stooped under a weight that was not physical.

"We are not monsters, Princess. We are the consequences of our own choices."

• • •

She woke with her arms tangled in the blankets. Her cheeks were wet. The Vel'thari was ice-cold, tight across her chest, and the taste of the plain remained in her mouth.

She lay still. Dust underfoot. The yellow sky. A child laughing on someone's shoulders.

Who sent that vision? The Malisohak? The Vel'thari? My own subconscious, working with data the star-metal collected from the enemy's bioelectric signatures? If the armor can construct a

model of the Malisohak's emotional state and feed it to me as sensory experience, what's stopping it from constructing a sympathetic narrative designed to lower my guard?

Her alloy contained star-metal, as their armor did. She could not rule out an affinity she did not understand.

The grief had felt as real as her own. That did not answer the question.

She did not know what to do with that.

At first light she got up. She had to tell the others, including the part she doubted.

• • •

They met in the hollow Eldrin used for war councils, its living walls lit by glyphs. Once she had asked Keeper whether the tree knew what they discussed inside it. He had asked her to define *knew*. She had never got an answer.

She told them about the plain, the growing cities, Xylos and the K'hara. She told them about the child.

Then she told them the part she was afraid of.

"I cannot tell you who sent it. The Malisohak, the armor, my own mind. I woke with the metal cold and my face wet." She rested a hand on the table. "It felt true. I do not know that it was."

Gavric's hand closed around his sword hilt.

"If it is true, they have advanced weapons and nothing left to lose," he said. "That makes them dangerous. Desperation does not make an army willing to bargain."

He paced two steps, turned. “If it’s a fabrication — either by the Malisohak or by the artifact — then someone is trying to make us sympathetic to the enemy on the eve of a potential offensive. Which is exactly what I’d do if I wanted to soften a target.”

Elyra, arms folded, had the expression of someone running through hypotheses and discarding them. “Some of those details may be testable,” she said. “The structures, the way they grow. If our scouts find the same technology here, we will have something beyond the vision to work with. It would not prove the rest.”

“If their buildings, armor and bodies share a material,” Elyra continued, “the metal might carry information between them. Perhaps the vision was a transmission. Something we were never meant to receive.”

“Sent by whom?” Gavric asked.

“That’s the question, isn’t it.”

Keeper stood near the wall. His gaze followed a line Lyrian could not see. When he turned back, she had the impression something remained facing the other way.

“I want to propose a framework,” he said, “and I want you to argue with it.”

He laid his palms on the table. “Star-metal fell here a thousand years ago. Celestium was already in our rivers. Together, they do something neither does alone. You have all seen that in the Vel’thari.”

“If the vision is accurate, the Malisohak used K’hara without a stabilizer like Celestium. Their systems fed on one another until they failed. Our alloy suggests a buffer is possible.”

“But why is the buffer here? Celestium predates the crash by geological ages. The Thal’as carries its signals through it: roots, soil, river sediment. The whole forest depends on a mineral that also stabilizes an alien material.”

He let that sit.

“I cannot rule out coincidence. But if there is a connection, we have not found it. The armor may be doing more than we think.”

Gavric stared at him. “You’re saying the armor might have its own agenda.”

“We should consider it.” Keeper turned to Lyrian. “You are wearing something that joins your mind to this forest and to whatever survives in the star-metal. Three participants. We have been treating it as a tool.”

The room was very quiet.

“Well,” said Drayven from the corner where he’d been leaning against the wall with his arms crossed, “that’s reassuring.”

Gavric let go of the hilt.

“It sometimes feels like a collaborator,” Lyrian said. “One that will not show me how it reached its conclusions. When I sensed the movement yesterday, I could not tell where my perception ended and its interpretation began.”

“You cannot check what it tells you?” Gavric asked.

“Not from the feeling alone,” Elyra said. “We need something outside it.”

Drayven cleared his throat. “Setting aside the philosophy for a moment — practically, what do we do? If Lyrian’s vision is even partially accurate, we’re fighting people who destroyed their own planet trying to do what they’re now trying to do to ours. That’s not a negotiation scenario. That’s a ‘they’ll strip-mine our forest with a clear conscience because they’ve already mourned the consequences’ scenario.”

“Unless,” Lyrian said carefully, “the mourning is what makes them reachable. They know what happens when K’hara extraction goes wrong. They lived it. If we can show them that Citoren’s Ce-

lestium infrastructure provides the stabilization they never had — that there's a way to access K'hara without triggering cascade failure —

"You're proposing we teach the people who invaded us how to safely extract the resource they invaded us to steal," Gavric said. His voice was level, but his knuckles were white on the sword hilt.

"I'm proposing we explore whether the alternative to mutual annihilation is mutual survival. Which, I'll grant you, sounds naive. But the alternative is a war of attrition against a technologically superior force with nothing to lose, and I've seen how that ends." She tapped her chestplate. "The Vel'thari showed me."

"Or told you a story designed to produce exactly this response," Gavric countered.

"Yes," Lyrian said. "Or that."

Lysara exhaled. "They have taken hamlets we cannot recover. If they can grow replacements for what we destroy, we cannot win by trading losses. We cannot keep losing people at this rate." She looked at Drayven. "If talking leaves the forest ours, we have to consider it."

Drayven scrubbed a hand across his stubble. "Fine. Let's assume the vision holds some fraction of truth. How do we approach them without getting vaporized?"

"We ask for a meeting," Lyrian said. "A small delegation. Gavric comes with me. His covering force stays in the trees; Lysara wards our retreat. If they attack, we have cover. If they talk, we listen."

Gavric leaned over the map. "A truce flag, and a way to get you out. I can work with that."

For two days messengers moved through the warded paths. Scouts found a substantial Malisohak force near the southern glades. They watched pods expand on scorched ground into damp, organic-metal dwellings. Hours, they reported, from pod to shelter. One detail from Lyrian's vision now had another witness.

Gavric drilled his small force in Kareth footwork, emphasizing the art of vanishing into forest shadows if negotiations turned hostile. Drayven organized archer teams in the high limbs. Lysara, with her usual methodical precision, established ward-lines and fallback corridors — defensive geometry that could channel a re-treating force through covered routes while slowing pursuit.

Lyrian oversaw the preparations from the Eldrin branches and tried not to think about the child in the vision. She failed.

That evening they gathered around the map again.

“Could we offer them a fraction of the star-metal's energy?” Drayven proposed. “Some kind of controlled extraction that doesn't strip the forest?”

Elyra frowned. “We'd need to understand their extraction methodology first. If they're using the same approach that failed on Xylos — direct K'hara tapping without a Celestium buffer — then giving them access to the star-metal is giving them a detonator without a safety.”

“So we teach them to use the safety,” Lyrian said.

“We don't fully understand the safety ourselves,” Elyra countered. “I'm reverse-engineering the Vel'thari's Celestium lattice in real time. We're maybe three months from a coherent theoretical model. Offering to share knowledge we don't possess is —”

“Tuesday,” Drayven supplied. “That’s called Tuesday in diplomacy.”

Lysara’s lips twitched. “He’s not wrong.”

“The alloy gives us something to show them,” Keeper said. “It does not give us a safe method of extraction. And whatever Lyrian receives through the link may have a counterpart going back.”

The room absorbed that.

“So she’s the bridge and the vulnerability,” Gavric said.

“Yes,” Keeper said.

“We approach them soon,” Lyrian said. “Under a flag of truce. I’ll request a meeting with their commander. If they’re as desperate as the vision suggests, they’ll at least hear us out. If not —” Her voice hardened. “We execute the contingency.”

Gavric marked the covered route back to the trees.

• • •

Unable to sleep, she walked the paths beneath the torches. The armor had grown weightless again. She should have welcomed it. Instead she kept waiting for another image.

She found Elyra by a stream near the camp’s edge, kneeling to cup water in her hands. The older woman looked up at Lyrian’s approach.

“You couldn’t rest either,” Elyra said. Not a question.

“My thoughts are louder than the forest tonight.” Lyrian sat on a low, mossy rock beside her. The stream’s murmur was the only sound that felt unambiguous.

Elyra let the water run from her hands. “I keep thinking about the buildings. Our scouts saw them grow. You saw them before we had the report.”

“I have been trying not to think about any of it before bed.”

“That part came from somewhere. It does not prove the history. A deceiver could use things that are true.” Elyra looked up. “But you have not imagined everything.”

Lyrian considered this. “That’s either comforting or terrifying.”

“Both, perhaps.” Elyra rested a hand over Lyrian’s forearm. Warmth entered the weightless quiet of the armor.

“You questioned it before you brought it to us,” Elyra said. “Keep doing that.”

She brushed the hair from Lyrian’s brow. Lyrian closed her eyes.

When she opened them, Elyra had not moved away.

For a while neither spoke. Lyrian could feel Elyra’s hand without needing to explain it.

• • •

Two mornings later, the delegation moved out.

Lyrian, Elyra, Gavric and a handful of knights took the path toward the southern glade. Behind them, Lysara’s wards covered the fallback routes. Drayven’s archers waited in the high limbs. Lyrian wore white cloth at her cloak.

No birds called near the southern edge. Old smoke lingered among charred trunks. Beneath it she detected the unfamiliar smell the scouts had described near the growing shelters.

They halted at the edge of a burned clearing. On the far side, half-obsured by settling dust, a Malisohak patrol occupied positions around one of the grown structures — a hab-unit whose organic-metal walls still had the slightly damp look of recent fabrication. Their armor was scuffed, the once-iridescent surfaces marred by Citoren’s terrain and Citoren’s defenders.

A tall figure in deep-green armor with silver patterning stood among the patrol. The Vel’thari warmed as Lyrian looked toward it. She felt the metal draw that way before the figure moved.

Gavric raised an open hand. Nearly a dozen Malisohak shifted position. Energy glowed along their weapons.

Lyrian stepped forward. “We come under truce.” She indicated the white fabric tied to her cloak. “I am Lyrian, Princess of Citoren. I’m requesting a meeting with your commander. We’d prefer to discuss alternatives before either of us adds to the body count.”

Nothing moved. Behind the opaque visors she could read no faces. Her pulse beat against the breastplate.

The tall figure inclined its head. Clicks and tones passed between the soldiers, accompanied by small flickers that Lyrian felt through the armor. The ranks parted.

She exhaled. Shaky, but she exhaled.

Gavric crossed with her. Elyra and the knights held at the edge of the clearing. As Lyrian approached the commander, the star-metal warmed and cooled in answer to its equipment. *The armor is talking to them*, she thought. *I am hearing only part of it.*

Up close she could see how carefully they conserved movement. The link gave her weariness, wariness, something that felt less like hostility. She kept her eyes on the weapons.

The commander’s visor drew back, exposing angular features traced with luminous lines. Star-metal ran through living tissue. Its voice carried several tones at once.

“You are the one who resonates with the K’hara.”

The armor tightened. She breathed before answering. “K’hara. What we have been calling the artifact’s power.”

A flicker of something — interest, recognition — crossed the commander’s features. “We have detected your signal. You stand at a nexus of K’hara flow unlike anything we have encountered since Xylos. Why do you seek dialogue after your warriors have killed so many of ours?”

They blame us. Of course they do. We blame them. Everyone’s the defender in their own narrative.

“Because this war is a negative-sum game,” Lyrian said, using a term from Keeper’s strategic vocabulary. “Every engagement degrades both sides’ capacity. I’ve learned something about your history — the world you lost, the K’hara extraction that caused the loss. I believe you’re here because you’re desperate, not because you’re conquerors. If I’m wrong, tell me. But if I’m right, then we’re two populations fighting over a resource that neither of us can safely extract alone.”

A soldier shifted behind the commander. Another turned toward it.

“You speak of our past. As though you witnessed it.”

“Something showed me. Whether it was your signal, or the star-metal’s memory, or my own imagination — I can’t verify the source. But I saw Xylos. I saw what happened. And I would prefer that Citoren doesn’t follow the same trajectory.”

The commander waited three seconds before answering.

“We lost our world to our own error.”

Cold entered her armor. Weight followed. She had been thinking about the words, but the grief seemed to arrive from somewhere outside her.

Or the Vel'thari constructing a compelling emotional narrative, she reminded herself. Always the other option.

"We came seeking another K'hara source," the commander continued. "Citoren resonates with its essence. We believed the world was — in your terms — unoccupied. An incorrect assessment." Its gaze swept the charred clearing. "We have caused harm. Your people have caused harm in return. The cycle persists."

"It doesn't have to," Lyrian said. "I think you extracted K'hara without a buffer. Is that what failed on Xylos? Citoren has a native mineral — Celestium — that stabilizes K'hara interaction. The alloy I'm wearing demonstrates the principle. Star-metal plus Celestium equals controlled resonance. Star-metal alone equals —"

"Cascade failure," the commander finished. "We know. We have always known. We could not find the stabilizing element."

"It's in our rivers. It's in our trees. It's the backbone of the entire forest's bioelectric network. It's been here for geological ages."

Another silence. Then, with a sharpness that surprised her: "You are proposing cooperation."

"I'm proposing we stop trying to take from each other and start trying to understand what the interaction between our materials actually does. The Vel'thari shouldn't work as well as it does. Keeper — our shaman — has theories about why, and none of them are comfortable. He cannot explain why the materials work together. Neither can I. We need to find out."

The commander studied her. Behind her, Gavric's armor shifted. He was close enough to reach her.

"Your words are unprecedented," the commander said. "The trust between us is shattered by conflict. Why should we believe this offer is not a stratagem?"

“Because continuing to fight solves nothing. Because I’ve seen what uncontrolled K’hara does — to your world and potentially to mine.” She paused. “And because the armor I’m wearing is having a conversation with your bio-tech right now that neither of us fully controls. The star-metal doesn’t care about our politics. It resonates with compatible substrate regardless of which species is wearing it.”

The commander’s eyes widened fractionally.

Then the Vel’thari did something Lyrian had not authorized.

Cold struck her chest. Machines failed in orbit above a green world. The sky opened. Ships fled while voices crowded into her, too many to separate. One broke through: a child calling for a parent.

She staggered. This grief carried images she had never lived. The Celestium flickered under the load, the metal growing colder. Gavric caught her arm.

The Malisohak commander had gone rigid. Its eyes were wide. “Xylos?” it said. “Again? Through the K’hara?”

“I don’t know,” Lyrian managed, breathing hard. “The alloy is transmitting. I’m receiving. I can’t — I can’t tell if I’m reading your memory or if the star-metal is projecting stored data.” She pressed a hand against the chestplate, as though she could slow the transmission through pressure. “But I see your home. Its final hours.”

Murmurs among the Malisohak patrol. Some stepped forward. The commander raised a hand — hold.

“This link,” it said. “Can you sustain it?”

“I’m trying. It’s not — “ She steadied herself with Gavric’s help, straightened. “This is new and uncontrolled and dangerous. Which is exactly why I’m proposing we study it together instead of using it as a weapon.” She swallowed. “I’m asking for a meeting. Neutral

ground. No weapons fired. A chance to understand what the K'hara link is doing before it does something neither of us can reverse."

The Malisohak held their positions. Light flickered among them as the commander conferred.

"We will consider your proposal." A pause. "But do not interpret restraint as concession. If we detect deception, we respond with force."

"Understood. If we detect the same, so do we." She dipped her head. "I hope the next time we meet, neither of us needs to make that threat."

She retreated carefully, Gavric at her side, his knuckles white on his sword hilt. The Malisohak did not pursue.

• • •

Back in Celestis Haven, the debriefing was tense but productive. The Malisohak had not offered a truce, but they had not opened fire, which — as Drayven noted — qualified as the most successful diplomatic engagement of the war so far. The bar was low. It was still above it.

She described the burst, including what she had not been able to stop. Keeper listened. Elyra recorded the sequence on bark-paper and asked her to go through it once more.

"The metals appear to be communicating," Elyra said. "Her nervous system receives the result. The Celestium buffered enough to keep her standing. Enough to prevent damage, probably. We cannot yet give her control over what arrives."

"Probably," Gavric repeated.

"I said what I said."

“The commander detected her signal,” Keeper said. “Something went back. Her emotions, perhaps. We must also consider whether it could take a memory, something about Haven she had no intention of sharing.”

The room absorbed this.

“So we may have just broadcast our position to the enemy through our own armor,” Gavric said.

“We may have,” Keeper acknowledged. “Or we may have transmitted something that makes them more inclined to negotiate. The uncertainty cuts both ways.”

Lyrian pressed her forehead against the war table’s rough surface, letting the wood’s faint warmth ground her. *How do you conduct diplomacy when your own equipment might be negotiating on its own behalf?*

She didn’t have an answer. She doubted anyone in the history of Citoren had needed one.

Late that night she left her hut. The Eldrin canopy shone silver. The armor was weightless once more, so quiet she could almost forget it.

If they agree, I will have to do this again. With their leaders.

She closed her eyes and listened to the forest. The signal was clean again. She could no longer take that as an answer.

She remembered the child in the vision. Laughing. Before.

We can’t let that happen here.

Elyra stood at the edge of the clearing. Their eyes met. Lyrian lifted her hand, and Elyra remained.

Her heart slowed. Tonight she let herself take comfort in it.

In the morning, she would ask Elyra to read back the notes.

CHAPTER 7

The Enchanted Wood

Elyra read the contact notes aloud the next morning. Lyrian remembered sending a question. The record showed how much had passed before she had managed to ask it.

Keeper spread a map beside the notes. The inner sanctum lay where the oldest paths of the Thal'as gathered. He hoped they might find a steadier connection there, one they could follow without forcing the armor to answer for it.

"Before I speak to them again," Lyrian said, "I want to know what else I might be sending."

They left Haven that afternoon. Fighters remained to guard the refugees. Gavric, Elyra, Lysara and Drayven went with her and Keeper.

Ten paces beneath the canopy, the greens deepened until they looked wrong. Another few steps and the air cooled sharply. Behind them sunlight still lay across ordinary Eldrin leaves.

Gavric gripped his Celestium sword. He had crossed ground held by Shal'kara and Umbraliths. He had never watched a forest change its light in a line across the path. *Jumpy*, he told himself. His knuckles stayed white.

Lyrian looked up at the Ancients. Their roots were broad enough to walk along. Deep patterns marked the bark, almost like runes, though she could find no repeated symbol. The trees seemed to have kept every pressure that had shaped them.

Turquoise moss glowed along the roots. She touched it. A faint response passed into the Vel'thari, Thal'as at a rhythm she did not recognize. It was clear, unbroken, and strange.

"Keep close," Keeper said.

He walked at the head of the group, placing each foot carefully. In the spirit-layer the Ancients crowded him more densely than their trunks crowded the path.

Their physical forms were healthy. In his other sight they were denser still, intricately folded, attentive. He could not reconcile one with the other.

"We are guests," he said quietly, "in a system that tracks our presence. I advise respect."

Elyra held her Liras-wood staff in both hands. She had carried it for decades. Now it pulled against her grip.

The Thal'as propagates through a forest like electrical impulses through a nervous system, she recited silently — the foundational model Elerion had taught every Sylvaren naturalist. Along specific pathways. At measurable speeds. With predictable attenuation at junction points.

She had trusted those losses through centuries of fieldwork. Here the signal strengthened at each junction. She checked it at the next root, then the next. Each added more than the branch before it had lost.

She had always been able to navigate by the losses. The staff strained toward the next junction, offering her a direction she did not yet trust.



The trail wound beneath vines as thick as arms. Moisture dripped from them, sharp with the scent Elyra associated with stressed plants. Around her everything flourished.

Nearly an hour in, something moved among the moon-blossoms.

Three insects rose from the white flowers. Each was thumb-sized, turquoise markings brightening in time with the moss.

“Arare-lights,” Elyra whispered. “They appear in the oldest Sylvaren songs. Said to feed on magic-laced nectar. I didn’t believe they still existed.”

The Arare-lights circled Lyrian. Their wings set a fine vibration running through the Celestium. She held still while they hovered at her breastplate. Then they followed one another into the Wood.

The vibration faded long after she lost sight of them.

A cry hung in the canopy. She could not place it, could not even decide which way to turn. Sorrow arrived with the sound.

The armor grew heavy. She felt the vibration in her teeth, familiar from grief. Nothing had happened.

Is that me, or the armor, or the forest doing something to both of us?

Keeper touched an Ancient. Warm bark met his palm. In the spirit-layer, something cold and watchful met the same hand.

“We may not be alone,” he said, which was true but misleading. He was reasonably certain that in the Enchanted Wood, “alone” was not a meaningful category. “The forest’s attention is on us. Some of its components are neutral. Others I cannot read.”

He did not say: *In the spirit-layer, this tree has more in common with an animal than a plant. And I do not know what to do with that information.*

Dame Lysara brushed damp hair from her face. “Why watch us? We only walk here.” Her voice carried forced bravado. Her hand on her belt-dagger did not.

Lyskai dropped from the canopy onto the great roots. Feathered crests rose from their long necks; light shone from their eyes. Elyra had seen them classified as deerlike spirits. Watching one fold its limbs beneath itself, she doubted the description.

Emerald passed into violet along their plumage, keeping time with the moss.

“Lyskai,” Lyrian breathed. “Keeper told me stories. But I never thought —”

“They’re nodes,” Elyra said quietly. “Like the insects. Like the moss. They’re part of the network. Sensory organs for the forest.”

Their heads tilted together. Lyrian watched her face reflected in a luminous eye. She felt exposed, as though something about her had become available to them without her consent.

Warmth and cold passed through the armor. The palace, the first activation, Xylos: memories returned too quickly to stop. She could not tell whether the creatures could see them.

The Lyskai sprang back into the canopy.

Keeper exhaled. “They assessed us. And they permitted passage.” A pause. “I think.”

“You think?” Gavric said.

“The physical evidence says they left without hostility. The spirit-layer says —” He stopped. “Something I cannot reconcile with the physical evidence. Let us continue, carefully.”

Gavric waited for more. Keeper had already begun walking.

• • •

Water dripped from broad fronds. Gavric counted the intervals. The same pause, again and again. He held his breath to make sure he was not matching the drops to it.

He said nothing. He had been finding patterns since the light changed.

Branches crossed overhead, dividing the way into lit passages and dark dead ends. Moss brightened along the path ahead of them. Behind them it dimmed.

Elyra tested this by stopping, then stepping backward. The moss behind her brightened. The moss ahead dimmed.

“It’s tracking us,” she said.

“I noticed,” Lyrian said. “Is that hospitality or herding?”

“I’m not confident those are different things here.”

Whispers reached Gavric from every direction. He turned with his sword raised. Almost words, always falling short of something he could understand.

Why? Gavric thought. *What’s the purpose of almost-words?*

Elyra listened. Each time a sound caught her attention, it seemed to change. *Learning what we hear?* She wished she had mentioned the staff sooner.

She kept this hypothesis to herself.

• • •

A ripple passed through the moss. Elyra stumbled, and her staff jerked sideways in her hands.

“The paths change here,” Keeper said. “Watch where you put your feet.”

In the spirit-layer, the changes led inward. He could see the direction but not what lay at its end.

They moved cautiously for another hour. A sharp, almost electrical smell thickened until Elyra's sinuses itched. It lay beneath the familiar scents of resin and wet growth.

The unclassified compound was the one that worried her.

Old accounts described fungi that defended the deep forest by altering what intruders perceived. She had read them on sheets of bark, puzzling over descriptions of air that brought the past back.

Her best explanation had been airborne compounds acting on memory and fear. A guilty traveler would hear accusation; a grieving one would see the dead. The same air, different terrors.

The images would come from the traveler.

The accounts called them Aetheri, *veil-born*. Perhaps the old writers had encountered this same defensive network and given it a face. She could not be sure.

The electrical scent sharpened. She opened her mouth to warn the others.

And then the forest stopped making sense.

• • •

The dripping stopped. Gavric looked up. Drops clung to the fronds, trembling, ready to fall. They stayed there.

He blinked. The droplets fell normally. *I imagined it*. He returned his attention to the path.

Lysara shifted her foot. Her shadow followed a little late. She moved again, watching for it. This time she could not be sure.

The moss had quickened. Elyra tried to count its glow against the Thal'as in her staff. They no longer matched.

The forest is running at one speed and my perception at another.

Lyrian pressed her breastplate. To her hand the metal felt solid. From within, it seemed thin and brittle, about to break.

She knew how the armor felt when she was afraid. This was just short of it, as though something were asking whether she would be.

Am I afraid, or am I about to be afraid?

Each waited for something definite enough to tell the others.

• • •

Gavric heard a voice.

Aldric. Gavric knew the voice before he made out the words. Aldric, who had died at the Southern Ford with an arrow in his side, saying Gavric's name.

He spun, sword raised. "Show yourself."

Nothing. Swirling shadow under massive trunks. The electrical-scented compound was very strong now, strong enough that his sinuses burned.

A patch of bark became a forehead. A knot opened into an eye. Light caught a root, and Gavric saw a jaw. He watched the face assemble and still believed it.

Aldric. Fenrath. The young knight whose name he had never learned, dead in his second engagement with the maker's mark still clear on his armor. They watched him from the trees.

You failed us, Gavric.

Coward.

You promised.

“No,” he said, and his voice trembled, and the trembling was real even if the faces were not. “I did everything I could.”

He could see the knot that made the eye. He knew what it was. Thirty years of guilt spoke through it anyway, louder than anything he could tell himself.

His sword slashed at empty air. The faces multiplied.

• • •

Dame Lysara felt something on her skin.

Something crawled beneath Lysara’s bracers. She tore at the leather. Pale bulges moved along her forearm, disappearing beneath skin that rose to let them pass.

She screamed. “No — get them out —”

She clawed her arm. Pain followed her nails. The crawling was there, she thought. She could feel where she had caught it.

They’re eating you alive. Rot. Failure. Weakness.

She knew those words. She had kept them to herself for years.

• • •

Lady Elyra was in fire.

Fire climbed every trunk. Elyra heard the deep crack of the eastern quarter burning, her mother’s voice, her mentor’s. She raised her staff. Where she sent water, the flames grew.

This was what she feared most: her own power turned destructive. The same fear had followed her since the eastern quarter burned.

“The fire—no!” she cried. “I won’t fail again—”

Her staff shone above unburned moss. She could see only flame.

• • •

Keeper saw his charges dying.

He reached for magic and felt it fail. He had brought them here. In one sight, that was all he knew.

In the other he saw mycelium threaded through the Ancient roots, a second network spread through the Thal’as. It reached beneath every tree he could perceive. Spores and vapors passed into the air where his companions stood.

Every breath since the threshold had carried it. The altered light, the regular drops, the almost-words. He thought he could trace the whole approach, each change leading toward this.

The network gathered around them as around an intrusion. A defense, perhaps. It did not need to hate them.

He slumped against a trunk, whispering about useless magic. In one sight they were alive. In the other he had already lost them. He could not make himself trust either.

His brother's face waited wherever Drayven turned. Dying, accusing, the face from his worst dreams. Between its appearances he could still see the forest. He did not know why the gaps remained. He held on to them.

Through one of them he saw Lysara tearing her arm.

Gavric knelt, slashing at shadows. Elyra pointed her staff into empty air. Keeper sagged against a trunk. He could hear Lyrian somewhere beyond them, struggling to breathe.

His brother appeared again. Drayven looked at him, then past him, and moved.

"Lysara!" He grabbed her shoulders, physically interrupting the feedback loop. "Look at me. Look at your arm." He wrapped his hand around her wrist, pressing hard enough that the pressure signal competed with the crawling sensation. "Feel my hand. That's real. The other thing is not."

She whimpered. Her pupils were wide, but she looked down at his hand. For a moment she stopped clawing.

"Drayven —" she choked. "I thought — I believed —"

"I see it too," he said. "Something in the air. Stay with me."

He did not know more than that.

He knelt before Keeper and caught his shoulders. "Keeper. Look at my hand. Feel where I am holding you."

Keeper's eyes focused, then wandered. Drayven held on until they found him again.

"The mechanism," Keeper whispered. "I can see it. In the deeper layer. It's mycelial. Fungal. The entire network —"

"Tell me later. Can you function?"

Keeper blinked. Exhaled. "Yes. With difficulty."

Elyra was next. She was chanting, tears streaming, feeding energy into phantom flames. Drayven grabbed her staff-arm. “Elyra. The ground is not burning. Feel it.” He pressed her free hand against the moss. Cool. Damp. Not scorched.

Elyra pressed into the moss. Cool water met her palm. The fire faltered, then rose again. She pressed harder.

“The compounds,” she gasped. “In the air. Psychoactive volatiles. They’re modulating — the fungi — it’s a defense mechanism —”

“Yes,” Drayven said. “Brilliant. Save the lecture for when we’re not all losing our minds.”

He found Gavric kneeling in the dirt, speaking to the gaps between the roots. Drayven seized his wrist. “Gavric. Look at me. We need to move. Get on your feet.”

Gavric’s face was streaked with tears. “They said I —”

“They didn’t say anything. Your brain said it. The forest drugged us. All of us. Stand up.” Drayven’s voice was firm enough to cut through the neurochemical haze — the auditory signal of authority competing with the internalized voices of the dead. “We honor them by surviving. Not by kneeling in the dirt talking to mushroom-induced phantoms.”

Gavric stared at him. Behind Drayven’s shoulder a face broke into bark and moss. He stood, wiping his eyes.

Lyrian lay on her side. The Vel’thari had drawn so tight she could barely breathe. Each attempt to fill her lungs frightened her more; the metal answered by tightening.

She saw star-metal spreading through Citoren. It came from the hands she could not lift.

Drayven knelt. “Princess.” He raised her chin. “The trees are standing. Look past me. We are all here.”

Lyrian blinked. “The Vel’thari — it can’t tell the difference —”

“No. It can’t. But you can. Breathe. Slow. Let the Celestium catch up.”

She tried to follow his voice. His hand stayed on her shoulder while the ruined forest broke apart and returned. Under her side she felt wet moss. She pressed into it. Slowly the armor loosened.

She stood, with help.

• • •

They gathered close. For a full minute no one spoke. Lysara kept a hand on Drayven’s sleeve. Gavric watched her fingers, then looked down at his own.

When Lyrian could walk, they followed the lit roots out of the close air. The electrical scent thinned. At the next bend they paused, hands still on one another. Lysara kept looking back at her arm.

Keeper straightened against a tree.

“Mycelium,” he said. “Through the Ancient roots. I could see it in the other layer while I was seeing all of you die.”

Elyra’s eyes sharpened through her tear-stains. “Parasitic?”

“Perhaps. I saw no damage to the Thal’as. It seemed to be using the network to change the air currents, the warmth, the moisture. To send its compounds where they were needed.”

“I think it began at the threshold. Those small changes in the light and sound. We kept trying to read them.”

“Chemical warfare,” Gavric said. “From mushrooms.”

“A very old network,” Keeper said. “Yes.”

“I want to go back to fighting Malisohak,” Gavric said. “They at least have the courtesy to be visible.”

Lysara, still shaking, managed a sound that was approximately a laugh. “You’re not wrong.”

Elyra wiped her face. “The old accounts describe this. Compounds that change how we sort what we see and remember. I suspected it before the air grew stronger. I should have spoken.”

“Which is why each person’s experience was different,” Lyrian said slowly. The Vel’thari was still running cold but the constriction had eased to a level she could function through. “The forest didn’t need to know what we feared. It only needed to —”

“Disable the filter,” Elyra finished. “And our psychology did the rest.”

Silence.

“Does it know what it is doing to us?” Gavric asked.

“I could find no central mind,” Keeper said. “Only responses spreading through the roots. It may defend itself without knowing us at all.”

“That’s more terrifying,” Lysara said. “Not less.”

“I know,” Keeper said.

• • •

Keeper passed his herbal flask. The tonic might help, he said, though he had made it for more familiar poisons. They took small sips.

Elyra gently touched Lysara’s arm. “You’re still standing.”

Lysara looked at her forearm. The skin was unmarked except for the scratches her own nails had made. “The phantom sensation was completely convincing. Localized. Specific. I would have sworn on my blade those things were real.”

“I believe you,” Elyra said. “Your hand is still shaking.”

Lysara covered the scratches with her other hand.

Gavric sat with his head bowed. “My men. I saw them. I knew — on some level I knew it wasn’t real. But the guilt is real. The fungi didn’t create it. They just — removed the walls I’d built around it.”

“The guilt was already there,” Keeper said. “What the faces accused you of is another matter.”

Lyrian looked at Drayven. “You reached us. I could not make the forest real by myself, but you gave me something else to follow.”

“My brother was there the whole time.” Drayven rubbed his neck. “I could still see you between appearances. I don’t know why.”

“We need to find out,” Elyra said.

• • •

They kept together as the path led on.

“Perhaps resistance changes the response,” she said. “Or the concentration is lower here. I would rather not turn back to compare.”

“Charming hospitality,” Drayven murmured.

They came upon a clearing ringed by mushrooms — large ones, cap-shaped, radiating soft purple bioluminescence. At the center, a spring fed by a subterranean source, its water shimmering with a turquoise hue that matched the Thal’as frequency Elyra had been tracking. A cool breeze touched their faces.

Keeper studied the clearing. “Water, mushrooms, a little wind.” He lowered his staff. “For once, both sights agree.”

Elyra dipped a hand in the spring. Her staff answered the Celestium dissolved in it. The local Thal'as was clear. She watched the purple mushrooms, uncertain why these had left them alone.

"This water is Celestium-infused," she said. "It may help clear the residual compounds."

They drank and washed their faces. Lyrian let the cold water run over her wrists. When she looked up, the clearing stayed where it was.

Gavric exhaled and let his shoulders sag. "If this forest weren't trying to eat my sanity, I could almost admire it."

"We do not know that it is trying," Elyra said.

"Thank you, that's a very important distinction when mushrooms are dismantling my grip on reality."

• • •

Beyond the spring, cascading notes sounded overhead. A Runeshrike settled on a branch, its feathery crest lit with patterns like writing.

"A Runeshrike," Keeper said. "They carry signals between places the roots cannot join."

Elyra listened to the intervals. They repeated, keeping their shape as they passed into the Thal'as around her. *Safe passage*, she thought.

Or at least, that was Elyra's best interpretation. The encoding was archaic, pre-dating any Sylvaren notation system she knew.

The bird spread luminous wings and vanished among the branches. For a few seconds the same notes moved through the forest.

Lyrian turned to the group. "We're deep in. Despite everything, we're still moving forward."

“Then perhaps we can reach the inner sanctum,” Keeper said. “If we have understood it.”

“Where we face the greatest trials,” Gavric said. “Or, ideally, fewer psychoactive mushrooms.”

“I cannot promise that,” Keeper said, with a straightness of expression that Gavric could not determine was deadpan humor or genuine warning. Knowing Keeper, it was both.

• • •

They passed more fungi, Ko’ri moths drifting on transparent wings, a shape that might have been another Lyskai. Lyrian kept waiting to feel the scrutiny return.

They crossed a ravine along an Ancient’s exposed root, single file. Cool mineral air rose from the darkness below. The Thal’as ran clearly beneath their boots.

They camped when the moss dimmed. Keeper gathered pink-capped fungi with spiral markings. “These compete with the others. Some of their compounds may help us. They are not a cure.”

“You’re prescribing counter-mushrooms to counteract the attack-mushrooms,” Drayven observed. “I want this noted for the record.”

Elyra conjured a small sphere of greenish light — enough to see faces without disrupting the forest’s light-sensitive organisms. They ate. They looked at each other.

Drayven cleared his throat. “We should talk about what happened.”

Lysara rubbed the scratches on her forearm. “I felt them under my skin. I knew it was impossible and I believed it completely. The two states coexisted.” She looked at her arm. “The forest found the thing I’m most afraid of — loss of bodily integrity. Being consumed from within. I’ve never told anyone that.”

“The fear was yours,” Elyra said. “The fungi did not need to know its name.”

Gavric spoke next. “My men. Thirty years of survivor’s guilt, and the forest stripped away every coping mechanism I’ve built.” He stared at his hands. “The accusations were in my own voice. That’s what — that’s the part I can’t shake.”

“You heard accusation,” Keeper said. “But you also heard Drayven. You stood up for the living.”

Elyra bowed her head. “I saw my power destroying everything I love. The worst version of myself, magnified. And the worst part is that the fear is rational. The Vel’thari research, the Thal’as modulation — any of it could go wrong. The illusion wasn’t a lie. It was a possibility I’ve been keeping in a box.”

They looked at Lyrian.

She drew a slow breath. The Vel’thari was cool but no longer constricting — the fear had receded to a background state she could coexist with. “I saw myself as the cause of Citoren’s destruction. The star-metal consuming everything through me. And the Vel’thari made it worse — it amplified the chemically induced fear through the same feedback loop it uses for genuine threats. I couldn’t distinguish artificial fear from real fear because the armor doesn’t distinguish them.”

She paused. “Which means any future encounter with psychoactive threats — natural or Malisohak-engineered — hits me harder than anyone else in this group. The Vel’thari is a vulnerability multiplier as much as a capability multiplier.”

Silence. Then Elyra: “We design countermeasures. We document the receptor pathways. We find compounds that antagonize the effects. This is solvable.”

“In three months,” Lyrian said. “Which is what you said about the Celestium lattice model.”

“I’m aware of the irony.”

“Then we watch for it,” Drayven said. “If Gavric speaks to shadows, I take his wrist. If Lysara feels the crawling, someone stays beside her. If Elyra sees fire, we ask what we can all see. And if the armor closes on you—”

“You talk me down,” Lyrian finished. “The same way you did today.”

“We were each alone in it,” Keeper said. “We need to know when another pair of eyes disagrees with ours.”

“Provided those eyes are seeing clearly,” Elyra said.

“Yes. We will have to keep checking.”

• • •

They lay down. Lyrian listened to their breathing, the distant calls, wood shifting as the air cooled.

The armor was neither heavy nor weightless. Small changes of warmth and cold passed through it. She could breathe without effort.

She glanced at Elyra, asleep near her staff’s faint glow.

We will make it through. She let the thought stay for a moment before she began to question it.

She closed her eyes. Beside her, someone turned in their sleep.

Some situations did not improve with analysis.

She slept.

The moss brightened by degrees. They woke stiff and sore. Gavric watched a moving shadow until a moth lifted from the branch above it.

Elyra knew the effects had eased. She still waited after each glance for the thing she had seen to change.

It was going to take longer than a night.

They ate more of the pink-capped fungi. “Fighting mycology with mycology,” Drayven said. No one had an improvement to suggest.

They checked their gear slowly, passing buckles and bindings between them when they wanted a second look.

Keeper checked the route he had marked in bark. Both sights agreed for now: inward, toward the sanctum.

Drayven stayed near Lysara. When her face tightened, he touched her shoulder. In a dark passage Lyrian looked back for Elyra and found her already watching. Gavric called “All clear” often enough that the words began to help.

Keeper walked more steadily. When his two sights disagreed, he stopped and asked the others what they saw.

The almost-words were gone. Elyra could no longer smell the sharp compound. She waited before deciding what that meant.

Ahead lay the inner sanctum, where the Thal’as gathered most densely. They followed the lit roots, close enough to reach one another.

CHAPTER 8

The Stygian Caverns

At the inner sanctum, the lit roots converged beneath a shelf of stone. Keeper's staff found an opening among them. The current they had followed through the Wood continued below.

They went down beside the roots.

The first thing Lyrian noticed was that the walls were breathing.

She watched the stone expand and settle. So slowly she could not point to the moment it changed. The Wood's last roots entered the rock beside her. Fungal colonies lit the ceiling ahead, joined by pale threads.

The air tasted of iron, with an alkaline smell beneath it that made her think of an old wound.

Cold spread along her ribs. The Vel'thari drew tight before she had decided to be afraid. She waited for the feeling to change. It did not.

"Vel'thari," Keeper had said when he examined it weeks earlier. "The Malisohak give it a function. We give it a ceremonial title so long that most people give up halfway through. Sometimes the shorter name wins."

She thought of his hands turning the armor over. Now it was closed around her. Named by the people who had burned her home.

Keeper's staff lit wet stone and scattered rubble. A slick film lay across the floor. "The caverns extend beneath Citoren," he said. His voice traveled ahead, clearer than an echo. "But these formations follow no layering I know."

"Wonderful," Sir Drayven said, rolling the shoulder where the Enchanted Wood's psychic assault had left him knotted and tense. "As if illusions and forest nightmares weren't enough. Now we get to crawl through the planet's intestinal tract."

No one laughed, but Lysara's mouth twitched.

Elyra crouched beside the fungi without touching them. "I do not recognize these. Look at the gills. And what they grow from." She pointed to the exposed stone. "No rotting wood. No leaf matter."

"The buried fragments may account for it," Keeper said. "The recovery parties could not have found everything." He touched the wall and drew back a wet finger. "Warm. And thick. This is not groundwater."

Crystal veins branched through the walls, thickening where they met. Light passed along the translucent ones, always in one direction. Lyrian followed a pulse until it disappeared into the rock.

Star-metal lay among the veins. Small dark fragments, their surfaces shifting as she moved. Around each one, stone had become porous. Crystals spread outward from the metal. She could not tell which material was growing into the other.

The armor drew tighter. She unclenched her jaw and tried to separate what she saw from what the metal made her feel.

It seemed to recognize the fragments. She wished she knew what recognition meant to it.

Gavric went ahead with his sword ready. Their boots scraped wet stone, and the sound traveled farther into the passage than Lyrian could see.

The passage opened beneath a high vault. Segmented columns joined floor and ceiling, ringed like growing bone. Darkness filled the spaces between them.

Keeper tapped a column with his staff. The sound returned from several directions. "Runes in the stone. Not on its surface. Within it."

Elyra turned. "The Thal'as is running through crystal here. Listen to how the pulses travel." She looked at Lyrian. "Can you feel the artifact?"

Lyrian closed her eyes. Warmth began beneath her sternum, easing the pressure. A slow pulse reached her from below. "There is something deeper. The armor is reaching toward it."

She opened her eyes. "It could be the artifact. Or more of these fragments. I cannot distinguish them."

Drayven, from behind her: "That distinction seems important."

"It is," she said. "I'm working on it."

He grunted. "And if your armor's guidance leads us into a geological oesophagus with teeth? Your powers aren't fully tested. Your control slipped in the Wood. And now you're asking us to follow a suit of alien-named metal deeper into the world's digestive system on its say-so."

The crystal nerve-veins in the walls pulsed faintly, as though reacting to the tension. Lyrian couldn't tell if that was real or the Vel'thari shading her perception.

“I know.” Heat edged into her gauntlets. She breathed before going on. “We came for the star-metal’s secrets. This is the strongest lead we have.”

Elyra stepped between them. “Then we check the lead as we follow it. Drayven, keep watching the route. Lyrian, tell us when the reading changes.”

“Fine.” Drayven looked once more at the inlays along her hands, then toward the passage.

They edged along ledges above chasms that swallowed the fungal light. It lit their side clearly and reached no farther. Lyrian kept a hand against the wall.

Deeper down, Celestium traces gave way to thicker crystal veins and more star-metal. The walls yielded beneath her hand in places. Elsewhere they had a grain like wood.

An arch crossed the next crevasse, slick with warm moisture. Gavric pressed a boot against it. The stone gave, then recovered.

“It bends.” He leaned a little more weight onto it. “I do not trust that much give.”

“Yet it comes back,” Elyra said.

“One at a time,” Keeper said. “Slowly.”

Drayven crossed slowly. A low tone rose from the arch beneath each step. Fragments fell into the dark without an answering impact. On the far side he turned. “It holds. Barely.”

Lysara followed. Near the midpoint, a dimple formed beneath her boot. She leaped clear of it, took the last steps in a rush, and caught Drayven’s arm.

The rest crossed one at a time. Lyrian’s hands still shook when she reached solid ground.

“Still better than the Wood’s illusions,” Lysara said, slightly breathless. “Though I’m beginning to suspect ‘better’ is a relative term we’ve been using too generously.”

The passages divided. In the lit ones, veins as thick as Lyrian's wrist carried synchronized pulses. Elyra watched a sequence repeat. "These are firing together. Like a nervous system."

"Please don't finish that thought," Gavric said.

"The thought finishes itself whether I say it or not."

Dark passages smelled of sulfur and a cloying sweetness. They doubled back more than once. Keeper checked his bearings; Lyrian reported what she could feel, and how uncertain she was of it.

"It's as if the caverns shift," Elyra said after they passed a formation she swore they'd seen an hour earlier — the same double-ribbed column with a fissure shaped like a radial fracture in bone. "Either my spatial memory is failing or the geometry isn't stable."

"If the star-metal makes it grow," Keeper said, "perhaps it also makes it remodel. New stone in one place, old stone taken back in another. It might change over weeks or months."

"Or hours," Elyra said.

"Let's hope not."

At last they reached a chamber whose ceiling disappeared into darkness. Fungal sheets covered its pillars. Fine dust shimmered across the floor. At the center stood a crooked obelisk, faint green patterns spread across its sides.

Gavric crouched. "No tracks." He rubbed dust between his fingers and sniffed it. "Warm. It smells of copper."

Keeper stopped before the obelisk. Lyrian watched the small shift in his eyes as he brought both sights to bear.

"These marks govern something." He traced a spiral. "The relationships repeat in the passages. I think this formation maps the cavern around it."

A sound interrupted him — a scraping, percussive rasp from the darkness beyond the chamber's far wall. The dust on the floor rippled in concentric circles, and a low tremor cracked through the stone.

"We're not alone," Lyrian whispered. The Vel'thari had gone cold and tight again, contracting around her torso. Fear. Definite, unmistakable fear, whether hers or amplified.

The Tenebrous Widow came out of the dark. Lyrian could see it too clearly.

Barbed legs contracted in waves beneath a segmented body. Its shell had the shifting sheen of the walls. Green fungal light struck the clustered eyes and came back violet.

Venom dripped from curved mandibles. Where it struck, the stone grew porous. Fine crystal threads began to rise from the wet patches.

Lyrian looked from the new threads to the veins along the wall.

Gavric cursed, sword up. "Stay together. Don't let it flank."

The Widow shrieked. Crystal veins flared across the chamber; the fungi dimmed and blazed again. Then it lunged.

Drayven caught a leg on his sword. The impact drove him backward through the dust. The Widow followed, mandibles closing toward the joints of his armor.

Lysara darted in and slashed at a leg joint. Her blade scraped the exoskeleton and the sparks that flew were the wrong color — blue-white, as from striking star-metal. The gouge she left was shallow and already darkening, the material sealing itself. "It heals," she spat, rolling clear of a return strike.

Elyra sent flame across the chamber. For an instant the ceiling appeared, ribbed and threaded with light. The Widow recoiled, then scuttled sideways beyond the hottest part.

Lyrian raised her hand. The star-metal blazed, and the current pulled right as her control slipped. The bolt passed so close to Drayven that his hair lifted. He jerked away.

“Are you *trying* to kill me?” He didn’t shout it. He said it with the flat fury of a man who had been expecting this.

Her arms sagged under a sudden weight. She had nearly struck him. She tried to breathe, but the thought came back before she had finished the breath.

Gavric drove his blade beneath the Widow. The plates there yielded with a wet sound. Dark fluid spilled, sharp with copper and ozone. Its scream ran through the crystal veins and into Lyrian’s teeth.

Keeper’s incantation erected a shimmering ward that deflected two scything legs. “Its nervous system is networked into the cavern’s crystal matrix,” he said, strain in his voice. “When it feels pain, the cavern feels it. Focus on the abdomen. Gavric’s blade got through there.”

She fixed her attention on the gap between the abdominal plates. The shame remained, heavy in her arms. She narrowed the current and released it. The arc struck the gap. The Widow’s legs locked.

Elyra burned its face. Lysara cut into an exposed leg joint. Gavric thrust upward through the broken plates.

The Widow died in spasms. Light rippled away through the walls. The fungi dimmed, then recovered.

Then the fungi began to move.

Threads reached for the corpse from floor and walls. They entered its wounds and spread beneath the shell, drawing it into the same pale growth that covered the chamber.

“It is taking the body back,” Elyra said. “It may have been part of the cavern. An organ.”

Drayven wiped blood — his own, from a cut on his forearm — and turned away from the sight. “The sooner we leave this place, the better. Before it decides we’re spare parts too.”

Lyrian bit the inside of her cheek. She still saw the bolt passing his head. Every return to it made the armor heavier.

Drayven checked his blade edge without looking up. Lysara touched his shoulder. “She was trying to cover you.”

“She nearly succeeded in a different sense.” But the heat had gone out of his voice. What remained was tiredness.

Keeper returned to the obelisk. Runes brightened beneath his fingers. Lyrian stayed a step behind, trying to settle the weight of the armor.

“I cannot date the script,” he said. “But these relationships suggest access rules.” He traced the nested lines. “Something to be answered.”

Lysara brushed dust from the base. “Here.” Smaller characters followed a spiral near the floor.

He squinted. Mouthed syllables. Then read aloud:

“Cities I have, but no houses. Forests, but no trees. Waters, but no fish. If you know me, you shall pass. If not, the path remains sealed.”

A pause.

“A riddle,” Gavric said. “Of course it is. Because navigating a semi-alive cave system full of monsters wasn’t enough of a test. They also wanted to check we’re clever.”

“To be fair,” Lysara said, “the monster didn’t check anything. I think the monster was just here.”

“Comforting.”

Drayven frowned at the runes. “Could be referencing illusions. Or some concept of representation versus reality.”

Lysara tapped her chin. “Something that contains these elements in name only. Not physically.”

Elyra studied the script. “A painting? A tapestry? They depict cities, forests, water — but none of it is real.”

Keeper returned his hand to the largest spiral. “Something that represents a place. Like this formation.”

“A map,” Lyrian said. “Cities, forests, rivers. All marked. None present.”

Keeper looked from her to the lines beneath his hand.

“Yes.” He traced the river systems, the forest boundaries, the mountains. Light followed his fingers and spread into the crystal veins.

The floor shook. Dust rose around the obelisk. Behind them, a section of wall flexed open, widening around a circle of white light.

Lyrian watched its edges contract and settle. She wished it had moved like a door.

“By the forest spirits,” Lysara breathed.

Gavric let out a low whistle, then glanced at Lyrian. “Well done, Princess.” He said it simply, without performance. She managed a nod.

The walls beyond shone pearl-white. Crystal veins ran in neat bundles along the ceiling. The warm seepage was gone, the air dry.

“Someone shaped this,” Keeper said. “The material is the same. The arrangement is deliberate.”

Lyrian studied the smooth walls. “If these paths connect across Citoren, the Malisohak may have found them too. They could be using the cavern network as transit routes.”

Elyra shivered. “If so, we could meet them down here.”

Drayven’s hand went to his sword hilt. “Then we’d better be ready.” His voice was flat, professional. He’d put the anger away somewhere. Lyrian didn’t mistake that for it being gone.

Malisohak figures filled the next wall. Lyrian recognized the angular faces and the flowing armor. Behind them, spires rose beneath more than one sun.

“The city from your vision?” Elyra asked.

Lyrian looked along the spires. “Xylos. Before it died.”

Keeper studied the next panel. “They built around the star-metal. Containment, or cultivation. Perhaps they feared it and tried to cage it; perhaps they were directing its growth.”

“Those aren’t mutually exclusive,” Elyra said.

“No. They rarely are.”

Lysara pointed to a smaller carving showing construction extending downward, into schematic representations of tunnels. “They worked beneath the surface too. Tunnels, chambers. The same forms we are seeing here.”

The tunnels in the carving resembled the passage around her. Xylos was gone. Why was its history here?

Drayven paused at each junction, looking back as well as ahead. Lyrian watched him check an alcove, then the way they had come. While she followed the metal, he kept track of the exits.

The corridor ended in a circular chamber. Angular patterns crossed the floor toward a stone door twice a Sylvaren’s height.

A tablet stood on a pedestal at the center. Energy arced around it. Lyrian felt the hair on her arms rise, then warmth spreading beneath the breastplate.

She told it to settle down and couldn’t tell if it listened.

“Another puzzle,” Keeper said.

Elyra approached and read:

“I can run but never walk. I have a bed but never sleep. I have a mouth but never eat. What am I?”

Gavric stared. “After the spider, a children’s riddle?”

“Can you still answer it?” Keeper asked.

“A river,” Lysara said. “It has a bed, a mouth, and it runs.”

“A river,” Lyrian said.

Drayven spoke up, quieter than before. “If it’s correct, how do we input the answer?”

Gavric nodded toward the swirling lines on the great door. “Same principle as before. We trace the relevant pattern.”

Keeper placed his palm on the tablet. The runes flared. Elyra closed her eyes and directed a careful thread of energy into the etched channels, shaping it into flowing, wavelike patterns. The arcs shifted color, forming undulations that traveled across the door’s surface like water in a streambed.

The door parted. Cool air rushed through, carrying scents of deep stone and ozone.

Lysara exhaled. “This place and its riddles. At least it hasn’t asked us for a limerick yet.”

“Don’t give it ideas,” Gavric said.

The door had barely opened when a roar sounded behind them. A side passage filled with serpents, each as thick as a thigh, their scales shifting like the Widow’s shell. Stone fell from the ceiling.

Keeper raised his staff. “The opening triggered them. Keep the doorway clear!”

Drayven caught the lead serpent’s fangs on his blade and shoved it back. “Working on it!”

He backed toward the open doorway, facing the chamber. The others closed beside and behind him.

“Hold here.” Lyrian set a shield to Drayven’s right. A serpent struck it and recoiled. Through the warming metal she felt the other bodies gathering behind it.

Gavric and Lysara guarded Drayven’s flanks. Elyra’s flame drove the serpents toward their blades. Keeper warded the gaps.

Most fell or fled. One larger serpent, crimson-scaled, held its ground. Drayven caught its strike. Lyrian moved until she had a clear angle beneath its body, then sent a narrow arc into the ventral plates. It collapsed.

In the aftermath, breathing hard, Lysara rubbed a shallow cut on her forearm. “They did not appreciate us opening that door.”

“Like an immune response,” Elyra said. “The door sent a signal. We may have passed one test and triggered another. It still treats us like an infection.”

“I’ve been called worse,” Gavric said.

They went through the door. Silver light filled the corridor beyond, and a cool breeze carried no scent at all. Lyrian drew a long breath.

The corridor opened onto a landing above a chasm. A circular platform projected from the rock, rings and celestial bodies inlaid across it. At the center, arcs joined star-metal shards into an unfamiliar constellation.

“The metal carries more than power,” Keeper said. “The main fragment was taken beneath the Eldrin. These remained buried. A thousand years in this stone—but the history in them is older.”

Elyra crouched beside the mosaic. “We followed the resonance here. But how much of the cavern can it reach?”

“Farther than I can see,” Keeper said. “The fragments answer one another.”

“Through the crystal matrix, I think. As the crater answers the sanctum through the bedrock.” She pointed to the veins leaving the platform. “If these carry the signal, it should weaken at a rate we can measure.”

“Can you predict the loss?” Keeper asked.

“With a baseline and enough time to sample it. I cannot give you either yet.”

“The resonance has guided us this far.”

“It has. I still want to know what is carrying it.”

Warmth drew Lyrian toward the mosaic. She put her palm against the stone.

Arcs leapt into her armor. For a moment the chamber seemed too small for what she could feel: crystal passages spreading in every direction, star-metal at their junctions, and a deeper pulse reaching through them. She had followed its echo. Now it seemed beneath her feet.

Gavric whistled low. “It’s responding to her.”

“We’re sure this is wise?” Drayven said, from several steps back, arms crossed. “Touching unknown star-metal deposits in an alien shrine inside a living cave?”

“Wise is a strong word,” Lyrian said, her voice strange in her own ears, resonating slightly. “But I can feel the network. The whole system. And it — there’s a path. Deeper.”

A clear note filled the air. The Celestium answered it, and for three seconds the armor’s constant alterations ceased. Lyrian felt fear, curiosity, the ache in her arms, without the metal changing their weight. As though a lens had lifted.

Then the metal answered her again. Around them, runes lit in a ring. The shards flared so brightly she could find no shadows.

“What’s happening?” Lysara asked, her voice admirably calm for someone standing in the center of an activating alien mechanism.

Energy stirred the dust and lifted their cloaks. Lyrian felt herself held for a heartbeat, weightless. As it ebbed, a path of light appeared in the veins behind them, leading deeper.

“It answered the Vel’thari,” Keeper said. “And opened a route.”

Lyrian approached Drayven while the others examined the newly activated pathway. He stood with his arms still crossed, watching the mosaic's fading glow with an expression she couldn't read.

"Drayven." She kept her voice low. "I nearly hit you. I let the anxiety pull my aim. You were right to call it dangerous."

"Anxiety," he said. "You make it sound like a part that failed."

"It becomes one in the armor. I have to recognize it before I send another bolt."

He watched the fading mosaic. "In the Wood, I could help. Here, every door asks for something I don't have. You, Keeper, Elyra—you can read this place. I count ways for us to die in it."

"You fought the Widow and held the center against the serpents. Without your sword work, they would have overrun us."

"Swords are simple. Anyone can swing steel."

"Not like you did."

He looked away. She could see the muscles in his jaw working. "I swore an oath to protect you, Princess. But it's difficult to protect someone whose armor is more dangerous to her than most of what's trying to kill us. I've seen what happens when people rely on power they can't control."

"I know. And your caution isn't wrong. I'm asking for patience, not faith. I'll earn the faith."

He nodded after a long moment. "Then we go on. But be careful."

The lit route spiraled down around a shaft. Alcoves held chipped altars, statues of the elongated figures, carvings abandoned before the final strokes.

The armor answered traces of star-metal in each alcove: altar stones, pigments, the edges of a statue. Whoever had worked here had used it in everything.

Serpents still moved somewhere in the side passages, but none followed. The crystal veins along the ramp kept a steady rhythm.

“Gates between worlds,” Elyra said, following signs at a statue’s base. “Something the Malisohak built before they lost Xylos. Or something they hoped to build.”

“They shaped it,” Keeper said. “It shaped them in return. Perhaps they reached a point where they could no longer separate the two.”

“Cheerful,” Gavric said.

“Instructive,” Keeper corrected.

The ramp’s terminus was a great oval portal carved with star-metal motifs of extraordinary density. The central swirl shimmered with contained energy. The group braced for another test.

Glowing script emerged:

“I am the beginning of the end, and the end of time and space. I am essential to creation, yet can be erased. What am I?”

Elyra read it aloud, eyebrow raised.

Lysara mulled. “Beginning of the end... end of time and space... essential to creation but can be erased. That’s a linguistic riddle, not a conceptual one.”

Gavric was already there. “The letter E. Start of ‘End.’ End of ‘time’ and ‘space.’ Essential to ‘creation.’ And you can erase a letter.”

“After fighting a cave-spider the size of a carriage and debating wave mechanics with a shaman,” Lyrian said, “we’re being asked for a letter of the alphabet.”

“Don’t complain. I’ll take the letter puzzle over the spider every time.” Gavric nodded at Keeper.

Keeper pressed his palm to the swirling pattern, focusing. The energy responded to the conceptual input — whatever interface the builders had designed, it operated on thought as much as touch. The central swirl parted, revealing an inner doorway.

Elyra managed a half-smile. “Thank goodness for riddles, I suppose. Though I’m starting to feel like we’re being graded.”

“We are,” Keeper said. “That’s exactly what this is.”

White crystals lit the final cavern. A dais rose at its center, ringed with glyphs. The metallic smell made Lyrian’s skin prickle. Warmth spread along the star-metal as she approached.

“No sign of recent passage,” Gavric said. “Unless there is another way in.”

Drayven stayed at the entrance. “We can defend this doorway. Keep it in sight.”

Keeper approached the dais and tapped it with his staff. The glyphs responded with light, and patterns traced across the floor — converging, as Lyrian had seen in the mosaic, in the shape of a star-metal shard.

On the dais, warmth rushed beyond the edges of her body. She stopped until the Celestium steadied it. The feeling reminded her of the old warning about losing the boundary between flesh and metal. She could not tell what had changed this time.

She placed her hand on the central glyph.

A robed figure appeared above the dais, translucent, its proportions matching the carvings. The voice almost resolved into words, then slipped beyond her understanding.

Keeper stared. “A memory. Stored in the metal.”

The figure gestured, and Xylos opened around them. Multiple suns over bare ground. Falling star-metal. Then Malisohak cities rising, tunnels spreading beneath them, machines drawing on the

same power. Time passed in sudden changes of shape. The structures grew beyond the forms their makers had given them. Fractures opened through the land. Figures sealed chambers, abandoned tools, fled.

Lyrian knew the world. This time the others were seeing it with her.

A vortex opened over the final image. Star-metal shone through failing containment. The figure raised one hand, then faded.

Lyrian kept her hand on the glyph until the image vanished.

“Xylos,” Lyrian said. “The same people we met in the glade. They built a world with this power, and it grew past their ability to direct it.”

Drayven exhaled. Something shifted in his posture — a rigidity releasing. “So we’re not the first to wrestle with this. That’s — I’m not sure if that’s reassuring or terrifying.”

“Both,” Elyra said. “It’s both.” She placed a hand on Lyrian’s shoulder. “This is a warning. But it’s also a map. We saw where the growth escaped them. We can compare that with what is happening here.”

They stood in the fading light. Somewhere beyond the doorway, stone creaked.

Gavric broke the silence. “We move on. The Malisohak still threaten Citoren. Now we have seen more of what failed on Xylos. We need to understand it before it happens here.”

Lysara nodded. “Whoever set these tests wanted this record preserved. We should learn what we can from it.”

Lyrian turned to Drayven. He met her gaze. He was no longer looking at the inlays.

“Keep telling me when something is wrong,” she said. “Even when I argue. I need the warning before I lose control.”

“I can promise to argue,” Drayven said.

“I had noticed.”

His mouth twitched.

At the far exit, Keeper raised a guide-light. Elyra warded the opening. Silver light continued along the passage beyond.

Lyrian waited for the armor to settle before moving. It had weight again. She could carry it.

Gavric checked his blade. Lysara flexed her bruised wrist. Drayven watched the new corridor while Elyra finished the ward.

Light passed through the veins around them, carrying something none of them could read. Lyrian kept the warning in mind as she followed it.

The corridor beckoned. They went deeper.

CHAPTER 9

The Barren Desert

Hours later, daylight showed at the end of a passage. They came out shielding their faces. Lyrian closed her eyes; even through her lids the light hurt.

She raised an arm and stepped onto sand. It shifted beneath her boots, warm below the surface as well as above. She thought of the wet heat in the cavern walls.

For now she said nothing. She needed to see where they were.

Dunes rolled to the horizon beneath a pale sky. Heat blurred their edges until the slopes seemed to flow. Here and there, dark rock broke through with a glassy shine.

Lyrian scooped up some sand. The grains looked almost identical in size. She tilted her palm; their color changed together. In the caverns the stone had yielded under her hand. Here she could not trust a handful of grit to look the same twice.

Keeper bowed his head against the wind. "The Kareth live here," he said, his voice rough with dryness. "We will need their permission to pass." He crouched, let sand stream through his fingers, then lifted another handful to his ear.

"Listen. The grains ring against each other."

Elyra rubbed a few between finger and thumb. “There is a charge when I press them. Piezoelectric, perhaps.” She let them fall. “Look at how they settle. They align.”

Keper lowered his hand. “I can feel the Thal’as in it.”

Gavric looked from the dunes to their canteens. “Then it may guide us. But it gives us no shade.”

Since leaving the caverns, the Vel’thari had been quiet against Lyrian’s skin. She felt no warning from the inlays, though the sand kept changing color in her hand.

“We need water,” she said. “Everything else is secondary to that.”

Sir Drayven stood apart, arms crossed. In the caverns Lyrian had asked him to keep questioning her. Now, with no shade or water in sight, she could see the question coming.

“How far do we follow this?” Drayven asked. “The Malisohak are consolidating while we chase the artifact through a cave with a digestive tract and out into a desert that hums.”

Heat flickered along her gauntlets. She breathed until it eased. “We need water first. We cannot fight them as corpses.”

“And after that? How do we know the bond isn’t compromised? That it isn’t leading you where the Malisohak want you to go?”

She had no answer. That made it harder to hear.

Lysara’s eyes went to Drayven’s sword hand. His fingers were tight against his arm.

Elyra touched his arm. “Please. The desert is dangerous enough without us fighting each other.”

He shook her hand off. “She asked me to question the armor. I’m questioning it. We know it can hurt someone she means to protect. Why should its sense of direction be any safer?”

Gavric looked at Lysara. Neither spoke.

They walked.

Wind drove the grains against their faces. Red marks rose on exposed skin; every breath dried Lyrian's throat. The inlays warmed in the sun, a steady heat she could do nothing to settle.

Keeper warned them to ration water. Their half-filled canteens would not last. Nothing grew between the dunes. The rock outcrops offered no sign of a spring.

Then the mirages appeared.

Lyrian had expected a shimmer low on the horizon. These distortions hung above the dunes in bands, rippling at even intervals. Some were well above her head.

Lysara halted, blinking. "Is that water?"

Gavric shielded his eyes. "A mirage. The desert plays tricks."

"Look at the spacing," Elyra said. "Waves meeting other waves. The Thal'as may be changing how the light passes through the air."

Keeper watched a band narrow, then widen. "We feel it through the grains. Perhaps it reaches beyond them."

"The Kareth will know more than we do," Elyra said.

"If they choose to tell us."

Drayven grunted behind them. "Even the desert conjures illusions. I'm beginning to think Citoren has a theme."

Hours later a dust devil rose ahead. Sand spiraled upward, caught the sun, then fell away. Figures stood where Lyrian had seen only dunes. She could not tell where they had been hiding.

Cloth covered them from throat to ankle, tan folds over scaled hide and bone plates. Scarves hid their lower faces. Lyrian saw curved sabers, hooked blades, barbed spears; behind them, warriors held sinew-strung bows. They had let the travelers come close.

The Vel'thari warmed. A shield sprang up before Lyrian, ragged light snapping along its edges. The tallest warrior raised a hand. His people stopped, weapons ready.

No one advanced.

Lysara stepped forward with empty hands. “We come in peace. We seek passage through your land. We share an enemy in the Malisohak.”

Lyrian let the shield go. Coolness returned along the Celestium seams. The warrior’s hand stayed raised.

He called a short command and another warrior came beside him. Marks covered their forearms: desert animals, curved lines, bands that reminded Lyrian of the patterns above the dunes.

She looked toward Elyra. The mage was studying them too.

They might be records of what the Kareth had seen. Lyrian could not read them.

The leader lowered the cloth from his face. A silver scar crossed one cheek.

“Pazhikar povars yu pazesh, poping up vitaut prior percepsh. Hau kan vi trust yur tru intentsh?”

Keeper murmured beside her, “We appeared without warning, bearing strange powers. He wants proof of intent.”

Lysara kept her palms raised. “We mean no harm. We fight the Malisohak who threaten all lands. We seek safe passage and water, if you can spare it.”

His gaze moved along the company and stopped at Lyrian’s in-lays. “Words are easy,” he said in halting Sylvaren. “Kareth rely on proof.” He beckoned to someone behind him.

The Shaman was small, her hair bound with cloth and bone beads. Feathers stirred against her robes. She carried a staff of sun-bleached wood, its carved marks resembling those on the warriors’ arms.

She studied their faces while the wind snapped at her sleeves.

“You claim to share our enemy. You claim you can fight them. Prove your worth. Answer riddles that reveal your knowledge of Citoren’s hidden truths.”

Lysara inclined her head. “We accept.”

The Shaman struck the sand with her staff. Dust rose. As it settled, the grains aligned in brief patterns and scattered. Lyrian felt a pulse through her boots.

Beside her, Keeper lowered his eyes to the staff’s point.

The Shaman spoke:

“Fabled fruit from a forest tree. Healing for hearts, but harming the heedless. Name it, if knowledge is yours.”

“The Enai fruit,” Lysara said. “Properly prepared, it heals. Improperly handled, it induces madness.”

The Shaman nodded.

“Wise-winged watcher in Citoren’s dark wood. A whisperer of words, a seeker of souls.”

“The Aeon Owl,” Lysara said. “Revered for sensing spirits in the forest’s twilight.”

Another nod. Then the Shaman lowered her voice.

“Citoren’s core conceals a sacred spring. Purifying the pure, hidden from the hateful. Speak not lightly its name — yet show us your reverence.”

Lysara hesitated. “A place known only to those who earn it, where water flows from the world’s heart. We do not speak its name freely, to keep it from desecration.”

The Shaman searched her face. Lyrian waited, uncertain whether Lysara’s refusal had cost them passage. Then the staff tapped the sand again.

“You have wisdom. Citoren’s secrets you do not spend carelessly. Passage is granted.”

The leader lowered his hand. "The Malisohak have poisoned our wells. Angered the spirits." He glanced at the Shaman. "Disrupted the patterns. If you war against them, we share a cause."

He let the cloth fall over his face. "Tread softly. Respect the desert's laws. We will not retrieve you if you break them."

Gavric leaned toward Lyrian. "The wells, then. We should ask what they have lost."

She nodded, watching the Shaman turn away.

The Kareth led them between sinkholes covered by thin crusts of sand. Lyrian watched their feet. Each small change in the grain pattern brought a turn or a shorter step. She began to recognize some of the places they avoided.

Hide tents stood in the lee of a rocky ridge, pit fires smoking between them. Arkrags waited at the tether points, heavy reptilian tails laid across the sand. Children moved among the mounts with waterskins.

The water they were given was lukewarm and tasted of minerals and hide. Lyrian drank too quickly, stopped, and drank again.

Drayven drank apart from them. The leader drew back his scarf. "I am Shayik al'Kunir. My people watch these dunes for enemies. Malisohak are enemies indeed."

Gavric returned his salute. "Thank you for receiving us. Where have they struck?"

Shayik nodded. "Their ships cross the sky sometimes. Drop soldiers near oases. We defend what we can. Some have already fallen."

"Ships," Drayven said. "They can cross your lines and land behind them."

Lyrian heard the beginning of an assessment: the Kareth might hold a route through the dunes and still lose the well it led to.

Drayven looked toward the others, but Elyra was already approaching the Shaman's fire. His jaw tightened. He did not follow.

The Shaman sat by a small fire, chanting over a bowl of smoking herbs. Elyra bowed and waited. A curt nod allowed her nearer.

"The desert spirits," Elyra said. "How do they manifest here?"

"Where the winds meet. Where the sands align." The Shaman stirred the herbs. "They test those who walk here, as the forest spirits test those who walk the Wood."

"The patterns above the dunes?"

"Those are the spirits' breath. Their presence. You saw them?"

"Interference fringes from converging wavefronts in the sand's crystal matrix." Elyra caught the Shaman's look. "Yes. I saw them."

The Shaman studied her. "Your people have different names."

"Different models. The same observations."

A pause. The fire crackled. The herbs smoked.

"Your model," the Shaman said, "explains how the spirits move. It does not explain why." She held up a hand before Elyra could respond. "I have watched the patterns for sixty years. They are not random. They respond to events — to death, to birth, to the poisoning of wells. Your wave-fronts and interference fringes do not account for that. My spirits do."

Elyra opened her mouth, then closed it. Lyrian waited for an answer; none came.

"Perhaps both accounts leave something out," Keeper said. "One follows the medium, the other the message. We may need both to understand what we are hearing."

"The philosopher's answer." The Shaman turned to him. "We have those too. They are the ones who satisfy no one."

Keeper almost smiled. "In my experience, that's how you know they're getting close to the truth."

Drayven circled the camp while they spoke. The tents could be struck quickly. The fires were low, hard to see from above, and the Arkrag's stood where their riders could reach them without crossing the camp. He slowed beside the guarded water store.

He studied the sentries' sight lines and watched a change of watch. For a short interval the southern approach lay unwatched behind the ridge. Children carried waterskins between the tents and tended the Arkrag's. He measured the distance from the weapons cache to the nearest shelter.

He could see no warriors held in reserve. Perhaps there were others beyond the ridge; from here, every armed adult seemed occupied. If the camp were struck, he could find no position to fall back to. They would have to hold or scatter.

No one asked what he had found. Across the camp, Elyra and Keeper were still at the Shaman's fire. He could take his observations over there. He kept walking.

A warrior practiced near the last tent. Drayven stopped to watch the curved blades turn. He knew parts of the footwork from Gavric's drills, but here the shifting sand was part of each step. He followed one sequence through twice, trying to see where the warrior placed his weight.

The heat left with the sun. Stars crowded a sky that the forest and the caverns had kept from them.

At a small fire beside the camp, Lyrian drew her hands toward the flames. The others huddled close.

"Drayven. Are you all right? You've been quiet."

He looked up. "I'm perfectly fine. Just tired of being decorative."

"That's not—"

"Yes it is." He stood. "You need me in front when something attacks. Then you solve the riddle, and the work that matters begins."

“You got us through the Wood. You held the center in the caves. I told you—”

“You told me that in the caverns. I believed you.” He looked toward the tents. “Today I raised the ships, and the conversation moved on. I’ve spent the afternoon looking at how this camp could be attacked. Did anyone want that assessment?”

Elyra stopped with a hand raised toward him. Gavric looked into the fire.

“I’m going for a walk,” Drayven said. He turned and strode into the dark dunes.

Gavric rose halfway. “Drayven—”

He passed beyond the light. His footsteps faded.

“He’ll come back,” Lysara said. “He needs to cool down.” She kept watching where he had gone.

Lyrian sank beside the fire. Her shoulders sagged beneath the armor. She tried to lift them and felt the weight return, heavier for the effort.

She had heard him speak at Shayik’s welcome. She could have asked him to go on.

Keeper’s eyes opened. “Something is wrong.” He turned his head. “The patterns are shifting around Drayven.”

A cry crossed the dunes. Several notes sounded together; the grains beside the fire trembled.

Gavric was on his feet, hand on his sword. “What *was* that?”

“Not Malisohak.” Keeper turned toward the dunes. “Something is following the disturbance around him.”

Elyra watched the grains tremble. “Through the sand?”

“I think so.” Keeper stood. “We need to move. Now.”

The Kareth leader had appeared beside them, drawn by the cry. “You go? Danger at night.”

“Our companion is out there alone,” Lyrian said. “Something is hunting him.”

Shayik studied her face. Then he gestured. “Take Shal’rik.” A lean, sharp-eyed Kareth scout materialized from the camp’s edge, bow across his shoulder. “He reads the sand. He will find the foot-steps.”

Shal’rik led them into the moonlight, stopping now and then to press his palm against the sand. Lyrian strained to hear what he was feeling.

Each time he rose, she hurried after him.

Elyra raised small lights. Shal’rik asked her to lower them; in the moonlight, faint bands appeared over the dune crests. The orbs’ glow had been hiding the patterns.

“Here.” He crouched beside a footprint. “Steady at first. Then wandering.” Behind the prints lay a broad, sinuous groove. Shal’rik ran a hand along its edge. “Something follows him.”

The cry came again, closer. Shal’rik quickened his pace.

Drayven climbed a dune and slid back. Sand poured beneath his boots. Cold found the gaps in his armor, and his mouth was dry again. He knew what his training said about leaving camp alone. He had known it when he walked away.

The serpent found him on the downslope. Three times the length of the cave serpents, thick as a barrel, it shone darkly in the moonlight. Its body seemed to skip between positions. He tried to follow a coil and found it elsewhere, among the faint bands above the sand.

Two sets of lidless eyes fixed on him. Now it was silent. He remembered the cry that had drawn him onward.

He drew his sword. The first strike rang against it and drove him back a step. The creature’s hide had the glassy sheen of the sand.

His cuts glanced off the scales. A coil swept his legs from beneath him; he rolled and caught the descending jaws on his crossguard. Translucent fangs leaked venom. Where it touched the sand, the grains hissed and fused into glass.

The creature's weight bore down on him. His arms shook. Sand filled his eyes and mouth. Between its lunges he caught a pattern: the sand aligned, and the pressure on his sword increased. The grains scattered, and the pressure eased. He began to count.

Lightning struck its flank. The serpent screamed, releasing him. Sand burst to powder beside his head. Drayven scrambled backward, gasping.

Lyrian stood on the dune, her hand bright with discharge. Keeper raised a ward beside her. Elyra's staff kindled; Gavric and Lysara came down on either side.

They had come for him. He had barely found breath before he had to fight again.

The serpent swung toward Lysara. She stepped aside and cut between its scales. Clear fluid ran down the flank, splitting the moonlight into colors. Gavric struck at its midsection.

Flame swept its face. As it recoiled, Lyrian saw the sand scatter beneath it. "Watch the grains! It strikes when they align!"

Drayven regained his feet. He had kept counting. "Thirty seconds between peaks. Next trough in ten. That's our window."

Gavric and Lysara kept it turning until the grains scattered. Drayven rushed in and drove his sword between the scales. He tore the blade free and stepped clear. Lyrian sent a narrow arc along its spine, and the creature broke apart around the current. Scales fell as sand. The coils collapsed into a low dune.

Drayven held his guard until the last coil fell.

The patterns overhead steadied. For a moment no one moved.

Elyra reached him first. "You're hurt?"

He looked at a fresh cut on his forearm. His ribs hurt when he breathed. "I'm intact." He swallowed. "I should not have left."

Lyrian came closer. The inlays dimmed along her hand. "We came as soon as Keeper felt the disturbance."

"I know." Drayven met her eyes. "I was a fool. Walked into the desert alone because my pride was louder than my training."

"You asked us to listen today," Lyrian said. "I heard you raise the ships. I let it pass."

Drayven blinked.

"Holding a route through the dunes means little if soldiers can land at the well behind it. You were trying to tell us that."

He was quiet. Then: "You noticed."

"Enough to know I should have asked you to go on."

Gavric offered a waterskin. "Drink. We can debrief properly once we're not standing on what might be another predator."

Drayven took the skin. Lysara gripped his arm for a moment, then let go so he could drink.

Shal'rik waited until they were ready, then started back toward the camp.

The walk back took the rest of the night. Drayven stayed beside Lyrian. Neither spoke. When the sand grew steep, they slowed together.

Dawn was beginning to show when they reached the tents. The sentries let them through without comment.

They sank down beside the remnants of their fire. Shal'rik paused at the edge of the tents.

"Thank you," Lyrian said.

He nodded toward Drayven. "Keep him where you can see him."

Then he went to join the waking camp.

Drayven sat against a rock. He leaned his sword within reach and rested his hands on his knees. At last they had stopped shaking.

Lyrian sat beside him. “When we’ve rested, I want your assessment. The terrain, the camp, everything since the Wood.”

“That’s a long briefing.”

“Then I’ll listen for a long time.”

He looked at her. “On the march. I think better when I’m moving.”

As the sun rose, the Kareth began packing. The Shaman found them beside the dead fire, feathers stirring against her robes.

“We seldom join outsiders’ wars,” she told Lyrian. “But the Malisohak poison our water. If your cause restores the patterns, we may stand with you.”

“We do this for all of Citoren. Any help is a gift.”

The Shaman tapped her staff, and the grains aligned at her feet. “A boon. A desert incantation that wards thirst for one day. Use it wisely.” She traced signs in the air, then pressed a clay amulet into Lyrian’s palm. Warmth beat through it against her skin.

Keeper bowed. “We are honored.”

She looked at Drayven. “You walk the line of pride and valor. Remember — the desert is both forge and grave. The difference is humility.”

He held her gaze. “I learned that last night. The hard way.”

“That is the only way the desert teaches.” The corner of her mouth moved. “Our word for ‘lesson’ and our word for ‘scar’ are the same.”

They spent the morning replenishing supplies. Shayik provided directions to a hidden canyon pass that would route them around a Malisohak-occupied oasis. “Beyond that, your war is your own. But we will watch the dunes for you.”

Drayven began his assessment as they left. He spoke about the low fires, the places an attacker could approach unseen, what he could and could not judge from a single walk around the camp. Lyrian listened. The Vel’thari lay quietly against her skin.

Shal’rik stayed to guide them when Shayik’s people moved on. Elyra and Gavric walked near him, scanning the dunes. Lysara kept to the center; Drayven and Lyrian followed.

Behind them, figures watched from the dune tops until the next rise hid the camp.

The amulet beat against Lyrian’s palm. The wind dried her lips, but her thirst did not return.

Rock formations marked the distant canyons. She looked toward them while Drayven spoke.

That night they made a small fire beneath the open stars. Drayven sat between Lyrian and Lysara. His eyes still moved over the perimeter, following the wind and the faint bands above the dunes.

But he stayed in the circle.

Keeper spoke into the quiet. “If we keep the pace, we reach the canyon pass by midday. The Malisohak won’t wait for us. Rest while we can.”

The sand rang in the wind. Lyrian could hear it beyond the crackle of the fire, faint and uneven.

She watched Drayven check the dark behind them, then turn back to the fire.

The armor was quiet. She let her hand fall from the warm inlays.

For once she did not lie awake listening for a change.

• • •

Drayven woke when the fire had burned down to its lowest ember.

No cry had woken him. Lyrian slept on his left, Lysara on his right. At the perimeter, Keeper sat upright against a low rock. Drayven checked the camp, then checked it again.

He could find no threat.

The desert's hum had acquired another note. He had listened to it before sleep, counting the changes above the dunes; this one had not been there. It seemed to come from beneath the sand, from the buried star-metal. He could not have said how he knew that. He had never been able to sense it like this.

The note drew his attention in one direction.

Toward the east.

He breathed and stayed still. An unfamiliar sensation required attention. It did not require him to follow it. He tried to name what he felt and could not.

The thought arrived: *I should tell Keeper.*

The next thought came almost before the first had finished: *No. Telling Keeper would compromise the strike team. They cannot afford a delay.*

Too easy. He distrusted an answer that left nothing to argue with. He would tell Keeper at dawn. Until then he would stay where he was.

The eastern sky had begun to pale when he found himself standing. His pack was on his back, his sword at his hip. He remembered deciding to wait. He could not remember rising or gathering his things.

Lyrian's silver-streaked hair caught the first light. Lysara had turned her face against her arm. Keeper faced east. Drayven could not tell whether he was awake.

Get yourself clear of them. Whatever this is, it should not be in the camp.

That, at least, made sense. Something beneath the sand held his attention, and he had lost part of the night without moving from among his companions. If it happened again, he should be away from them.

He left the camp without waking anyone. The dunes received him.

He walked east, toward the pull. The thought that had kept him by the fire had lost its force. He could still remember it.

He would, he told himself, return by midmorning.

He noted that this promise also arrived too smoothly.

CHAPTER 10

A New Alliance

The desert cooled as evening came. Lyrian had been cold for an hour without reaching for another layer. At dawn Drayven's place had been empty. She kept looking toward the dunes as though she might still see him returning.

Gavric, Lysara and Shal'rik had followed his tracks east at first light. She had wanted to go. Gavric had asked where Drayven should find them if he came back, and she had stayed with Elyra and Keeper beside the dead fire.

By noon, Elyra had found three directions in the signal. Keeper could confirm none. The searchers returned with sand in their hair and no better answer. Beyond a stony rise the prints had broken apart; Shal'rik would not name the scattered marks beyond it as Drayven's.

They waited through the worst heat. Then they marked the way from the old camp and moved together toward the canyon route. Gavric kept turning to check behind them. Each time, Lyrian turned too.

When she found him gone, the Vel'thari had grown heavy against her chest. Twenty minutes later the weight eased. Nothing had changed; he was still missing. She distrusted the relief more than the heaviness.

Gavric snapped a dry root for the fire. Shal'rik had shown them where to dig for these remnants of buried shrubs. They caught slowly and burned long. "You know what bothers me," he said.

"Several things, presumably." Lysara sat cross-legged, cleaning her blade.

"The signs were there," Gavric said. "After the caverns. At Shayik's camp. I thought it was fatigue until he walked off." He turned the broken root. "Then we brought him back. I thought we had settled it."

"He sat between us last night," Lysara said. Her blade lay still across her knees. "He gave Lyrian the assessment she asked for. He stayed in the circle."

Elyra swept her detection ward over the dunes. "Then we do not know why he went."

Gavric laid the broken root on the fire. It took a while to catch.

Then the howl came.

From the northwest, it rose and fell over the dunes. Lyrian pressed a hand against her breastplate. Cold tightened along the inlays. She waited for her breathing to steady, and the pressure slowly eased.

Gavric stood with his sword drawn. Shal'rik crouched and listened, then lowered his shoulders.

"Mourning cry," he said in his clipped Sylvaren. "Not war. The Asa'vel — the long grief. Clan has lost people."

"Which clan?" Lysara asked.

"Not mine. Azure Scale, maybe. Or Copper Fang. Hard to say — wind carries it wrong."

By the time figures appeared on the dunes, Lysara had considered what she could offer them, and how little they could afford to give away.

Lysara could usually hear the point at which a court argument became a negotiation. Here she was less certain what an offered word might mean.

She had listened to Elyra and Shayik's Shaman disagree without resolving anything. They had still exchanged knowledge.

Since meeting Shal'rik, she had heard him name a sandstorm as the mood of Eyzam'hara, the dune mother. When Elyra asked about the wind, he had answered about what had angered her. Lysara remembered the frustration on both their faces.

Perhaps forty warriors approached in a loose crescent. Lysara watched its ends spread beyond the firelight. They had left room between their ranks, enough to speak across or close quickly.

Their armor shone where Shayik's hide and bone had been dull. Thin plates overlapped as they moved. Later she would learn that the Kareth made them from Arkrag molts, layering chitin across the grain and binding it with resin. For now she watched how little the plates hindered a warrior lowering his spear.

The leader was tall and broad-shouldered. Fine scales caught the moonlight across his face, blue as sapphire. Lysara had heard rumors of draconic bloodlines among the desert clans. She kept the question to herself.

"U napil na harming," the leader said. *We mean no harm.* His voice carried the changing stresses of Zeth'kar. "U kel the Malisohak yu sek." *We know of the Malisohak you seek.*

Gavric's hand rested on his sword. Lysara stepped forward, keeping her own hands in view.

"Dame Lysara of the Sylvaren court. What can you tell us of them? Something we can verify."

She waited. An answer might give them somewhere to begin.

The leader regarded her for a moment. Then he reached into a pouch at his waist and withdrew a shard of metal.

The fragment had an oily sheen. Light caught along a warped edge and seemed to turn the wrong way. Elyra drew a sharp breath; her ward brightened beside Lysara.

“We confront them daily,” he said in careful Sylvaren. “This is from a fallen weapon. We gather what remains. Learn the weaknesses.” He turned the fragment in his hand. “We have lost many.”

Gavric took it in his gloved hands. He tested the weight and looked at Lysara. A small nod.

“Xanthera,” the leader said. “Azure Scale clan. We guard these sands, the sacred places. You fight the Malisohak also. Let us speak plainly.”

• • •

They followed him to the Azure Scale encampment. Lysara stayed near the front, watching the shelter come into view.

Low hide tents stood behind a windbreak of dunes. Their openings faced the breeze that came before dawn, Xanthera explained. Small fire pits warmed the spaces where people slept. The tents looked easy to strike, but no rope or stake seemed casually placed.

Near the perimeter, shallow stone basins tilted toward the sky. Moisture gathered on their dark-coated surfaces and ran through channels into buried clay cisterns. Lysara stopped to watch a drop reach the rim and disappear.

Elyra stopped beside her. “Condensation traps. How much can you gather in a night?”

A Kareth woman tending the nearest basin looked up. “Depends on the season. Good night, enough for three. Bad night, enough for the basin-keeper.” She shrugged. “The desert gives what it chooses.”

Elyra looked back at the basin, then at its keeper. Lysara waited for another explanation of temperature and moisture. The mage only nodded.

Around the fire-pit, the conversation began.

Warriors took up watch along the perimeter. Those who sat by the fire kept their armor on. Lysara studied the marks cut into the plates: clan signs, star positions, lines she could not read.

Xanthera settled across from them.

“The desert has a pulse,” he said. “The sands, the wind, the rising heat. Eyzam’hara’s breath. We live within it. Since the Malisohak came, the storms have worsened. Arkrags will not settle. Sand shifts differently near the places they have struck.”

“Poisoned water would alter the ground around a well,” Elyra said. “The moisture, how the sand holds together—”

“I am describing anger.” He waited until she looked at him. “You ask how the sand moves. I ask what has been done to make it move that way. The well is poisoned. The desert feels the injury. Your account may describe part of it.”

Elyra looked ready to answer. Lysara had watched a conversation turn here before: one person explaining more carefully, the other hearing the same dismissal.

She leaned forward before they could begin again.

“We need to stop the poisoning,” she said. “Can we agree on that, while we learn what else it has done?”

Xanthera held her gaze. She resisted the urge to fill the silence. “Then we share what we know.”

• • •

They spoke for hours. Lysara kept track of what each side offered and what remained unanswered.

The Kareth named patrol routes, poisoned wells and hidden water that remained clean. They described corridors through the basalt where a small force could trap a larger one. They offered scouts who could read tracks that a Sylvaren would lose as soon as the wind rose.

The Sylvaren offered what they had learned fighting Malisohak in Sylvaria: how their weapons struck, how quickly a barrier could fail. Elyra described wards she might adapt to the sand and compared what she knew of the enemy's devices with the fragments Xanthera's people had recovered.

Lysara began to see where the reports met. Each force had faced the same enemy under different conditions. A weakness missed in Sylvaria might have shown itself beside a desert well.

When Gavric described the invasion, Lysara glanced toward the place Drayven would have taken beside him. He should have been hearing this. She had listened to his assessment only yesterday. Now she gave Xanthera his name and description for the scouts, and told him about the empty place beside their fire.

Xanthera waited through her silence without pressing her. She returned her attention to the fire.

Near midnight, the conversation turned to star-metal.

Xanthera rested his hands on his knees.

"The sky-fire left wounds in the basalt flats," Xanthera said. "Fused sand. Fractured rock. Nothing grows there. Arkrag's refuse to approach within a kilometer. We mark the places and avoid them."

“Deposits of raw star-metal,” Elyra said.

“Wounds,” he said. “We do not touch what lies there. Our oldest shamans teach that small measures can serve healing or divination. Large measures drive people mad. We have a history of it.”

He told them about Zar’rath.

Centuries ago, the warlord had taken star-metal from the deep desert and forged weapons from it. In the telling, his swords never dulled, his armor turned every blade. His army went undefeated for a season. Then soldiers began killing their own. Orders contradicted orders. Zar’rath was said to have commanded the rocks themselves. No enemy conquered him; his own forces destroyed his domain. The Kareth still marked the buried ruins.

“Zar’rath’s folly,” Xanthera said. “The eternal warning.”

Lysara looked toward Lyrian’s armor. The inlays lay quiet along her hands. She had heard what Celestium was meant to buffer; Zar’rath’s story showed what the Kareth feared from the raw metal. She could not tell from a story whether it had failed in the same way.

Veriossa, the Azure Scale Shaman, had sat quietly beside Xanthera through much of the exchange. Cobalt whorls covered her face. Dried scorpion shells clicked at her throat when she turned toward Elyra. A closed leather codex lay beside her; she held a pale wooden staff, its runes dark in the firelight.

At last she rose and crossed to a separate brazier. Acrid smoke rose as she added herbs.

Elyra followed. From the fire, Lysara heard a question, a pause, Veriossa’s reply. The mage moved nearer the brazier.

Lysara could follow parts of the exchange. Elyra asked how the herbs changed perception; Veriossa answered with accounts of spirits bringing news of distant patrols. Neither account yet told Lysara how to judge whether the news was true.

She hoped they would find a way to compare what they learned.

For now, they were still talking.

• • •

Most of the camp was asleep when Lysara met Xanthera at the edge of the firelight.

They had been walking the perimeter from opposite directions. She stopped when he did. Beyond him the sand was silver, the nearest watcher a dark figure on a crest.

“Your diplomacy,” he said. “It is very precise.”

“Your hospitality,” she said. “It is very strategic.”

He laughed. “Every guest costs something. We must know what we have to share.”

“I think about alliances the same way,” she said. “Which probably makes me sound cold.”

“It makes you someone I can speak to.” He looked out toward the watcher. “We cannot promise what we do not have.”

He spoke of his father, killed in a Malisohak raid, and the leadership he had taken up before he was ready. Since then he had been trying to bring the desert clans together. Lysara listened. He spoke more slowly now that he was no longer offering terms.

“The mourning cry,” she said. “Who were you remembering?”

“My sister. Last year.” He kept his eyes on the dunes. “The Malisohak struck while I was leading scouts elsewhere. We returned to ash.” He was quiet for a while. “Since then I ask what will prevent the next loss. It makes other questions difficult to hear.”

“I know that question,” she said. “I’ve been living inside it since we left Sylvaria.”

Wind brought the musk of the tethered Arkrag. On the crest, the watcher shifted his weight and was still again.

“And now one of your own is missing,” Xanthera said.

“Drayven. We thought things were better between us. Last night he sat beside me.” She rubbed a thumb over the seam of her glove. “By morning he was gone.”

“Some fractures heal,” Xanthera said. “Some become canyons. Do you know which this is?”

“Not yet.”

He reached for her hand, then hesitated. She let him take it. His skin was warm, the fine scales smooth beneath her thumb. For a moment neither spoke.

“I would like to hear about your forest,” he said. “The illusions you survived. Your home. When we are not deciding how to fight.”

“So would I,” she said. “About yours.”

Before they parted, he pressed a bone charm into her hand. Wind-direction marks surrounded the Azure Scale sign. A token of protection. Lysara closed her fingers around it and kept his hand a moment longer.

Back beside the fire, she turned the charm between her fingers. Wanting him would make the next negotiation harder. She ought to sleep. Instead she traced the marks again, remembering the pause before he took her hand.

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Pink light spread above the dunes. The Kareth emptied the basins into skins, collapsed the tents and buried their fires. Within half an hour they were ready to move.

Xanthera led them to a high dune. Beyond it, pale sand swept toward the dark basalt ridges. The air had already begun to shimmer.

He pointed east. “The basalt spires. Malisohak patrol sightings have increased there. We believe they’re scouting for an oasis or for star-metal remnant deposits. If you travel that direction, be prepared.” He paused. “My people move north to unite with other Kareth clans. If we coordinate a strike, it will be from the north while you draw their attention from the west.”

Lysara came up beside Lyrian. “We will remember.” She looked at Xanthera as she said it.

He inclined his head. “Carry the charm. Any Kareth who sees it will know you are kin-allied.”

Below them, Elyra and Keeper took their leave of Veriossa. She had given them three ward-patterns for carrying power through sand. Elyra had shown her a detection technique; Veriossa was still tracing part of it when they turned away.

Gavric bowed to Xanthera’s second-in-command, then clasped the warrior’s inner wrist in the Kareth manner. The warrior’s fingers rested briefly over his pulse.

The Azure Scale turned north. The dunes hid one file, then another, until the last warrior passed out of sight.

Lyrian’s group turned east.

Gavric looked back as they settled into formation. Lysara half expected to hear Drayven answering from the rear.

Lysara lagged behind. She looked once toward the dune where Xanthera had stood. There was no one there.

Lyrian slowed to walk with her. After a while she said, “You found something out there.”

“A tactical alliance with strategic depth,” Lysara said.

Lyrian almost smiled. “Is that what you’re calling it?”

“It’s what it is. Among other things.” Lysara touched the bone charm in her pouch. “I hope we both survive long enough for the other things to matter.”

Heat rose around their boots. Elyra and Keeper worked cooling wards while the basalt spires grew clearer ahead.

They carried routes to clean water now, and warnings about the wells to avoid. Lyrian went over the landmarks with Shal'rik. Lysara kept a hand near the charm in her pouch.

Somewhere north of them, Xanthera would be seeking the other clans. She could not know how many would answer.

Sand caught against her face. She had understood so little of what he meant by Eyzam'hara's breath. She wanted another chance to listen.

Ahead, the black spires rose above the dunes. Their shadows lay across the way east.

CHAPTER 11

Shaman's Warning

Elyra had three weeks of notes on Keeper. They did not tell her what he was.

His skin gave off a faint light under conditions she had yet to isolate. When he looked into the spirit realm, his left pupil widened more than his right. His temperature stayed a degree below the Sylvaren norm, unchanged by the surrounding air. She could record each difference. She could not make them explain one another.

Gavric planned around what Keeper had done before and left room for what he might fail to do. Elyra understood the caution.

Lyrian trusted him more readily. Elyra wondered whether she had mistaken his endurance for something that could not break.

Keeper called his body an anchor. An initiation ritual had bound him to the star-metal's presence on Citoren; since then, he had lived in the physical world and the spirit realm at once. When she asked how, he spoke of tides and currents. She wrote those down too.

Perhaps the spirit realm was a way of perceiving what was already around them. The Thal'as passed through living bodies and between them; Keeper might sense its patterns as directly as she saw light. It would explain some of what he knew. It did not explain all of him.

She tried to imagine never being able to shut it out.

That troubled her more than the thought of another world.

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That night, figures from Xanthera's courtesy patrol stood on the dune crests. His main force had gone north; these warriors kept watch while the company rested. Dry roots burned low in the fire, their smell sharp in the cold air.

Lyrian drew her knees up beside the fire. The armor tightened at her shoulders and collar. She searched for the fear that might be causing it and found only the dull ache of Drayven's absence. Warmth gathered at the center of her chest while the inlays grew colder.

She waited. The armor had warned her before, and it had made ordinary doubts harder to bear. She could not yet tell which this was.

Gavric walked the perimeter. Elyra held her staff in both hands, listening through a low detection ward. Beside the fire, Lysara turned the bone charm between her fingers.

Keeper was on the rise.

Thirty meters from the fire, he sat with his face lifted to the stars. His staff stood planted beside him. Its runes held a pale light, and a fainter glow lay beneath his skin.

Once Elyra had asked what he saw. “Imagine seeing every conversation in a city at once,” he had told her. “The meaning of it, as color and pressure and direction. Then imagine you cannot turn away.”

Here the signals reached him unevenly. The ringing sand carried them near the surface; deeper down he followed traces through buried water, old roots and veins in the basalt. Connections that would have been clear in the Whisperwood arrived broken and faint.

He had been trying to read them all evening.

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Near midnight Lyrian climbed the rise. Her breath showed in the cold. The constriction had spread down her arms, though a patch of warmth persisted over her heart.

“Keeper. You have hardly spoken since the Kareth left. What are you sensing?”

He kept his face turned upward. His left pupil nearly filled the iris; the right was a small dark point.

“Something is changing in the field,” he said. “I can still distinguish Drayven, though it is harder now. Another pattern keeps meeting his.”

“What pattern?”

“Something beneath the living signals. Old, or so it feels.” He paused. “There is anger in what I sense from him. I remember that anger from before. Something is answering it.”

Cold gripped Lyrian’s ribs. She breathed until she could speak again.

“Can you see where Drayven is?”

“East. I cannot place him precisely.” Keeper finally looked at her. “The pattern I know as his is becoming harder to separate from the other. We need to find him.”

“Keeper, I —”

He drew a breath and did not let it go.

• • •

From the fire, Elyra heard the intake of air.

Keeper’s chest barely moved. He was still drawing breath when her ward flared and broke. She caught her staff in both hands and tried to raise it again.

His staff blazed. Shadows cut across the dune, sharp-edged, but she could not settle her eyes on the light that cast them. It hurt even when she looked away.

Then came the pressure wave.

It passed through Elyra without stirring the sand. On the rise, Lyrian staggered. Heat flared along her inlays; then she gasped as the Celestium chilled against her chest.

Keeper went rigid. Light shone from his open eyes. Elyra could not see him breathing now.

She ran toward him.

The air stung her nose and tongue. Ozone. A bitter taste reached the back of her throat.

Then he was gone.

His staff fell sideways. Sand flew outward from the empty place, striking Lyrian’s boots. She raised an arm against it.

Warm air touched Elyra's face as she reached the rise. The bitter smell remained.

His prints were still in the sand.

• • •

Gavric ran up from camp with his sword drawn. Elyra swept her rebuilt ward over the rise. Lysara and the Kareth patrol came in from the perimeter, weapons ready.

Lyrian stood over Keeper's prints. The armor tightened, warmed, tightened again. She could not find a feeling to hold still.

"Keeper!" Her voice carried out over the dunes.

Elyra knelt with her palms against the sand. "There is still a charge here. Stronger than anything I have felt from him." She looked up. "The field spread outward from this point."

"Can you find him?" Gavric asked.

Elyra lifted her hands. "I cannot find a direction he went. The field expanded all around him. Perhaps his awareness did too. That does not tell me what happened to his body."

"That is not reassuring," Lysara said.

"It is all I have."

Gavric sheathed his sword. "Can he come back?"

"His body has always been his anchor," Elyra said. "When he communes, he returns to it. But I have never seen this happen." She looked at the empty sand. "I don't know whether that connection holds when the body is gone."

The patrol leader approached, a lean woman in copper-etched armor. "Your shaman. The desert spirits took him?"

"We don't know," Gavric said. He looked at the fallen staff. "That is about all we agree on."

She looked from him to Elyra.

“We need him back,” Lysara said.

Elyra kept the ward over the empty place. The charge was fading slowly. Too slowly, she thought, for something whose source had gone. She watched for another change.

Seven minutes. The desert wind carried sand across the empty space.

Eleven minutes. Gavric returned to the perimeter. Lysara stayed where she could watch both the empty place and the dunes.

Fourteen minutes.

The air split.

Elyra’s ward collapsed again. The pulse drove her back; a crack followed, low enough to feel in her chest. Violet and white light arced through the air where Keeper had been.

He appeared above the sand and fell. His limbs folded beneath him. The fallen staff rolled toward his hand.

He shook all over. Light lingered in his eyes as the unequal pupils slowly drew toward the same size.

Lyrian knelt beside him. For three seconds the armor lost its weight. The stillness she remembered from training returned: no pressure at her ribs, no rush of feeling louder than she could bear. Then the inlays chilled and the weight settled back onto her shoulders. She stayed on her knees beside Keeper.

“Keeper. Are you hurt?”

Elyra knelt on his other side. “Pulse erratic. Two degrees above his usual temperature. That is a degree above ours.” She watched his eyes. “His pupils are coming back.”

His fingers closed around the staff. He tried to speak, stopped, and pulled another breath.

“Not a summons.” He swallowed. “I wasn’t pulled somewhere. Everything opened. I couldn’t stop it.”

“The field I always see was everywhere. I could no longer see past it.” His hand tightened on the staff. “Living signals, far beyond the camp. Patrols east of us, with weapons bright enough to hurt. Clans moving north. And breaks around the star-metal sites, holes in what should have been connected.”

“Below it all, another pattern.” He closed his eyes. “It changed when I noticed it. As though it had noticed me.”

“What you sensed around Drayven?” Lyrian asked.

“Yes. But spread much farther than I knew. I followed it between deposits. Fragments answering fragments.” His hands began to shake harder. “There were patterns in the answers. I thought I could read an intention. I could not hold it long enough to be sure.”

Gavric crouched near them. “What does it mean for Drayven? What can we do?”

“Always practical,” Elyra murmured.

“Someone has to be.” He waited for Keeper.

Keeper let Elyra help him sit. “The force is in the star-metal. In the connections between it. I saw deposits far apart answering one another. I could not tell whether it arrived with the metal or grew from its contact with the Thal’as during the thousand years since the fall.”

“Alive?” Gavric asked.

“I don’t know that it is alive. The connections behave as though they intend something. Perhaps I am giving a pattern a purpose it does not have.” He struggled for breath. “It was like trying to read every book in a library at once. Knowing the words were there did not mean I understood them.”

Elyra watched his hands. “You nearly stopped breathing. Whatever it allowed you to perceive, your body could not bear it.”

Keeper nodded.

“Could it happen again?” Lysara asked.

“Yes. Something in the field opened my perception against my will. I don’t know how to prevent it.”

“Then someone stays near you,” she said. “And we decide what to do if it begins again.”

Gavric nodded. “But first, tell us what you saw of Drayven.”

• • •

Keeper took his time answering.

The fire had burned out below them. They sat in the cold sand while he searched for words.

He had followed the familiar signal east. Another resonance moved through it, strengthening some parts until they overwhelmed the others. Anger returned more strongly each time the patterns met. It sounded to Lyrian like the armor feeding a feeling back to her, except that Drayven’s equipment had no Celestium lattice joined to the star-metal to filter what reached him.

“I fear he will feel it as certainty,” Keeper said. “Anger that seems more justified each time it returns. If the signal keeps answering what is already there, he may take it for his own judgment.”

“How long?” Lyrian asked. Weight gathered at her sternum.

“Perhaps days. Less if it strengthens. Water, shelter, someone he can trust might help him resist it. Isolation gives him nothing to set against what he is feeling.”

“He took his supplies,” Gavric said. “They won’t last forever. If he is losing his judgment, he may not use them well.”

“If he cannot resist?” Lysara asked.

“He could become its agent. Still thinking, still choosing, but from priorities it has made to feel like his own.” Keeper looked down at his hands. “He may defend what is being done to him.”

Lyrian heard sand scraping against their boots.

“Zar’rath may have suffered the same thing,” Keeper said. “The raw metal has no Celestium to buffer it. If his army was exposed to a connected field, it could have amplified more than their own feelings.”

Elyra looked at him. “You are reading a great deal into that story.”

“Yes. I have seen something tonight that makes me read it differently. That is not proof of what happened to Zar’rath.”

“Then keep the two apart,” Elyra said. “What you saw, and what the story makes you suspect.”

Keeper nodded. “The buffer does work. We have seen that. But there may be another pressure on it, one we have not known how to measure.”

“The connections between the fragments,” Lysara said.

“Yes.”

Gavric looked from Keeper to the empty dunes. “You have given us a direction. The Kareth have warned us about the patrols there. We need to check both. I cannot judge the rest from what happened here.”

“Yes,” Keeper said.

“Then we find him,” Gavric said. “Whatever is happening to him, he is alone near enemy patrols. That is enough reason to go.”

“We still need to understand it,” Elyra said. “There is star-metal in what Lyrian is wearing.”

“The armor could be connected,” Lyrian said. Cold tightened along the inlays. She could feel each seam against her ribs.

“It could,” Elyra said. “The Celestium filters the amplification. If Keeper is right, it may also be limiting what reaches you from the other fragments.”

“Some of what reached me,” Keeper said.

Lyrian looked down at the inlays. Narrow strips along her arms and hands, shining in the starlight. They seemed less like metal now than openings.

• • •

They agreed to leave at once.

Gavric began dividing the supplies. Elyra stayed beside Keeper until he could stand, then kept a hand near his arm. Lysara called to the Kareth patrol leader.

Lyrian watched the way east. She could still picture Drayven beside their small fire, between her and Lysara. She meant to bring him back.

They buried the dead fire and filled their skins from the Kareth cache, enough for two days if rationed. Shal’rik spoke with the patrol leader in Zeth’kar. She sent two scouts ahead; they passed over the next dune before the company was ready.

They marched east under the stars.

Keeper walked in the center, unsteady on his left foot. The light beneath his skin had gone. Elyra stayed close enough to catch him.

A thin ward wavered ahead of his staff. Now and then it faded almost to nothing.

“Save your energy,” Elyra told him.

“I need to feel the deposits before we reach them.” He steadied the staff. “This much I can still do.”

Gavric led by the stars and the landmarks Xanthera had described. The basalt stood dark against the sky. Faint bands hung over the dune crests; the night had not cleared all the desert's illusions.

They walked until Keeper needed to stop.

At a rock outcrop, Lyrian brought him water. The armor had grown quiet. A little warmth remained over her chest, and she could not decide whether to welcome it.

"Your initiation bound you to the star-metal," she said. "You saw the fall in a vision. If the fragments are connected, could the fall have been more than an impact?"

"A seeding," he said. "Possibly. But a network might also have formed here, from the fragments answering the native Thal'as over a thousand years. I cannot distinguish a deliberate act from something that grew without one."

"And the Malisohak are using it."

"Using material that may be connected in ways their instruments cannot show them." He paused. "I do not know what they can see. They lost Xylos to something they could not control. That does not tell us what they have learned since."

He drank, holding the skin carefully. "For centuries I have watched people turn to the metal, then struggle with what it gave them. I thought the failure was theirs. Now I wonder how much of that hunger it was teaching them to feel."

"That's—" Lyrian stopped.

"Terrifying," Keeper said.

"I was going to say speculative."

A small smile moved across his face. "Also accurate." He handed back the water. "But I could still recognize Drayven in what I saw. We must reach him while that is true."

She squeezed his hand. It was still warmer than usual. “We’ll find him.”

“I hope he will let us.”

• • •

The scouts returned as the east began to pale. They had found one set of tracks toward the basalt, a wavering stride. It matched the direction Keeper had given them.

Black spires rose ahead. Cool air breathed from the gaps, carrying a mineral tang. Warmth moved along Lyrian’s inlays in a pattern she did not recognize.

Shal’rik stopped between two pillars and studied prints half-erased by the wind. “I think these are his. They go through here. No others.” He brushed the sand with his fingers. “Finer. Darker. The rock changes it.”

Elyra looked up along a seam in the basalt. “There may be star-metal in it. Fragments from the fall. We need to be careful here.”

Keeper’s ward brightened. His mouth tightened with the effort. “I can feel the deposits in the rock. Stay close. Watch what changes in yourselves.” He looked at Lyrian.

“It went weightless when you came back,” Lyrian said. “For three seconds. Like the training ground.”

“The deposits may put more strain on the buffer,” he said. “If the armor becomes weightless, do not assume it means you are safe. What happened beside me may have been harmony. Or the field may have silenced the resistance you usually feel. I fear both could feel like relief.”

The inlays warmed against her skin. She looked at Elyra, then Gavric. She would have to trust what they saw in her.

The footprints led into the narrow gap. Dark sand lay between them.

“Stay close,” she said. “Watch each other. If someone starts behaving differently, say something. We go in, we find Drayven, we bring him out. Everything else is secondary.”

Gavric drew his sword. Elyra raised her staff. Lysara touched the charm in her pouch. Keeper held his staff with both hands, keeping the wavering ward ahead of them.

They entered the cleft.

The walls narrowed the sky to a strip of gray. The air grew cold and tasted of mineral dust. Lyrian could still feel the warmth along her arms. Somewhere ahead was Drayven, and she did not know what he would hear when she called his name.

Wind moved through the cleft with a sound like breathing.

They walked toward it.

The cleft opened onto a shelf of bare stone. Shal’rik found sand caught in the cracks and followed it to the far edge. Below, a worn path turned between the rocks.

“Dustwind,” he said. “There is water that way. Someone with a wavering step has taken the path. I cannot promise who.”

Lyrian bent over her own hands. The light along her fingers had begun to skip. Elyra took her wrist and watched it through another pulse.

“We cannot take her through more of these deposits.”

“Then take her back to the river paths,” Keeper said. “I will go with Shal’rik.”

Lyrian straightened. “You could scarcely stand last night.”

“I can walk now. That is how I will have to reach him.”

“Can you speak to him before that?”

“If I can find his pattern for long enough. He may hear me, or feel a hand. It will not be a hand that can give him water.” Keeper gripped his staff. “My body stays where it is. What happened last night was a loss of that hold. I cannot use it as a road.”

Shal’rik waited beside the descending path. Gavric divided the water again, filling the two pursuers’ skins before closing his own.

“Send word through the Kareth,” Lyrian said. “To the river wards. We will find our way back to the people holding them.”

Keeper nodded. She caught his sleeve before he turned.

“Tell him we came.”

She watched him and Shal’rik descend until the rock hid them. Then Elyra took her arm, and they went back through the cleft.

CHAPTER 12

Drayven's Betrayal

On the morning he left camp, sand rasped against Drayven's boots and traveled through his shins into his knees. He could almost name the note. The pull that had woken him was still there. Now the edges of distant dunes separated into colors he had never seen in sand.

He kept walking.

Daylight was dimming the last ember of the fire behind him. He could still make out his companions around it. He turned east.

I can't serve under them any longer. I won't.

He remembered deciding to wait for Keeper. He remembered standing with his pack on. Between those two things, nothing. He could not account for it, and each attempt made the pull behind his eyes harder to ignore.

He told himself that leaving had been the decision. The missing moment was only fatigue.

They never trusted me. The certainty arrived before he could finish testing it. He had given his sword, his loyalty. He had nearly died trying to help Lyrian. Those were easier facts.

Every step cost effort. The anger kept him moving.

At the next crest he looked back again. *They'll manage without me.* Once that would have comforted him. He wanted it to hurt them.

In the Wood he had kept enough hold on himself to bring the others back. His training had helped him act, though it had not spared him the sight of his brother dying. He remembered gripping wrists, calling names. He had mattered there.

Then the lightning in the caverns. Four inches, by his reckoning. He could still feel the lifted hair along his neck. Lyrian had apologized. She had asked him to keep questioning her. When he tried to hold those words beside the bolt, the bolt was easier to remember.

At Shayik's camp he had raised the ships, and the conversation had moved on. That had happened. So had the rescue afterward. He could choose which part to turn over as he walked.

Yesterday she had listened to his assessment all along the march. Today it seemed less like respect than something offered to keep him quiet. He found that thought easier to carry.

He spat and coughed on the dry grit in his mouth. "I'll prove my worth alone."

Wind took the words. He tried them again without speaking. *I'll find a way to stop the Malisohak.*

His stomach tightened.

What if I truly am leaving them defenseless?

He pushed the doubt away. The answer came readily: they could discover what it cost to lose him.

He went down the far side of the dune. East was a direction, not a plan. He needed a plan.

Track them. Sabotage them. Bring back something they cannot dismiss.

He walked as the sun climbed. Memories came with him, unwelcome in their small, precise details.

Gavric in the training yard, saying, “You’ll lead our vanguard one day, Drayven.” The smile had mattered almost as much as the words.

Elyra absorbed in a ritual, trusting him to guard her. He had reminded her to breathe. Afterward she had thanked him, and he had waved it away.

In the Wood, Lyrian had looked at him and said, “You talk me down. The same way you did today.” He remembered her meaning it. He wished the memory had ended there, before he began wondering whether she valued him only for what he could do for her.

What changed? He asked it as though the answer could only be something they had done.

In the caverns, she had said his caution was not wrong. He remembered that too. Yet her power kept opening the way, and his part seemed to end when the threat was down. By the time he had repeated it to himself, the thought no longer contained her apology.

Four inches. He returned to that.

He tried to remember the assessment she had asked for. She had listened; he had spoken for a long time. He could recall the low fires, the sentry positions, the facts he had given her. What he could no longer recover was how it had felt to be heard.

Too late now.

What if they truly do need me? What if I’m letting them down now?

He let the question go. It went more easily than before, leaving him with enough resolve to take the next dune.

His hand found the sword at his hip. The familiar grip fitted the calluses it had helped make. He had earned this skill. He wanted something to remain that no fragment of metal had given him.

Are you sure?

He turned at the thought. There was only sand moving across the slope. Each grain seemed to leave a separate sting against his skin.

• • •

The sun had cleared the dunes when he stopped to catch his breath. He watched the last pale mist leave his mouth. For an instant every little movement in it seemed separate. He blinked, trying to make it ordinary again.

He checked his water. The skin had weight, but it was all he had for a route he had not planned. He drank and stopped himself before he wanted to.

I'll manage. The Kareth do it. I can too.

In a dry gully he stopped before the salt marks on the stone. Branching lines spread from the old watercourse. He had been staring at them for some time before he remembered that he was walking somewhere.

A vulture cried overhead. Its wings crossed the pale sky, and the beat of them seemed to strike his teeth.

Even scavengers wait for me to fail. He almost smiled. *Get in line.*

He lay in the shelter of a low dune. For a while he kept arguing with people who were not there. Exhaustion took him before any of the arguments ended.

In sleep the Wood returned. His companions' faces filled the trees, pale beneath a light that came from Lyrian. He tried to look away and found himself reflected in star-metal. His eyes had a polished sheen. They caught light from somewhere behind him.

He woke drenched in cold sweat.

Even if this path leads nowhere, it's mine.

• • •

After the uneasy sleep, the sun stood higher. The pulse returned behind his eyes, stronger whenever he faced east.

He thought of the Vel'thari and what they had learned of its joined metals. The Celestium in his own equipment was no such filter. This reached him without the alloy's restraint, through his teeth and bones as much as his ears.

Anger made the pulse stronger. Doubt did too. *They never believed in you.* The thought settled into him with a warmth that made disagreement feel like effort. *You can rise beyond them.*

For a little while he no longer minded the heat.

He knew what was happening, or enough of it. In the Wood he had learned to act against what his senses insisted was true. Here the insistence came from inside the thought itself.

He tried not to listen. His mouth was dry, his head ached, and the certainty kept offering relief.

By midday his water was nearly gone. Shapes appeared ahead, resolved briefly into what might be Malisohak patrols, then vanished. Each gave him a new direction. He recognized the method: enough to draw a pursuer on, never enough to let him close.

He kept following anyway.

• • •

In mid-afternoon he reached the basalt. He dropped into its shade and drank a little. When the wind fell, he could feel the silence against his skin.

Light flashed from the top of an outcrop. He drew his sword halfway. A signal, perhaps. The slope left him exposed all the way up; he could see nowhere to take cover. He climbed it.

Gavric would make a lesson of this.

There was no scout at the top. A metal fragment lay half-buried in the rock, its surface shifting as he moved. He knew that wrongness from the sanctum. Raw star-metal. What he had taken for the angles of a weapon was the fracture in the metal; the flashes had been sunlight.

There was no person.

The fragment might have lain here since the fall. Exposed on the rock, with no one guarding it, it was both a danger and something the others would want to know about.

He stopped a meter away. Without touching it, he felt a vibration pass from his teeth to the base of his skull. It settled behind his eyes. He remembered Keeper's warnings about the raw metal.

Beyond it, a passage descended into the basalt.

I should turn back, he thought.

No. The others would want this mapped. Bring back something useful.

Again, the answer came too easily. He was already moving down the passage when he noticed. His sword stayed half-drawn; he still knew how to enter a place he could not see through.

Some of us see potential in your disillusionment. The words were nearly in his own voice.

He looked over his shoulder. Who was *us*? The passage was empty.

A messenger of older powers. He almost laughed at the grandness of it. *Star-metal is a mirror, yes, but also a blade for forging a new order.*

“I’m no puppet for star-metal zealots.” His voice sounded rough against the stone.

Nor were you ever. You are simply tired of being overshadowed.

He drank, then stopped with his mouth still dry. A little water remained. He tightened the cap before he could change his mind.

He knew he should not make decisions here, thirsty and alone with something that answered whatever he wanted to hear.

Yes. Step into your destiny.

He wanted to move farther in. He could no longer tell whether that desire had come before the words.

He sheathed the sword. The scrape sounded like a door closing.

“Lead on,” he told the empty passage.

He glanced once toward the dunes. Purple fringed the horizon. Then the bend in the passage hid it from him.

The walls were close enough to touch on both sides. At the edges of his sight they seemed to breathe; when he turned toward them, they were still. Fatigue could do that. He had read accounts. He kept his eyes ahead.

His conscience flared, sudden and unwelcome. *What if Lyrian tries to find me?*

The bolt returned to him: heat, the lifted hair, the gap he reckoned at four inches. He had to reach further for the apology. He stopped reaching.

No. They can manage. Better to carve my own destiny.

He remembered watch rotations, Gavric's badly timed jokes, the sound of a companion breathing beside him after a fight. The memories stayed clear. Their claim on him weakened.

Stop the Malisohak. Show them what skill can do.

He repeated it until the words no longer needed an answer.

The passage opened into a small courtyard ringed by spires. A ruined structure stood at its center, stone blocks cut with worn runes. His altered sight picked out light in their deepest grooves. The marks seemed to channel it through the walls.

The hum rose through his fingertips and forearms into his chest. Warmth followed. He had never been here before, yet it felt like being recognized.

The air stung as it did before lightning. The feeling grew stronger toward the runes.

His palm came to rest on a carved block before he remembered deciding to reach for it. Green light ran through the channels. Something in the stone answered the changes he could feel in himself. *Welcome, O worthy champion. Seize your power...*

He turned his head. Here the whisper seemed to come from a place, somewhere deeper in the ruin.

An outpost. Long abandoned by those who sought star-metal. Make it a new seat of power. He studied the green light and waited for someone to explain more. There was no one.

"I see." He did not. "What next?"

• • •

That evening he laid his bedroll inside the ruin. He placed his rations and canteen within reach, as though order could make this a sound camp. Green light moved through the marks above him. He could see where the channels passed into the stone, and once he had found them he could not stop following them.

Lyrian's face returned when he closed his eyes. Yesterday she had listened. He could still see the attention in her face. He turned on the bedroll, trying to find a position that kept the light from his eyes.

They'll worry. They'll send people to find me.

He held onto that thought. They had come for him once already, out into the dark. Nothing he had done since made coming after him easier.

But maybe they already think I'm gone.

He pictured the report he would bring them: a Malisohak position found and destroyed. A plan of his own, carried through. He held the image as long as he could.

That thought lulled him into a restless doze.

In the dream, something moved through the rooms of his mind. He could not see it, but each door opened before he reached it. *Let the anger grow. We shall build a new order.*

He woke sweating. The channels overhead looked brighter. He blinked until his eyes hurt, but could not tell whether the light had changed.

What am I doing?

• • •

At dawn he used the last of his water for ration tea. The cup smelled sharper than it should, mineral and metallic. He tried to remember when he had become able to separate so many scents.

The tea was hot. It helped for as long as he was drinking it.

Am I embracing something monstrous?

He waited for the question to trouble him. It had less force than yesterday.

The artifact is a tool. If Lyrian cannot use it responsibly, perhaps I can do more with this power.

The thought offered an answer without requiring him to examine the question. He had felt that ease before leaving camp. It had troubled him then.

“How do we proceed?” he asked the courtyard. “If we are striking the Malisohak, I need a plan. Supplies. Allies.” The list came without effort. He still knew what an operation required.

He was less certain who had chosen the operation.

Light moved through the runes as he spoke. *You will have your chance. Far beyond the princess or her band. Gather. Prepare.* He heard it in the stone and inside his head.

It had given him none of the things he asked for. He knew that. He could walk out beyond the pressure of the runes and think again.

Instead he waited for the warmth to return.

“Fine,” he said to no one. “I’m in.”

Green light moved along the courtyard wall. The air smelled of ozone. He remembered the bolt passing his head, and the word *betrayal* came with it.

No, he corrected it. *I’m forging a better path.*

The unease remained, but it was quiet enough to mistake for something he had answered.

• • •

Later he leaned against a broken pillar. Warmth reached him through the basalt, strongest beside a rune channel. He tried to put his thoughts in order.

“I’m no one’s second fiddle.” Beneath the words came a memory of Lyrian laughing at a joke he had made on watch. He pushed it aside.

He imagined what Gavric would say about his complaints. Acceptable risk. A soldier’s duty. In his imagining there was no room for Gavric kneeling to offer him water after the serpent fight.

He had brought them back in the Wood. They knew that. He wanted knowing it to mean more than expecting him to do it again.

His objections had been reasonable. The armor could misfire. They relied on it too much. He began with those facts each time, and each time arrived at the same conclusion: they had never valued him. The rescue, the apology, the long conversation on the march did not fit. He let them fall away.

They cared. The objection was small and persistent. *They came for you.*

He shoved it away. *Too little, too late.*

• • •

An hour later he practiced sword forms in the courtyard. Each cut brought an answering pulse from the runes. He felt it through the soles of his boots, up his legs and into his spine. His next movement came more quickly.

The blade went where he meant it to go with scarcely a pause between thought and movement. *This is power.* He turned into the next form. *I could learn to use it.*

Keeper had warned them what the raw metal amplified: pain, fear, confidence. Everything. Drayven's sword still had its familiar balance, but the hand directing it no longer felt entirely familiar.

Am I letting it corrupt me? Or am I forging a new path?

He could still ask the question. He tried to decide whether that meant he was resisting, or merely being allowed the comfort of pretending to.

He swung faster. There was less room to think between cuts.

• • •

At dusk on his second day away, he followed the strongest pulse beneath the courtyard. One section forced him to crawl. The air grew thick with a metallic taste, and the stone pressed close around his shoulders.

Shards lined the chamber walls in patterns he could not read. Their broken harmony filled his head; he could hear notes he had no way to separate from pain.

A console glowed at the center. He approached with his hand raised. Before he touched it, the runes flared and a map spread above them: Citoren, its cities and oases, the far mountain realms. Lines crossed the land. He read them as Malisohak movements and followed each toward the next. They made a tightening ring.

The console had answered his presence. Or the resonance that had been changing him. He could not separate the two now. The map offered intelligence; he had no way to check it from inside the chamber.

See the future. See yourself at the center of a new reckoning.

At the center. Me.

A center could be a command position. It could also be a target. He kept looking for the places from which he could direct the fight.

Break the Malisohak. Carve out your own dominion, before your old friends know what has happened.

Dominion. He had meant to defend Citoren. He tried to find the point at which that had become a wish to rule part of it.

“That’s beyond what I meant to do.”

The runes brightened. *Or have you stopped limiting yourself to what they want?*

Perhaps. He waited for the refusal that should have followed. “Yes,” he said instead.

Later he sat against a cool wall in a side passage. His breath sounded too loud. He remembered Lyrian admitting what the armor made her fear, and how readily he had judged her for wearing it anyway.

Is this better?

You will surpass them all. The answer came before he could finish deciding what he was asking.

It did not feel entirely his. He knew that, and stayed where he was.



On his second night away from camp, Drayven watches the stars appear. He sits on a broken basalt balcony with his sword across his knees. Green light shifts behind him; purple fringes the stars. The blade's weight seems differently placed each time he adjusts his grip.

He remembers the fires they shared. The memories hurt less than they did yesterday. He is grateful for that.

Wind rattles the shards behind him. He keeps wanting to turn toward someone who is not there. He has been alone since leaving camp. Still, at the edge of his sight, a presence seems to wait. *I will do this alone. I won't return a dog with tail between my legs.*

He recognizes the words as his own. The certainty beneath them is harder to place. Returning feels worse than anything he can imagine finding here.

You are on the right path, Drayven. We shall shape Citoren's future together. He shivers, then holds himself still until it passes. He no longer tries to decide whether the voice belongs to the metal or to the mind it has been changing.

The stars brighten above the ruin. Beyond the dunes, his friends are trying to find him. He rests both hands on his sword and imagines what he will say when they ask him to come home.

CHAPTER 13

Drayven's Power

— Drayven —

It had not begun with the lightning. Drayven kept returning to that. A man did not leave his companions over one mistake.

He could put the grievances in order. The Wood, where he had brought the others out of their terrors while his brother died again before his eyes. The caverns, where Lyrian's lightning had passed his head. Four inches, he still thought. Then the desert, and the warning nobody had wanted to hear until he was shouting it.

He was a Knight of Citoren. He had held lines that broke on either side of him. He wanted someone to remember that without first needing him to hold another.

The lightning stayed sharpest. Its heat along his left side, the ozone in his mouth. Lyrian had apologized. He remembered the words exactly. He had asked her to listen, and on the march she had listened. Those memories came without warmth now. The bolt still burned.

She doesn't trust me. His fingertips began to vibrate. Copper gathered at the back of his tongue, and every edge in the desert sharpened. The anger had never done this to him before.

Lysara had sat beside him on their last night together. He remembered her there, and Lyrian on his other side. He could place them more easily than he could recover what it had felt like to be between them.

I'm better than this. I'm stronger than they think.

He told himself he had left to make them see what they were losing. It gave the departure a shape he could understand. It did not explain the gap between lying awake with the buried note in his ears and finding himself on his feet, pack already on his shoulder.

They had come for him after the quarrel. He could still see Gavric holding out the water. This time he had walked farther, and farther again. Still no familiar voice behind him. He let that silence stand for their answer.

• • •

He had spent his life defending Citoren. Trained, bled, gone back when he was ordered. Now he heard Elyra praising their unity and found an insult in it. If they were all needed equally, any one of them could be replaced.

He knew that did not follow. Knowing scarcely disturbed the hurt.

Lyrian's armor lit when she fought. Everyone turned toward it. His own work ended with an enemy on the ground and another already coming at him. He remembered only the heads turning.

Beyond the outpost, the buried fragments kept calling. He felt them through his boots, a note that strengthened as he approached and loosened its hold behind him. His own body carried an answering vibration now. By day every bright edge hurt his eyes. At night the cold brought out sounds he could find no source for.

Under the stars he could admit that he missed them. He walked until the admission lost its force.

He followed the pull without a destination he could name. The outpost's map stayed in his thoughts, its tightening ring and the place he had imagined for himself at its center. He had no supplies for an operation, no allies, no verified target. He knew all three mattered. The next buried note drew him on.

Did I abandon them? The question returned between the pulses. *What does that make me?*

He closed his fists until his nails cut his palms. The pain reached him late, faint and almost pleasant. He held on to it.

They never truly believed in me anyway.

• • •

On his third morning away, after he left the outpost, another presence reached him through the hum. It was faint enough to lose whenever he moved. He stopped and turned toward it.

There was no one on the slope behind him. Yet beneath the scattered notes he felt a steadier current, something familiar from Keeper's work with the Thal'as.

It followed when he changed direction. He could not decide whether that meant Keeper had found him, or whether the thing that had used his own voice in the ruin had learned another.

• • •

Resting against a sun-bleached rock, he tried to separate the sound from what it made him feel. The air seemed to whisper, yet he could hear no words. A buried note rose. His attention turned behind him before he chose to turn his head.

You are being watched. He could have supplied those words himself. They fitted the feeling too well.

The presence persisted beyond the rock. Nothing like the eager answer of the empty outpost. This waited.

He could not see Keeper. The steadier current persisted anyway, quiet and insistent. He moved away from the rock, irritated that it would not leave him alone.

He remembered Keeper's warning: *Drayven, your anger is a double-edged sword. It can forge a path to greatness or carve your destruction. I am here to guide you, but you must allow me to do so.*

Allow him. Drayven had been hearing that part less often than the rest.

• • •

He watched the changes as he would watch an enemy line. Where they advanced. What still held.

At a hundred yards he could make out small fractures in exposed stone. Closer by, every moving grain demanded his attention. He lost the shape of a dune in the detail of its surface.

Distant wings troubled his teeth. The buried metal sounded through his soles, and a thin hiss followed each change of wind. He could not cover his ears against any of it.

A sand-fly touched his neck and he rounded with his hand on his sword. Afterwards he stood breathing hard, furious at the insect. The dwindling supplies frightened him much less.

That was what should have worried him.

Water trembled on the horizon. He could see the shimmering layers that made the mirage, watch them shift as the air changed. His body still wanted to walk toward it.

• • •

Old battles returned with unwelcome precision: the ring of his blade against Malisohak armor, Gavric's grunt under a heavy parry. Even the laughter after a fight came back clearly. Then the question attached itself: *Did they laugh with you? Or stop when you came near?*

He could not remember wondering that at the time.

The hilt was cold in his palm. He had known its weight for years. Now something passed between his hand and the metal, and he could not tell which way it travelled.

A warrior, not a puppet in someone else's grand design.

He had said it before. It troubled him that he needed to say it again.

• • •

In a starless valley, the scattered hum narrowed to a point behind and above him. Sand dragged at his boots. He stopped.

Keeper was near.

The steadier note reached him between the buried fragments' pulses. He tried to hear concern in it. What he felt was the pressure of being watched.

He could almost hear Keeper's voice in the shifting of the air itself: *You walk a treacherous path, Drayven. Do not let anger be your master.*

He shuddered. *I am not weak. I do not need saving.*

His body had answered before he did. He stood waiting for the tremor to stop.

Fear was still there. He could reach it if he concentrated, but anger needed no effort at all.

Is this a trap?

The question passed. He had scarcely tried to dismiss it.

I will not go back empty-handed. I will not go back the same man they dismissed.

He could still hear how he would once have answered that. Returning alive mattered more than returning impressive. He had said as much to younger knights. The words sounded reasonable and belonged to a life that was receding from him.

• • •

By his fourth day away from camp, he was walking faster than on the first. He had drunk the last of his water with the tea at the outpost two mornings earlier. His mouth hurt. He had scarcely slept. Yet a warmth under his ribs kept spreading through him, and his legs answered when he asked them for another rise.

The vibration beneath his skin deepened. He felt it in his marrow now, even when he stood still. Laying his hand flat against his chest did nothing to quiet it.

The buried notes kept finding him. In the Vel'thari, metal and Celestium worked together; he remembered that much of Keeper's teaching. Here a pulse arrived and the thought he was already holding became urgent. Doubt seldom lasted long enough to meet the next one.

It will consume me. He waited to feel the force of that. *Unless I learn.*

He slowed his breathing and tried to gather the warmth toward his hand. For an instant it obeyed. Then it scattered through him, leaving him trembling. The relief was so strong that he wanted to try again.

He gripped his sword. *I can control this power.* Violet light ran along the edge. He stared at it. The blade was not star-metal; the glow began beneath his hand and travelled outward.

He aimed at a patch of bare ground. Sand flew on every side of him. Violet afterimages hid the place he had meant to strike.

He had missed.

He wanted to do it again.

He could learn, surely. Power this strong must be worth the cost of learning. He rested the point of his sword in the sand until he could hold it steady.

• • •

That night he slept against a jagged basalt outcrop. A change in the air woke him.

Keeper's outline stood against the dark. Drayven could see the rock through him, then could not. He blinked until the face resolved. It looked solid. The moonlit stone showed no shadow beside his own.

His hand was already on his sword. He blinked, trying to bring Keeper's face into focus. A faint light came from the Shaman's skin.

"Drayven." Keeper's voice reached him twice, through the air and somewhere beneath it. "Let me help you."

"Then give me water."

Keeper lowered his eyes. "My body is still on the road. Shal'rik is with me. I have found enough of you to speak, for a little while. I cannot bring a skin through this."

Drayven looked at the unshadowed feet. "Useful."

The outline thinned. For a breath he could see the stone again.

"They came looking," Keeper said. "Lyrian, all of them. The deposits were breaking her buffer. We had to divide."

He wanted to believe it. He resented needing to.

"I don't need saving." His throat scraped. He looked down at his hand. "My power... it's too much to control."

He had meant to say something else. His fingers shook against the hilt. There was an ache along his arm that he had almost stopped noticing.

The pressure of a rough palm settled on his shoulder. He could feel it through the cloth. He could not tell where the sensation entered him. The noise diminished, and he drew a breath without the answering hum.

"Anger won't give you control," Keeper said. "You had reason to fear her lightning. You had reason to ask her to listen. That does not mean you were cast aside." His hand stayed on Drayven's shoulder. "The artifact can return your hurt to you until it is all you hear."

He remembered Gavric kneeling beside him after the serpent fight. The memory hurt. He had been able to look at it for days without feeling this.

They still need me. I have made it harder for them.

Four seconds. He counted them. Then warmth spread beneath Keeper's hand and the thought began to seem unfair. He had needed things too.

The answer came in his own voice. Strength bought respect. Lyrian had it. Why should he keep refusing what would make them listen?

He could follow every step of the argument. He no longer stopped at its beginning.

Keeper watched his face. "I will follow you," he said. "Even when you cannot bear to hear me."

Drayven drew breath to shout. Nothing came. He could still feel the quiet that the hand on his shoulder had briefly made possible.

I'm not just a forgotten knight. I am the one who can rise above them all.

Iron filled his mouth. The thought had arrived with the warmth, and he could no longer be certain which he had welcomed first.

• • •

When he resumed walking, Keeper receded to the edge of his senses, then vanished from them. Once the quieter note returned. Drayven turned too late to find anything in it. The power's pulse settled back into his heartbeat.

He remembered Lyrian turning toward the artifact while he was still speaking. Gavric clapping another knight on the shoulder. Small things, clearer now than the apologies and the offered water. He let them repeat.

With his eyes closed he arranged an army around himself. Where the lines would hold, how the enemy would have to turn to face him. No one could overlook the man at the center of that force.

He began choosing positions.

Then he pictured a surge like the one that had thrown sand in every direction. His own soldiers within its reach. The plan went on beyond the moment he lost control.

I must master it. Even if I have to burn away what I was.

He heard that last part. He kept walking.

• • •

He listened for the quieter presence whenever the buried hum fell away. Most times nothing answered.

He would not turn toward Keeper. He did not want the silence that would follow if Keeper stopped trying.

For now, he would trust his own strength. The warmth answered as though he had made a promise.

He lifted the waterskin once, out of habit, and put it down without opening it. His tongue rubbed against the dry roof of his mouth. Warmth gathered under his ribs and carried him over the next rise.



At dusk he stumbled into Dustwind. Mud-brick huts stood around a brackish oasis, their woven door mats angled against the prevailing wind. He noticed the patched walls even through the pounding in his head. These people knew what failed here. They kept repairing it.

Water seeped through a fissure in the sandstone. Shallow channels led it into clay cisterns, their seams sealed with a pale mixture he later learned was called *taff*: tallow and calcium powder. From there, ceramic pipes ran downhill to three communal basins. Some pipes had cracked and been mended. He followed the slow course of the water with his eyes. The whole village depended on those joints holding.

Humans and Kareth watched him pass. Farmers, herders, people with clay on their hands. Their clothing was worn and practical. No one hurried toward the armed stranger.

His legs were still moving. He could no longer remember what he had expected to find by following the warmth this far.

An elderly woman came to meet him. Zara, the village elder. Her voice was rough, her manner gentle. “We are a simple people. We share what we have with those in need.”

He accepted the clay pitcher. The first swallow hurt. Shame rose while he drank: his companions would have given him water just as freely.

Gavric had.

• • •

They fed him roasted goat and dates by the communal fire. He listened to their prayers to the Spirits of the Sands. Individual voices kept separating from the song, sharp enough to follow without effort. He tried to hear them together.

For a little while he sat quietly with them. It reminded him of the last fire with Lyrian and Lysara beside him. No one had cast him out. He still could not remember deciding to put on his pack, but he remembered each later chance to turn back.

Lying awake afterwards, he returned to the caverns. The heat of the bolt. How little room there had been to move. Each time he reached the apology, he began again with the bolt.

Around him people settled to sleep. Someone covered the last food. He had eaten his share.

Was it their fault?

He turned away from the fire. By then he barely needed an answer.

• • •

Over the following days he paced the village outskirts or sat beside the oasis, watching films of color shift on its surface. Sometimes he stayed in the sun until his skin hurt. That pain still seemed to belong to him.

A child laughed and he flinched. The high note hung in his ears after the child had run on. When someone asked if he needed anything, he had to wait before he could answer without snarling.

They had given him food and a place to sleep.

He knew that while he waited.

Then, one night, a scream shattered the silence.

A woman's voice, from the northeast. It kept going.

He was on his feet with his sword before he had decided to move.

Six Malisohak scouts moved between the burning huts. Light equipment, a spreading formation: he recognized the sweep from the briefings. He read it as a raid meant to draw a response. The villagers were already being driven toward the center.

"Face me!" His voice carried farther than he expected, a lower note beneath his shout.

He charged.

He caught the first strike on his sword. Light ran from his hand into the blade, and the shock of the parry scarcely slowed him. He turned beneath a venomous strike he would once have had to retreat from. There was time to see the opening. Time to choose where to cut.

He drove them back. Gavric would have seen the skill in it. For a moment that thought reached him as pleasure.

Then he pressed his advantage.

As he cut down the last scout in reach, power broke outward from his chest. His sword flashed violet. A raised spiked club burst into splinters; the scouts still standing beyond his blade were thrown backward. Sand scorched in a half-circle around him.

He stood shaking inside the scorched sand. Violet light burned in his eyes, washing the faces turned toward him. His fingers glowed.

“What was that?” Warm light crackled between his fingers. He could not close them steadily.

He held his sword ready, waiting for the scouts to rise. None did. The villagers stared from beyond the scorched sand. No one came close enough to thank him.

Behind them the huts were still burning.

He had saved them. He tried to hold that thought, but what returned most clearly was the instant the power left him. The release. How easily the bodies had been thrown. He had never struck with so little restraint, and nothing he had done with a sword had felt as good.

He looked at his hand, waiting for another spark.

He was still looking when Keeper spoke.

• • •

Keeper’s face resolved at the edge of the shadows. Drayven turned toward it. Beyond the Shaman’s shoulder a villager carried a broken length of timber straight through the place where his arm appeared to be.

“Still not here,” Drayven said.

“Not yet.” The voice thinned, then returned. “Stay where there are people.”

“You could not stop it,” Keeper said. “Do you see that now?”

“It wasn’t me.” Drayven heard the lie. “It was something inside me that I can’t control.” His hands tingled. Even as he spoke he wanted the release again.

Keeper touched his shoulder. In the quiet that followed, Drayven could hear people moving among the damaged huts. “Your lineage is bound to an ancient power. The Blood of the Dark Crown. A legacy of glory and ruin.” Keeper looked at the light fading from his hands. “You must learn what it is doing to you.”

“I think the resonance is changing how you receive sensation,” Keeper said. “The Vel’thari’s Celestium works within its lattice. You have no such filter between yourself and the raw signal. What arrives strongly grows stronger, until the quieter thoughts can scarcely reach you.” He looked at Drayven’s shaking hand. “The altered hearing and sight were the first of three stages I recognize. Now you can understand a warning and feel almost no need to act on it. Being able to describe that is not control.”

The Blood of the Dark Crown.

He had not known what his lineage meant. Now Keeper had given it a name while he stood with luminous hands in a burned village. Nearby iron tools stirred as he moved; he could feel their small answering pull.

Perhaps this is what I was meant for.

The thought was comforting. Beneath it came another, much fainter: *Or this is what it needs me to believe.*

“I don’t know if I can control it.” He watched the light under his nails. “And I’m not sure I want to stop it.”

He had not meant to give Keeper that much.

Keeper’s hand tightened. “I will help you. But you must tell me when you want to use it again. Even when you believe the reason is good.”

Drayven looked past him at the ruined huts. A good reason had brought him here tonight.

• • •

Keeper let his hand fall. The quiet went with it. Drayven stood a little apart from him, listening to the villagers call across the wreckage. The power was changing him. Each surge made anger easier and doubt harder to hold. For a moment after the discharge, nothing had hurt.

He had wanted to matter to his companions. The power could not give him that. It could make him care less about it. He was beginning to accept the difference.

Perhaps it was only uncovering what he had always been. Impatient. Hungry for praise. He had spent years learning to master such things. He could no longer tell whether the discipline had been false, or whether something was teaching him to despise it.

“Come with me,” Keeper said. “We will work at this together. Whatever is answering your anger, you must not face it alone.”

Drayven tightened his grip. A little violet remained along the blade. Beyond the damaged huts the dunes were dark.

• • •

Later that night, while the villagers cleared the broken huts, Drayven withdrew toward the palms. Zara pressed dried dates into his hands as he passed. He could barely meet her eyes.

He had wanted to believe these strangers gave something his companions had withheld. Then Gavric’s waterskin was in his memory again, as plain as the dates in his hands.

Under the palms he watched the work. One person lifted while another pulled broken timber clear. *I could help*. For a moment it seemed as simple as that.

Warmth spread through him. *You are beyond them now.* The words were nearly his own. He held the dates without eating them.

He could feel his shame fading before he had done anything to answer it. That was what frightened him. He had thought understanding the danger would give him something to resist with. Now he watched a feeling leave and could not call it back.

He turned toward the dunes.

By a small fire on the outskirts, he listened to the villagers' songs and prayers. He could separate every voice. He could not recover what it had felt like to sit among them.

Footsteps scraped behind him. Keeper came between the palms, dust caught in his robes. Shal'rik followed, carrying both their packs.

Keeper lowered himself beside the fire with a groan. His heel knocked a stone loose. It rolled against Drayven's boot and stayed there.

"Water," Keeper said, holding out a skin.

Drayven took it. Its weight pulled at his wrist.

"Zara gave me some."

"Have more."

He drank while Shal'rik set down the packs. At dawn the guide would take word back through the Kareth: Drayven was alive, and Keeper had reached him. They would seek the old records in the Wood. Keeper asked Drayven whether he would add anything.

He turned the stopper between his fingers. "Tell her I know she came."

Shal'rik waited, then nodded.

Keeper watched the fire. "You are not meant to be alone, Drayven."

"I don't need saving. I need to understand what I'm becoming." He spoke quietly. The steadiness pleased him until he wondered where it had come from.

"Then begin with what you can still tell me," Keeper said. "The Blood of the Dark Crown gives this a history. It does not tell us what you will do next."

Drayven watched the fire. He could see small changes of color along each burning length of palm wood. For a while he let that occupy him.

"I can feel it changing me," he said. "Every time I use it, the anger makes more sense and the guilt makes less. I know what that means, Keeper. I'm not a fool."

Knowing had once seemed enough. He could see the danger as clearly as an enemy movement across open ground. He was still letting it advance.

Keeper touched his shoulder again. The noise eased, and he looked back toward the huts. He had been sitting here while the people who fed him worked.

"I will stay with you," Keeper said. "But I cannot make you listen. That much must still come from you."

Drayven looked away. "Then help me channel it. Not to contain it. To wield it."

He waited. Keeper's hand stayed on his shoulder.

"We will learn," the Shaman said. "I have seen a future where your power saves lives, and another where it brings ruin. I cannot promise which waits for us."

Drayven wanted the promise. He resented Keeper for knowing better than to give it.

He rose and settled his sword at his side. The lights of Dustwind flickered beyond the palms. He could hear the workers still calling to one another.

I am sorry. He could not decide whether he meant it for them or for the companions who were still somewhere behind him.

The power hummed with his heartbeat. He stopped trying to hold himself apart from it. Relief came at once. He knew enough now to distrust that, even as he let it spread.

He and Keeper set off into the desert. Drayven measured his steps. He was glad of how deliberate they felt.

Keeper spoke behind him. He heard the warning and began considering how to use it.

I am Drayven. I will master what I have become, no matter the cost.

Doubt remained. He knew where to look for it. He kept walking instead.

CHAPTER 14

Echoes of the Past

— Drayven —

The deep Enchanted Wood did not welcome them. Drayven felt it in the way he kept checking the path behind him.

After the desert, they reached the outer Enchanted Wood. Over a single afternoon its familiar Eldrin stands gave way to trees Drayven could not place. The change kept drawing his eye sideways. When he stopped to look directly, he could seldom find the thing that had disturbed him.

Then he touched the bark.

Eldrin bark should have caught against his palm, grey-brown ridges roughened by age. This was dark and smooth as obsidian. Warmth reached him through it. He pressed harder, as though a firmer touch might find the tree he knew beneath the surface.

He took his hand away. Nothing marked it. For several minutes the warmth remained, with a vibration he felt both in his fingers and somewhere behind his teeth.

“The Thal’as here is different,” he said. It was not a question.

Keeper walked ahead. “The Sylvaren have been pruning and re-directing the outer wood’s flow for centuries. Here it has grown beyond their tending.”

“That doesn’t explain why the bark is warm.”

“No,” Keeper agreed. “It doesn’t.”

• • •

His training had included the Sylvaren naturalists’ texts. He had resented the hours spent over branching patterns and root systems. Now he tried to remember the diagrams.

Nothing here fitted them.

Trunks climbed in tight spirals, holding weights that should have pulled them down. He could feel their low vibration before he came close enough to touch them. Farther in, leaves spread toward the ground. He stood beneath a canopy turned away from the light and wondered what it was feeding on.

The soil rose beneath his feet. Only a little, perhaps two millimeters. It settled, then rose again. He counted against his heartbeat: roughly eight seconds between movements.

“What is that?” Drayven asked, pointing at the ground.

Keeper stopped beside him. “The roots here have fused. In the outer wood the trees exchange signals and nutrients through fungi. Here the trees are joined in their own flesh.”

“A single organism.”

“Below ground, yes. The joining happened centuries ago. Perhaps longer. What you feel is the pressure of sap moving through it.”

Drayven absorbed this. “And the Thal’as?”

“Travels through the joined roots. In the outer wood we follow separate paths from tree to tree. Here I feel it everywhere. Our instruments were made to measure the paths.”

“So the Sylvaren don’t know about this.”

“Some do. Most are told the deep wood is sacred and must not be entered.” Keeper stepped over a root. “That is easier to teach than what happens here.”

Drayven looked at him. He had not expected that edge in Keeper’s voice.

• • •

They walked for what Drayven reckoned was three days. No sunlight reached the floor. Silver leaves and phosphorescent fungi gave enough light to travel by, but their dimming seldom agreed with his need for sleep. Once the glow held steady for what felt like twenty hours.

He saw no birds or insects. Still, things moved. A branch was lower when he looked back. Fungi seemed to gather in a different arrangement. He was almost sure a root had shifted while they rested beside it. He tried to fix each thing in memory before turning away; the effort made him less certain.

The desert’s metallic notes were richer here, crowded so close that he could not separate them. Silver leaves hurt his eyes. The fungi gave off colors he could see clearly and could not have named. He knew his senses were changing. He did not know what that allowed the Wood to conceal from him.

“Is it this strange to you,” he asked, “or would I find something wrong wherever I looked?”

“The ground moves under my feet too,” Keeper said. “The bark is warm. I see the same branching patterns. Beyond that, I cannot tell you which changes belong to this place and which to your sight.”

“Helpful.”

“Accurate.”

• • •

On what he judged to be their fourth day in the deep wood, they found the tree.

Its trunk was perhaps fifteen meters across. Drayven had seen larger Eldrin, but none he found so difficult to look past. The smooth bark caught the surrounding light. Roots curved away at repeated intervals, each bend answering the next.

Ivy and luminous moss hung over an opening at its base. No cut edges. The wood had parted and grown around the passage, which sloped down into the roots.

Keeper stood before it and said nothing for a long time.

“You’ve been here before,” Drayven said.

“Once. A very long time ago.” Keeper studied the entrance. “The passage was narrower. Reluctant. Now it looks—”

“Like an invitation.”

“Yes.” Keeper turned toward him. For once Drayven did not seem to be the cause of the fear in the Shaman’s face. “That concerns me.”

Keeper spoke in old Sylvaren. Drayven recognized the language, though the cadence was unlike anything he had been taught. Ivy drew aside. The moss brightened, and the roots began to move. Slowly the passage widened. The light within had a color he could not quite hold in his sight.

They descended.

• • •

Below, the roots opened around a chamber.

The passage took them below the trunk, where wood gave way to stone. Roots followed the curves of a vaulted ceiling. Shelves had been formed in the rock. Drayven could not tell where the tree's growth ended and the shaping of the chamber began.

Leather-bound books and brittle scrolls occupied the shelves, with crystals set between them. Their light made his eyes ache. The arrangement left room to reach each object without disturbing its neighbors.

Whoever had made it had expected work to be done here.

Keeper lifted a scroll with trembling hands. "Aetheri records," he said. Drayven looked at the place where it had lain. No dust. He ran a finger along the neighboring shelf and found it clean too. He kept glancing toward the passage, wondering who else came here.

He should have been more troubled by the thought. He knew that much.

• • •

"Tell me about the Aetheri," he said. Keeper had already opened a second scroll.

Keeper did not look up. "What do you know already?"

"Legends. Luminous beings. Wings. Taught the Sylvaren the secrets of harmony and balance. Betrayed by King Kaelindryth. The Great Purge. Standard curriculum."

"And what does the standard curriculum leave out?"

“Presumably the part that requires a hidden chamber in the deep wood.”

Keeper almost smiled. “The legends preserve their appearance. They say very little about what the Aetheri did here.”

“These records describe work,” Keeper said. He laid two scrolls side by side. “The Aetheri shaped the living systems of Citoren. I believe the Thal’as was their largest undertaking here: a way to carry signals through the forest, detect instability and coordinate a response before damage spread.”

Drayven stared at him. “You’re saying the Enchanted Wood is artificial.”

“The living things were already here. The Aetheri shaped how they communicated and sustained one another. An irrigation channel does not make the river that feeds it artificial.”

“That isn’t the history we were taught.”

“It contradicts what we are taught about how the Thal’as began. That is one reason this chamber has remained secret.”

• • •

Drayven watched Keeper arrange the scrolls.

The Shaman had come here with an explanation in mind. Each new entry seemed to strengthen it. Drayven kept looking for what it left out.

Keeper kept returning to the same account. The Aetheri had cultivated the Wood’s living network before the Sylvaren learned to tend it. They had also understood star-metal: its resonance with living bodies, its ability to amplify sensation, the danger of a connection that ceased to distinguish the two. In his reading, the metal had belonged to their work from the beginning.

“If the metal belonged in their design, then the corruption could be a failure within it,” Drayven said. “Something breaking down. We’ve been trying to drive out something they meant to put there.”

Keeper was quiet for a long time. “That is one interpretation.”

“Then what are these?” Drayven pointed to the repeated entries Keeper had been translating. “Readings, adjustments, the same readings taken again. They were watching for failures.”

“You’ve heard less than an hour of these records. That is a great deal to decide from them.”

“Am I wrong?”

Keeper was silent for a while. “You may be right about the failures. But there is still the Purge. Kaelindryth drove out or killed the people who knew how to tend this work. The histories preserve the violence. They scarcely ask what was left running after the people were gone.”

The crystals still glowed on the shelves. Drayven looked from one to the next.

“He destroyed more than records. He destroyed the knowledge of how to keep this working.”

“And a system deprived of that work could deteriorate for centuries.” Keeper looked down at the scroll. “That has been my working hypothesis. These records give it weight. They do not tell us everything that has happened since.”

• • •

The oldest scroll lay in a sealed compartment behind the crystals.

Keeper drew it out carefully. Its surface was thin and flexible, faintly metallic. Drayven had never seen its like. As it unrolled, the symbols seemed to shift. He leaned to one side, trying to decide whether the movement belonged to the marks or the light.

Keeper's hands steadied. He held the scroll flat.

He read:

“In the age when shadow devours the sun,
One shall rise whose blood and star are one.
That which fell from beyond the veil of night

Shall answer to the sovereign's wounded light.

By bond of sword and tempest's turning,

The balance tilts toward mending or toward burning.

But mark this well, ye who seek the flame—

The dark within bears no other name.”

The crystals dimmed as he read, then brightened. Drayven felt the change through his feet. He waited to see whether the light would settle back to its earlier rhythm. Below the verse, the scroll's damaged edge cut through another line.

Keeper laid the scroll down. Half a minute passed.

“You've seen those words before,” Drayven said.

“Parts of them. Damaged copies, incomplete transcriptions. I read them as a warning given the shape of a myth.”

“And now?”

“Now I can read what surrounds it.” Keeper pointed to the marginal symbols. “Frequencies. Thresholds. Rates of change. I think the verse preserves a model of what happens when certain limits are reached.” He bent closer. “These are technical annotations. The warning may have survived as prophecy because its readers lost the knowledge needed to use it.”

“And the one whose blood and star are one?”

“It could describe the last stage of integration: a living host’s signal becoming indistinguishable from the metal’s. Blood and star as one.” Keeper kept his finger beside the annotation.

Drayven looked at his hands.

“That’s me,” Drayven said. “That’s what’s happening to me.”

“It could happen to you. To another who carries the same affinity. Lyrian’s connection is different: the Celestium in the Vel’thari mediates it. You have no such buffer.”

“I’m the failure mode.”

“One possible outcome. There is another in the same verse. Mending.” Keeper looked up. “They understood that a connection could stabilize the system or destroy it. We must learn what separates those outcomes.”

Keeper returned to the annotations, translating under his breath. Drayven held on to *the dark within bears no other name*. Perhaps the voice in the ruin had not belonged to a hidden speaker. Perhaps it was what the connection became when no one knew how to govern it.

He had imagined an intruder he could force out. If Keeper’s reading held, he was caught in a process the Aetheri had once known how to guide.

That should have made the danger more manageable. He found it harder to picture an escape.

• • •

Keeper kept translating, sometimes speaking to Drayven, sometimes too quietly for him to follow. The account grew less like the one he had learned in training.

These Aetheri had institutions and disagreements. Some records contradicted others. Even their own descriptions left Keeper uncertain whether the name meant a species or a society. They had worked with living networks beyond the Thal'as; he found references to other undertakings without enough detail to place them.

One term halted him. He translated it first as "descended," then as "differentiated." Either the Aetheri had arrived on Citoren or emerged there; he could not choose between the readings. The surrounding account was clearer. Regions had suffered repeated ecological failures. The Aetheri had joined the existing life in a network meant to detect those failures and coordinate a response.

Keeper returned to a drawing of pale channels joined around an opening. Beside it, successive marks showed the channels being separated and set again.

"Celestium," he said. "Or work very like ours. I first read this word as making the material. Look at what follows it. Sorting, heating, setting. Then the same sequence after use."

"They made Celestium?"

"They worked it. The mineral was already here. Elerion used Celestium from the Draythyr River before the fall; these records concern what can be done with it." He traced the space between two channels. "An arrangement, and the care that kept it useful."

Drayven leaned closer. "We still know how to forge it."

"Enough to make blades. Enough to build the Vel'thari. That does not mean we kept every part of their craft. These marks distinguish strains I have never seen named in our teachings."

"And when the Aetheri were driven out?"

Keeper held his hand above the drawing. "The river did not cease to hold Celestium. The people who knew how to work it were killed or scattered. Perhaps these are some of the things we no longer know to look for."

He turned back to the channels. “Raw star-metal amplifies what reaches it. The buffer has to keep doing its work under that strain. If we have mistaken a pattern that needs tending for a shape we need only forge once, we could be wearing it out without understanding what we are losing.”

Drayven looked around the chamber again. The books had survived. The hands that knew what to do with them were gone.

“The Great Purge,” Drayven said. “A maintenance failure.”

Keeper flinched. “It was murder.”

“Is it inaccurate?”

“Incomplete.” Keeper kept looking at him. “They were people, Drayven.”

• • •

Drayven repeated the intact verse, looking back at the scroll whenever he hesitated. As they prepared to leave, Keeper returned to the broken line beneath it. *Beware the...* Beyond those words, the marks thinned and lost their edges. The scroll had not burned. Its faintly metallic surface seemed to have dissolved.

“Could that degradation be natural?” Drayven asked.

“It was made to endure. I do not know how long, or what could damage it.” Keeper held the edge toward the light. “It may have failed. Someone may have wanted this part lost. We have too little left to distinguish them.”

Drayven bent close to the remaining marks. Each time he thought he recognized the start of a letter, it became part of the damaged edge again.

He touched one of the crystals. Its hum changed beneath his fingers, a response that felt uncomfortably like recognition. He withdrew his hand and listened. The note lingered.

I must master it. He had carried the words all the way from Dustwind. Here he could see shelves of knowledge that might give them meaning. The people who had worked in this chamber had needed more than strength.

He looked once more at the damaged warning.

• • •

Outside, the twilight had scarcely changed. The ground still rose under his boots. He tried to read the warm bark and the repeated root patterns as parts of Keeper's account. They began to fit. He remembered how easily other things had fitted what he wanted to believe.

They walked in silence for nearly an hour. Then Keeper spoke.

"You were right about the work lost in the Purge," Keeper said. "I have suspected it for decades. Holding their records is different from arguing over fragments."

"What changes?"

"The forest is still failing. The Malisohak are still here. Understanding more does not end either danger. It may help us choose what to try."

"Such as?"

"The archive would take years to translate fully. What we have read suggests that the Thal'as depended on care we no longer know how to give it. We cut shadow-knots and raise barriers. Sometimes that helps. But we may be treating failures whose causes we have not understood."

"Because the people who knew are gone."

“And we have not found anyone who can teach us the whole of their work. We need to bring people here who can work through these records. For now, I want to hear what the Northern Tribes have observed. They have watched the ice longer than the Sylvaren have kept their histories.”

Fungi marked the path in changing light. Drayven began to notice brighter patches where the Thal’as felt stronger. He watched for the pattern to repeat before trusting it to guide him.

The balance tilts toward mending or toward burning. Keeper had read two possible outcomes in the verse. Drayven thought of Lyrian inside the armor, the work the Celestium did between her and the raw metal. He felt the answering note in his own body.

They were connected to the same danger in different ways. That was as much as he could be certain of.

• • •

The fungi dimmed together along a narrow path. Drayven took it for evening.

“The legends say the Aetheri were too trusting,” Keeper said. “That may be an easier story to inherit than the one in their records. If their work needed them, the people who benefited from it had reason to protect them.”

“And they depended on those people to do so.”

“Perhaps.” Keeper watched the path. “The parts we have read describe how to tend the network. They do not show me how it was meant to survive the loss of everyone who knew that work. I cannot tell you whether they never prepared for it, or whether we have yet to find what they left.”

A branch lowered in the distance. Drayven watched until it stopped. Was that part of the forest tending itself? “And the Blood of the Dark Crown? Where does that fit?”

“There were references I need more time to understand.” Keeper slowed. “Your affinity resembles what they describe as a way of joining a living mind to the metal. The early Aetheri had that ability. They passed it to descendants, and to some of the peoples they worked with. I think your bloodline preserves that connection.”

“Something made for a purpose,” Drayven said. “And passed down.”

“I think it began as an ability used for that work. What it has become without their knowledge or the buffering it needed is what we must learn.”

He tried to take in the difference. An inherited ability could still be dangerous. It need not be a sentence passed on him before he was born.

For days he had wanted to prove the power belonged to him. Now he pictured the repeated readings in the archive, the adjustments, the care needed to keep a connection from destroying what it joined. He did not know how to do that work. Wanting to wield the power had not brought him closer to knowing.

Mending or burning. He wished the missing line had told him how to choose.

• • •

On the journey out, rough bark returned beneath his hands. The ground grew still. Common fungi replaced the strange lights, and the Thal’as separated into paths he could follow from tree to tree.

He kept stopping to listen. Something seemed absent, though he could not have said which of the deep wood’s crowded notes he missed.

Keeper noticed him listening. “After the deep wood, this will feel diminished. You may readjust as we travel.”

“May.”

“I cannot predict how you will respond.”

“You’re full of reassurances today.”

“I would give you one if I had it.”

They emerged at dawn. Sunlight fell through the branches and warmed his face. He stopped in it, surprised by the pleasure.

For a moment he felt nothing else.

Then the metallic note returned. He let the warmth remain on his face a little longer.

I am Drayven. I will forge my own legacy. He still wanted that. But there had been things in the chamber he could learn, limits he could try to understand before reaching them.

He had not yet chosen what he would do when understanding required him to stop.

Keeper waited beside him, solid in the morning light. Their path led back toward the desert, then toward the frozen north and the knowledge guarded by the Northern Tribes.

Beware the... He tried once more to recover a letter from the damaged edge.

Keeper started walking. Drayven followed, carrying the unfinished warning with him.

CHAPTER 15

The Frozen North

— Drayven —

At first Drayven watched the cold as though it were happening to someone else.

As they climbed into the northern foothills, the air thinned and dried. Ice gathered on exposed surfaces. Drayven noticed each change with an attention that felt useful. For a while it kept him from noticing how badly he was shaking.

Then he tried to fasten his pack.

The wind found the gap at his wrist. He pulled his sleeve down and lost the fastening. His breath caught in the air as a fine white dust. He had known cold near thirty below; this felt colder, and there was no break in the wind.

Behind them the foothills hid the Wood. Ahead lay white slopes and grey rock. He kept looking for the next place they could get out of the wind.

He had served at northern outposts and trained in the high passes. He knew how to layer clothing, keep it dry, eat before exhaustion made eating an effort. He had never stayed this far into the cold for so long.

His fingers were still feeling, but they would not obey. He fumbled the closure again. Swore. Tried to work it with the heel of his hand.

“You are losing the use of your fingers,” Keeper said. “Warm them before we move on. And tell me if an ordinary decision starts taking effort.”

“I had noticed the fingers.” He worked his hands inside his sleeves.

“Notice the rest before it prevents you from doing anything about it.”

“What should I look for?”

“You may feel certain when you ought to hesitate. If I tell you to stop, listen before deciding that I am the one who has lost his judgment.”

Drayven looked at him. “And after that?”

“You may stop caring that you are cold. Or want to lie down. I do not want us to reach that point.”

“You have a gift for morale, Keeper.”

“Then give me fewer reasons to worry.”

• • •

There were only two sets of tracks behind them. When Drayven stopped, Keeper stopped too. No one waited ahead to choose the next shelter.

The Thal’as had filled the Wood. Here Drayven could feel no familiar paths through living roots. Something slower reached him through the ice. He tried to follow it and lost the place where he had meant to put his foot.

Keeper caught his sleeve. Neither of them spoke until they were past the opening.

• • •

They crossed the narrow bridges one at a time. Drayven waited on the far side while Keeper tested each foothold with his staff. Once they spent half a day climbing toward a pass only to find the approach split by a crevasse.

He knew the routes to the Sylvaren outposts. Those were behind him now. He stood over the broken ice until Keeper asked whether he meant to turn back.

He did. Saying it took longer than it should have.

• • •

Keeper left tracks beside his.

Snow caught on his shoulders. His breath clouded. He ate when they stopped and slept with his pack close by. Drayven watched these ordinary things more closely than he wanted to.

They did not explain everything.

In a whiteout on their third day in the north, he lost sight of Keeper. The wind swallowed his call. He went on counting steps, holding its pressure against his left cheek. When the whiteness thinned ten minutes later, Keeper was ahead, waiting. Much less snow clung to him than Drayven expected.

At dusk on the fourth day, Keeper stood by a crevasse with his eyes closed. His lips moved. For an instant his outline blurred against the ice.

Drayven blinked. Frost in silver hair. Boots planted on the ground. Keeper opened his eyes.

He waited for Keeper to move away from the edge. The blur had lasted too briefly to question with any certainty. He remembered the rock showing through the Shaman's outline in the desert, and kept the comparison to himself.

• • •

The deeper ice was wrong.

Drayven first noticed it where a crevasse exposed the layers below the snow.

He expected layers of snowfall pressed into ice, older beneath newer. He had learned to read something of a glacier's history that way.

Here he soon lost the thread.

The upper snow compacted into familiar ice. Farther down, the exposed layers changed. He moved along the lip, looking for the point where one became the other.

Perhaps thirty meters down, the ice turned grey-green. Deeper still, around fifty meters, he could see a faint light. He changed his position at the edge. The glow remained below, beyond the daylight.

Farther down he made out repeated edges and curves. They persisted when he looked away and back. If he was reading the layers correctly, they lay beneath ages of accumulated ice. He could not place them in any history he knew.

"What is that?" Drayven asked, standing at the lip of a crevasse whose walls displayed the grey-green luminescence in vertical bands.

Keeper knelt beside him. “Those edges repeat.”

“A lattice?”

“Perhaps. I cannot tell from here what joins them.”

“How old?”

Keeper looked down through the layers. “Older than anything I can place. We should ask someone who has watched it longer than a morning.”

The wind shrieked over the opening. Far below, grey-green light brightened and faded at intervals he could not connect to anything moving above it.

“The Northern Tribes have watched this ice longer than the Sylvaren have kept their histories,” Keeper said, still watching the ice. “We should ask what they see in it.”

• • •

The resonance changed as the cold deepened.

He knew the ordinary demands of cold. Food, dry clothing, a place beyond the wind. He kept attending to them.

They did not account for everything he felt.

The cold seemed to follow the paths where he felt the buried note. His hands were cold, his face stung; those were familiar. But there were places under his ribs and behind his eyes that felt colder than the skin around them.

He pressed a hand against his chest. There was no way to measure what he felt. The cold points remained, scattered through the answering hum.

He wondered what the Vel'thari would do here. Its materials answered the same forces differently. Would the Celestium spare Lyrian this, or would the metal draw the cold against her wherever it touched? He had no way to test the thought.

He hoped she would never need to find out.

He could still plan a day's march. He could list their risks and find sheltering ground. The knowledge that someone might suffer from a wrong decision reached him with less force than it once had.

He noticed the delay most when someone spoke to him. He heard what was needed. He knew what to do. Concern came afterwards, if it came at all.

He kept answering before anyone could notice the pause.

• • •

They found Frostfang territory on the ninth day. By then he had to loosen his fingers before he could close them properly around his sword. He practiced once, feeling the lost moment between the intention and the grip.

Old camps appeared first: stone fire-circles, charred fuel, symbols carved into ice-coated rock. Then he saw watchfires burning orange through the white. He could not place the fuel by its smell or the color of its flame.

The settlement took longer to distinguish. Snow and ice walls rose out of the slope, close enough in color to disappear when the wind lifted loose snow across them.

Stone reinforced the dwellings; hides lined their interiors. Air moved through channels cut to shelter the openings from the wind. Heat rose from vents beneath the ice. Crystals set into the walls gave light and a gentler warmth, one Drayven felt answering the resonance in his body.

The crystals answered something he could feel in the ice. He thought of the repeated edges in the crevasse, but did not yet know what joined them to this light.

• • •

People emerged between the dwellings as they approached.

The Frostfangs were human, a head above the average Sylvar-en, pale-skinned and lean. Most had ice-blue eyes. White and silver hair showed at the edges of fur hoods, even on faces that looked young.

Their furs were layered to shed wind outside and keep dry warmth within. Bone and beads held parts of the garments apart, keeping the layers from flattening under their weight. Drayven studied the construction while he waited for someone to speak.

He had thought he knew how to dress for cold. He could see what his own clothing lacked.

Warriors took positions across the approach. Fur and carved bone covered their faces. Their weapons remained sheathed.

A man with a long silver scar across his cheek stepped forward. “Halt. Who are you, and what brings you to our lands?”

Drayven kept his hands where the man could see them. He tried to remember how he would have answered in a council chamber.

“Travelers from the south. Seeking shelter and knowledge. We’ve heard that your people understand things about this land that ours have forgotten.”

He had meant to make the request sound less like a need. There was little point. His fingers were shaking in plain sight.

The warrior glanced toward the others. A tall woman came through the formation and stopped before Drayven. She looked from him to Keeper.

“Astrid, Chieftain of the Frostfangs. You are far from the lands your people claim.” Her ice-blue eyes stayed on his face. “Brave or desperate? Tell me honestly.”

“Desperate. And curious.” He could not separate them any longer.

Astrid studied him, then the sword he had not drawn.

“Come. Warm yourselves. Then we will determine whether your curiosity is worth satisfying.”

• • •

Warm air met him inside the central hall. Hides covered much of the carved ice; light spread from crystals in the walls. It felt warm after the journey. He should have been grateful. Instead he stood trembling, unable to bring the warmth of the room together with the cold he still felt inside.

Astrid sat on a seat cut into the ice, advisors gathered beside her. A younger woman stood close by: Elara, her daughter and the tribe’s Shaman. Light showed in her eyes even when she turned away from the wall crystals. Drayven wondered whether she felt the ice as Keeper felt the Wood.

He told them about the Malisohak, the Vel’thari, the prophecy. Then the archive in the deep wood. He kept to what they had found and what Keeper thought it meant.

The Frostfangs murmured at the prophecy. Drayven described Keeper’s reading of the archive: a cultivated Thal’as, lost ways of working Celestium, a network deprived of the people who knew how to tend it. Astrid watched him closely.

An elder leaned forward. Deep lines marked her face. “What do you know of the Tunglq?”

“We call it the K’hara. The star-metal artifact.” He hesitated at her expression. “It has helped us and harmed us.”

“The Tunglq is the force,” she said. “The artifact is one expression. The ice is another.”

He looked toward a crystal set in the wall.

“Tell me.”

Astrid answered before the elder could continue.

“Our ancestors, the Winterborn, knew the Tunglq before the Sylvaren existed. Before the Enchanted Wood was planted.” Astrid let that word stand. “It moves in the deep earth, in stone and ice. Your Thal’as is built upon it.”

Keeper leaned forward. “An energy network carried in stone and ice. Older than the living network.”

“We have watched it for a hundred generations,” Astrid said. “The deep ice you crossed is Tunglq made solid. The grey-green layers, the light, the shapes within them. Their structure preserves a record of how it has worked. Our ancestors learned to read it.”

Drayven remembered the repeated edges below the crevasse. “What does it tell you?”

“That the Aetheri’s work was built over an older network,” Astrid said. “They saw it failing and used living things to compensate. Your forest carries work that once belonged below it.”

Keeper did not answer at once. Drayven watched him turn toward the crystals in the wall.

“If the ice is failing, and the forest built over that failure is failing too...” Keeper stopped. “We have been looking at only part of the damage.”

“And trying to mend it with knowledge of only that part,” Astrid said.

They stayed to compare what they knew.

The elder's name was Sigridr. Keeper spent hours with her, listening to accounts passed through a hundred generations of watching the ice. She could describe which changes came together and which followed years apart. He kept asking what joined them.

They argued quietly. Drayven sometimes lost track of the distinction they were pursuing, then caught its importance in the next question.

"How does it travel through the ice?" Keeper asked.

"With it," Sigridr said. "When the ice shifts, the Tunglq shifts. When it fractures, the Tunglq fractures. The ice is its physical expression."

"A tree can die and the Thal'as find another path. Can the Tunglq do that?"

"When this ice is destroyed, that part of the Tunglq is lost. We have watched the glaciers retreat. You call it warming. We are watching the loss of the network beneath your own."

If Sigridr was right, they had found another failure beneath the one Keeper had described. Drayven pictured the Thal'as carrying work the ice could no longer do, then losing the people who knew how to keep it carrying that work. The Malisohak were pressing against a land already strained. That did not make the invasion any less deliberate.

Drayven had been listening from beside the wall. "Then we could mend the forest and still leave this failing under it."

Astrid looked toward him. "Yes. That is why we need you to listen."

• • •

The possibility of an alliance grew out of those conversations.

“You know the living network,” Astrid said. “We know the ice. We will need both. The Malisohak have been using what divides us.”

Keeper and Elara spent hours comparing what each could sense. He tried to describe the paths he knew through living roots. She kept asking which changes those descriptions allowed him to predict. When they disagreed, they returned to an observation they could both make.

Drayven sat with the patrol leaders over a map of the approaches. He marked where Sylvaren soldiers would have taken cover. One of the Frostfangs moved his marker away from a snow shelf and explained what the wind would do there. He listened, then found a second place to ask about.

Drayven followed the work easily. He could see why it mattered. He watched for the feeling that should have accompanied that understanding.

At meals the Frostfangs sang. Their voices rose against the sound of wind beyond the walls. He remembered sitting beside the fire in Dustwind, ashamed that its songs scarcely reached him. Here he noticed the same absence. Even the shame was faint.

He waited for more. The next voice began.

• • •

One night a storm battered the settlement. Drayven lay awake, trying to put the changes in order.

The metallic notes no longer left him. Colors had begun to crowd beyond anything he knew how to name. He misjudged the edges of his own body, stopping short of walls as though his shoulder extended beyond where he could see it.

His thoughts still came readily. The feeling that ought to follow them arrived late and thin.

They never valued me. He could still summon the accusation. It no longer burned, and it no longer survived a careful look. Lyrian had listened. Gavric had come for him. *They were right to worry.*

He had known it for some time.

He was changing in ways he could not control. He could state that clearly. It ought to have brought him upright, made him call for Keeper. He stayed where he was.

Keeper sat at the edge of the shelter, cross-legged, his eyes open but unfocused. Then he looked at Drayven.

“You are afraid.”

The denial came readily. He let it pass.

He said nothing.

“Keep telling me what you can still feel,” Keeper said. “Especially when it changes. A warning may reach you before you feel any need to heed it.”

He searched for fear. He could name what frightened him: losing the difference between his own wishes and the answering voice. Being able to hurt someone and feel only the release. The reasons were clear. The fear itself was hard to reach.

“I can still find it,” he said. “But it’s fading, Keeper. It’s becoming abstract. I know I should be terrified, and instead I’m... noting that I should be terrified. That’s not the same thing.”

Keeper's eyes held his. "Being able to notice that difference still matters. In the last stage, the distinction itself is lost."

"How long?"

"I do not know. This has worsened since we came into the cold. Leaving may help. I cannot promise that everything lost here will return with warmth."

"You still have no reassurance."

Keeper was quiet. "Drayven, we need what the Frostfangs know. And we need each other. When the fighting comes, will you still be able to care whom you are defending? Or only whom you can strike?"

Outside, the wind drove snow against the wall. Drayven listened to it. Keeper waited.

. . .

At dawn they gathered again in the hall. The light beyond the entrance had turned grey. Astrid faced Drayven before the assembled company.

"Our struggles are joined," she said. "The Malisohak exploit the failure in both our lands. We will share what we know and stand together against them."

Drayven met her gaze. She studied his face, then his hands. He wondered how much of the change she could see.

"I will fight for Citoren," he said. The words were true. The warmth that should have accompanied them was not.

Astrid's jaw tightened. "Trust must be earned daily. You will need to master what is happening to you, or add to the danger we already face."

He could dismiss none of it as affection or an old grievance. She had met him as he was now.

He nodded. Astrid accepted the answer.

• • •

As they prepared for the road south, Drayven tried once more to measure what remained of himself.

The hum had become familiar. He could follow a plan, anticipate an attack, notice where another person's hand shook. He still had to remind himself why that last thing mattered.

He would fight with the alliance. He would try to preserve what still allowed him to care about the people beside him. The decision offered none of the warmth he had once mistaken for proof that he was right.

He made no promise of success. The old vows had given him certainty when he most wanted it; he no longer trusted that feeling. This decision was harder to hold. He hoped the effort meant it was still his.

He could still feel the difference. Barely.

They were right to fear what this could make of me. He flexed his hands. *I will go back anyway.*

He held on to the decision. He would have to keep making it.

He remembered Keeper beside him when Astrid pronounced the alliance, Elara and Sigridr listening from the other side of the hall. They had offered knowledge and shelter. Lyrian and the others were still far to the south. He would have to face them himself.

He tried to feel gratitude.

He knew it belonged here. For now he had to act on that knowledge.

Keeper came beside him, breath clouding in the air. His outline seemed to waver. Then he turned, and Drayven saw only the concern in his face.

“One step at a time,” Keeper said.

Drayven followed. Cold came through his boots; the deeper cold answered it.

Behind him lay the settlement and its watchfires. Ahead, the road turned south toward Citoren’s contested heartland.

His hands trembled less. He watched them, uncertain whether he was recovering or simply losing another warning.

One step. Then another. The ice held. For now, the ice held.

CHAPTER 16

The Siege of Sylvaria (Part 1)

While Drayven and Keeper were in the north, Lyrian returned to Sylvaria by the river wards.

Gavric went first, calling the watchword into a gap between two barricades. A defender answered from behind stacked grain carts. Beyond them lay the lower citadel terraces, crowded with people who had fled the palace and the occupied streets above.

The upper halls were lost. The lower walls had held. For weeks, Rael had measured out the river warehouses' grain while Kareth boats brought what they could through the southern shallows. Each boat now carried less; each crossing drew fire.

Shal'rik's message reached Lyrian there. Drayven was alive. Keeper was with him. *Tell her I know she came.* She read that part twice, then folded the message into her sleeve.

The war room had been moved to a clerk's chamber on the lowest terrace. From its window she could see the burned palace above the defenses they still held.

In the borrowed war room, Princess Lyrian studied a map that no longer matched the view through the shattered window. The outer defenses had grown from the Whisperwood's roots, wood interwoven around stone, its living paths carrying the Thal'as into

the shields above. Mages tended that flow. They could sustain it only while enough of the roots remained alive. Beyond the window, another section of wall was turning grey.

She had not slept. Each time she drifted toward it, the inlays along her spine tightened. Cold spread until the Celestium steadied it into an ache. For three days she had been trying to decide whether the armor sensed danger she had missed or was returning her own fear to her too strongly to ignore.

She had asked Elyra once. Elyra's look had told her the answer would take longer than either of them had.

On the ramparts, Sir Gavric watched assault craft in the northern clearing. They had landed two days earlier and cut the remaining connections between the city and the outer groves. The defenses now drew on what survived inside the walls. He could see the shields thinning over the abandoned forward positions.

Gavric explained the failing connections to Lieutenant Rael, who was trying to bind a cut on his forearm. He had a supply manifest trapped beneath his elbow.

"So we lose the roots and the shields together."

"Where the roots die."

Rael glanced toward the thinning light above the wall. "And the rest takes the strain."

"Until it cannot."

Rael looked from the manifest to the landing craft. "Anything better?"

"The mages can give the remaining paths more power. Elyra is working out how much."

"How long does that buy us?"

"Hours. Perhaps a day, if they take shifts and no one collapses."

Rael wedged the manifest under his wounded arm and tried another strip of bandage. "At least we will die well-informed."

• • •

Below the citadel, Anya carried flour through the smell of burning sap. Something sharper caught in her throat. Twenty-three years of baking had taught her to place a sourness, a scorch, the first wrong note in a batch of dough. She could find no name for this.

Grey-green haze lay between the buildings. It shone faintly where the street fell into shadow. Someone had called it Thal's residue. Anya knew only that Elara coughed when she breathed it.

"Mama," Elara said, pulling at her sleeve. "The air tastes funny."

"I know, sweetheart. Keep the cloth over your mouth."

"It tastes like when the oven gets too hot and the bread goes wrong."

Anya tightened the damp cloth over her daughter's face. Seven years old, and already measuring a siege by the things her mother had burned. She whispered a prayer to the Anar'alla and drew the child closer.

The two sacks of flour pulled at her shoulders. She shifted them and went on toward the central storehouse. Soldiers needed bread. So did the families gathering in the inner district. She could still do that much.

• • •

The command ship's first barrage struck the northeastern wall where three major root paths joined. *The Devourer*, the intelligence reports called it. Gavric watched from the western rampart as the light above the junction failed.

The struck roots broke. Grey spread through the wood around them, and the remaining fibers stiffened. Along the neighboring sections the shield began to flicker, light striking back toward the dead junction and breaking apart. Gavric counted through ninety seconds. By then a forty-meter stretch stood bare beneath the smoke.

The neighboring paths brightened as they took the strain. He watched for the same greying to reach them.

“They know where to hit.”

Rael had tied his sleeve around the wound. “The junction?”

“Three paths in one shot.”

“Can they see the network?”

“Or they have mapped it.” Gavric looked toward the command ship. “We should have expected them to try.”

The next barrage struck three more junctions. Grey circles opened in the living wood. Between them the northern shield hung in separate patches, each smaller than the gap beside it.

Ground troops climbed through the broken roots beneath the gaps.

• • •

In the war room, Lyrian gripped the edge of the table. Cold jolts struck along her ribs. Three. Four. Then they ran together and she could no longer count them.

The Celestium’s thin note vibrated in her teeth. The plates seemed to contract against her chest. She knew that response to fear. It did not tell her how much of the fear belonged to what was happening outside.

She pressed both palms against the table. Grain caught through the gauntlets. *How much has fallen?* She needed a report she could compare with the cold.

At Haven they had tested fear, confidence, anger, the small interval in which she could move between them. She knew what the armor had done there. Here the network it answered was being torn apart. The enemy had understood enough to classify the Vel'thari before the Sylvaren understood its dangers. She remembered Elyra's distinction: classified by them, not made by them. It did little to comfort her now.

"Sections of the northern shield are down," an aide said at the door. Cold tightened along her ribs. She could not tell whether it had come before his words.

"How many breaches?"

"Three confirmed. Gavric is reinforcing the western approach. The mages are sending the flow through secondary roots, but—"

"The secondaries cannot carry all of it." Elyra had spent three hours showing her the connections two days earlier. They could send the flow along another route. They could not make that route grow fast enough to carry everything the dying roots had held.

"Tell Elyra to hold the western cluster. The citadel loses its shield if that goes."

"Yes, Princess."

After the aide left, she looked at her hands. They were steady. She could hear impacts outside and feel the cold inside her chest, but her hands did not shake. She waited for them to.

Another impact struck. She left the table.

• • •

Gavric came down from the western rampart and crossed behind the wall toward the northeastern breach. By the time he reached it, the first teams were through the broken roots and moving toward the intact wall beside them.

Sappers. Smaller, faster Malisohak, working in teams of four. He could not identify the equipment they carried. Then one pressed a device against a living root, and the others began doing the same.

“What are those?” Rael asked.

“Nothing good.” Gavric drew his Celestium sword. “Archers on the breach. Take the ones carrying equipment first.”

“Which ones, sir?”

“Then the ones attaching it to the wall.”

He reached them before the first device lit. One sapper met his sword with a weapon held in its free hand, its other hand still working against the root. He killed it, then another. Behind him a third device flared. The wood turned grey for three meters around it.

The shield above their heads flickered and went out.

“Secondary position! Fall back!” He parried a weapon that dripped onto the stone. Something hissed beside his boot. “Keep the line!”

The line broke into uneven groups. Some men ran; others kept turning to cover them. Gavric counted as they reached the secondary position. Three missing. He counted again before looking back toward the breach.

• • •

The blows reached Anya through her chest. She had brought Elara inside the storehouse, where people pressed against the inner walls. An old man held a locket in both hands. Nearby, a woman tried to settle two infants. A boy of about fifteen watched the door; someone had told him he was too young to fight.

Dust sifted from the beams. Beyond the storehouse a long crack ended in the crash of falling wood. Elara pressed harder against her side.

“The loaves.” Anya looked toward the door. “I need to get them out.”

A woman beside her stared. “You’re baking?”

“They’ll burn in ten minutes.”

“Everything is burning.”

“These can still be saved.”

The woman took Elara’s hand, still staring at Anya. “I will bring bread back,” Anya told them. She went through the smoke toward the bakery. The ovens were hot. Dark edges had begun to form on the loaves. She took up the peel.

• • •

Lyrian climbed to the ramparts. From the war room she had been receiving the city’s losses as reports and cold. Here she could see the breach and the soldiers holding it. She drew her sword.

A Malisohak climbed through the eastern gap. Heat spread from her hand to her chest. The cold was still there, but she scarcely noticed it.

The inlays brightened. A soldier beside her flinched from the light. She could no longer hear the Celestium’s steadier note. Her fingers closed around the sword, and for a moment she could not feel where the gauntlet ended.

Her parry drove the enemy’s blade aside. The shock up her arm felt good. Too good. She wanted the next blow before she had looked for the next opening.

“Hold here!” Her voice scraped. “Stay close. Cover the person beside you. If you’re cut off, fall back. We need you alive tomorrow.”

The soldiers drew closer. One glanced toward the bright inlays at her shoulder, then back to the breach. Lyrian could feel herself shaking beneath the armor.

Gavric reached her from the secondary position, blood on his face, someone else’s helmet under his arm. He set it against the wall and took his place beside her.

“Nice speech,” he said.

“It was terrible.”

“They could see a lie from here.” He wiped blood from his eye. “Honest will do.”

She looked toward the smoke beyond the wall. “How close is that fire?”

“Eastern grove. Coming this way.”

• • •

Above the city, aboard *The Devourer*, Commander Xal’tor followed the reports across his displays. Ground teams marked the junctions as they fell. Sensor views showed the shields contracting around the surviving paths. So far the defenders had withdrawn where his analysts expected them to.

“Sixty-three percent of identified junctions neutralized,” Kra’goth reported. “The remaining shields are fragmentary.”

“The western cluster remains intact.”

“They are concentrating their channelers there. Rerouting energy through secondary pathways.”

Xal’tor watched the western paths brighten. Each channeler sent there left another position with less support.

“Maintain pressure on the northern and eastern sectors. Do not assault the western cluster.”

The plates along Kra’goth’s face shifted. “Commander?”

“Let them commit there. When it is their last position, take it.” He opened a channel to the ground forces. “Advance through the northern breach. Standard clearance. Preserve the subsurface roots in the inner district.”

His intelligence placed the K’hara beneath the citadel. The surviving roots offered the most direct route. He wanted that route intact.

Acknowledgments returned from the ground teams.

• • •

Lyrian stumbled. The cold came back so suddenly that she looked for the blow that had struck her. Beyond the breach, the last northern shields were gone.

Gavric caught her arm. “Steady.”

“The northern section is gone.”

“I see it.”

“I felt the whole path go at once.” She pressed a hand against her chest. Cold and a dull warmth moved through the inlays, too close together to separate. She could name what had failed. She could not describe what the armor made her feel.

Gavric looked from the armor to her face. “Can you fight?”

“Yes.”

“And the armor?”

“I think so. I cannot always tell what it is doing.”

“Then tell me what you can.” He turned to meet the next advance.

The Malisohak advanced through the northern gaps in formed units. They passed buildings they could have stopped to burn and kept moving toward the inner wall. Lyrian followed their line of advance with her eyes. The K’hara lay beneath the citadel. If that was their objective, the remaining roots gave them a way toward it.

“Bring the northern garrison back to the inner wall,” she told a runner. “Find Elyra. Tell her the northern path is dead.”

“What should I tell her to do about it?”

Lyrian almost laughed. “Give her the problem. She’ll know more than I do about how to keep the rest alive.”

• • •

By the next dawn, Xal’tor’s ground forces held the northern district and were approaching the inner wall. Reports aboard *The Devourer* still showed the western cluster resisting. Most of the mapped junctions elsewhere had fallen.

Below, smoke shortened the streets to glimpses of thirty meters. Anya had taken the first loaves back to the storehouse and sat with Elara while the child ate. Now each new load carried her out into the acrid sweetness of the dead wall. She tasted it through the cloth over her mouth.

Knights held the intersections. Mages kept small shields above the positions they could still reach. Civilians passed water toward the wounded and loaves toward the barricades. The bakery had wood for another day, perhaps two. Anya counted the remaining lengths between batches.

On the inner wall, Lyrian felt the armor ease. The cold along her ribs and the heat at its edges fell quiet. For a few seconds she scarcely felt its weight.

She knew that brief lightness from Haven. She also remembered Keeper warning her that relief might make her trust what she should question.

Still, in those seconds she could follow a thought to its end. The surviving walls depended on fewer roots each hour. When those died, the shields would go. They needed a way to fight that did not depend on holding every junction.

Then the cold tightened again. She tried to hold the thought still and look at it. Had she seen a way forward, or found a reason to abandon ground she was afraid to defend?

The armor gave her no answer she could trust.

“Find Gavric and Elyra,” she told the runner. “Ask the river watch whether there is word of Keeper. I need Gavric and Elyra here to tell me what we can still hold.”

The runner went. At the bakery, Anya drew another batch from the ovens. The dough waiting for the next batch had risen beneath its cloth.

Lyrian watched the smoke drift between the damaged towers. She waited for her advisors, trying to keep the question separate from the armor’s answer.

CHAPTER 17

The Siege of Sylvaria (Part 2)

On the second morning of the ground assault, Sir Gavric could tell some of the city's losses by their sound.

Stone cracked sharply under a hit. Living wood tore with a wet sound he tried not to listen to. Worse was the low groan that came through the wall into his boots. Above it, a section of shield would dim.

The groans came roughly a quarter of an hour apart now. He kept moving between them, looking for the next place the line would need to bend.

"Western cluster is holding," Rael said at his elbow. He looked as though he had slept where he stood. "Elyra says the secondary paths are showing stress fractures. Her words."

"Stress fractures in what? The roots?"

"In the signal. Waves building where they turn the flow around a dead root." Rael checked a scrap of paper. "She says it is like forcing a river through an irrigation ditch."

Gavric looked toward the western light. Every lost path sent more of the remaining flow there. Elyra had warned them what the smaller roots could carry.

"How long?" he asked.

“Hours, she says. She can steady a junction by working at it directly. There are fourteen that need her.”

“What about the other mages?”

“Three down. Two exhausted. Junction seven discharged through Taren.” Rael stopped. “He’s alive. He cannot see.”

Gavric waited a moment. “The others?”

“Still taking shifts. It isn’t enough.”

Beyond the inner wall, troops moved through the dead northern roots. Rubble and overturned carts slowed them at the street mouths. Gavric watched a group of defenders leave one barricade and run toward the next.

“Tell her to keep the western cluster—”

“She knows, sir. She asked me to tell you she can see it failing from where she stands.”

Gavric almost smiled. “Anything else?”

“The bread woman is still baking.”

“The — what?”

“Anya. Six hours of deliveries to the barricades. The men call her the Siege Baker.”

“Then keep her supplied.” Gavric looked toward the inner wall. “Bring the reserve company up from the southern approach. Reinforce the barricades. The northern district is lost. We hold south of the market square.”

• • •

After seventeen hours of intermittent fighting, Princess Lyrian could scarcely lift her feet.

She knew the heaviness. It had pulled at her shoulders after the guard told her how her father died. Now a young knight lay at the eastern breach, a blade having found the joint below his shoulder plate. Nineteen, perhaps. He had held the gap for forty seconds. She had seen him there and had not reached him in time.

The armor seemed to grow heavier with each step. Her knees bent under it. A low vibration troubled her sternum and teeth. She could not tell how much of the weight belonged to the metal and how much to the effort of moving at all.

She kept seeing the boy's shoulder turn, the opening below the plate.

"Move." Gavric was on her left. "To the inner wall. Keep moving."

She forced another step. Ahead, the line was forming behind overturned market stalls and broken masonry.

• • •

From the barricade, Lyrian watched the next Malisohak advance.

They repeated the same sequence. A firing position first, then a steady attack to keep the defenders down. Flanking teams moved along either side while sappers approached with their devices. She had seen enough of it now to recognize the pause before the teams separated.

Gavric watched beside her.

"They are better at this than we are," he said.

"They have done it before."

"Often enough to know the sequence without being told."

"Does that help us?"

"If we can make them break it."

“How?”

“Stop giving them a position to work on. Let them come farther into the streets, then hit their flanks. Make them turn in the narrow places.”

She looked past the barricade at the houses they would be fighting between. Another piece of the city to give up before they could try to hold it.

“Do it,” she said.

• • •

In the inner district, Anya noticed a new sweetness in the air.

It reached her between batches, thick as fruit left too long in a warm room. She bent toward the cobblestones. The smell was stronger there.

Elara stood beside her with bread for the next delivery. “Mama, the ground smells sick.”

Thin roots showed between the stones. They should have been green. These were yellowish white, and as Anya watched, one tip lengthened across a joint. Another pressed up beside it.

“They’re trying to make new connections.” A young mage sat against the wall, his head lowered. One of Elyra’s assistants. “The old paths have failed. But the new fibers aren’t carrying the flow properly. They’re filling the gaps without repairing them.”

A pale tip reached the next stone and divided. She could not see where all this growth could go without lifting the street.

“Is it dangerous?” she asked.

“The smell comes with the new growth,” the mage said. “I do not know what it is giving off. Or what breathing it will do.” He rubbed his eyes. “I have never seen roots do this.”

Anya adjusted Elara's cloth and took her back to the bakery. There was dough waiting under a cloth of its own. She lifted a corner and pressed it lightly with her fingers. It was ready.

• • •

By afternoon, Lady Elyra was losing the rhythm she had been holding at the western junction.

She stood with both palms against the exposed roots. A pulse reached her, then another too soon. She steadied the second and felt a third return from somewhere it should not have gone.

After the outer groves were cut off, there had been too little flow. Now the surviving roots were forcing strong bursts toward the western cluster. The bursts arrived out of time with one another, reflected from dead ends, and met returning waves. There was power beneath her hands. She could not make it hold a shield unless she could bring those arrivals together.

Tessara stood beside her. Forty years old, most of her work done in healthy forests. She listened while Elyra described the returning waves.

"Three, seven and twelve are reflecting back on us. Each time we change the route, the waves meet somewhere else."

"Can we damp them where they reflect?"

"We need living fiber where the waves turn back. That is where the roots have died."

Tessara closed her eyes. "And the interference is killing what we would use to replace them."

"Yes."

"It keeps making itself worse."

Elyra pressed her forehead against the root mass. “At this rate, four hours. Five, perhaps. I can correct the timing here, but each failure elsewhere changes what reaches me. I cannot hold all fourteen points.”

“And junction seven happens again.”

Elyra remembered Taren crying out. Alive in the infirmary now, unable to see. She could still feel the jolt that had passed through the network when the discharge found him.

“Yes,” she said.

• • •

Aboard *The Devourer*, Xal'tor followed the new lines on his tactical display.

“Eighty-one percent of identified junctions neutralized,” Kra'goth reported. “We hold the northern and eastern districts. The inner approaches are defended by infantry and barricades. Local shielding remains around the western cluster.”

“Casualties?”

“Sixty-three ground troops lost. Gavric has stopped holding the breaches. His defenders let us into the narrow streets and strike from the sides.”

“He is buying hours.” Xal'tor turned to the subsurface view. “The K'hara?”

“Beneath the central citadel. Forty to sixty meters down. The roots appear to give us access.”

“No more junction disruptors in the inner district. Pass that to every ground team. We need those roots functioning.”

Kra'goth's facial plates shifted. “They power the remaining shields.”

“Leave the western shield. Go around it. The route below matters more now.”

He watched the order pass to the ground teams. There would be structures left standing until his forces had what they came for.

• • •

For a moment, the noise inside the armor quieted.

Behind a barricade in the market square, the pressure of the armor eased. Lyrian could hear its two materials settle into one note. For a few seconds the cold and heat fell quiet enough for her to follow what she was seeing.

Another barricade had been abandoned. Beyond it she could make out the next line of soldiers, already fewer than the one that had left it. Gavric was buying time. She could not see what they were going to use it for.

She pictured Elyra at the western roots, trying to hold them while every retreat added to their burden. Gavric moved between positions with fewer soldiers following him. Earlier, in the inner district, she had passed the baker and her daughter carrying bread over stones lifted by new roots.

Perhaps ten seconds. Then a blast struck three meters to her right. Stone hit the barricade and the cold seized her chest again.

She held on to what she had counted: positions lost, fewer defenders, more strain on the western roots. Those facts did not depend on whether the calm had been trustworthy.

She needed another way to defend the city. She did not yet have one.

An hour later she sat on an ammunition crate at the inner-wall command post, the map before her. Gavric came in from the barricades.

“The western cluster may hold until nightfall,” he said. “They have stopped putting new disruptors into the inner roots. The shocks are coming less often. Elyra can follow the pattern for longer, but the mages are spent.”

“What happens when the western cluster fails?”

“Without the last shields, less than a day. We cannot keep energy weapons out with these barricades.”

She traced the inner district on the map. “They have stopped using the devices where the roots run toward the citadel.”

“I noticed.”

“Why?”

“They want a way through. They are destroying the outer paths and leaving the ones below the citadel.”

“The K’hara.”

“The K’hara.” Gavric sat on a fallen block of stone. “They want us out of the way so they can dig.”

A sharp pulse ran through her breastplate. She waited for it to pass before speaking.

“Then they could reach it while we are still holding the streets above.”

“And we would still be fighting over the barricades.”

A building fell somewhere beyond the smoke. They waited for the sound to end. Anya passed the command post with flatbread, and Gavric took a piece. He ate while looking at the map.

Lysara arrived from the eastern barricades with Xanthera close behind. Both were bloodied.

“We have fallen back to the market perimeter,” she said. “Three positions holding. Two improvised. Those two will not stand a hard push.”

“They test a position and go around it if it holds,” Xanthera added. “Their flanking teams keep doing the same.”

“They are clearing a route,” Gavric said.

“Then we block the route.” Lyrian followed the root tunnels on the map. “Between the outer district and the citadel. If we collapse those passages—”

“Put a cave-in between them and the citadel.”

“If we can keep the western cluster alive while we do it,” Lyrian said. “We need Elyra to tell us which connections we can afford to lose.”

He followed her finger along the map. “Centuries of growth. We cannot put it back when this is over.”

The weight returned across her shoulders. Below the marked streets, living roots still carried what remained of the city. She was asking for some of them to be destroyed.

“I know,” she said.

Gavric looked at the map. “I will get the sappers. Elyra must mark the connections feeding the western cluster and the places we can bring down around them. We clear the buildings above those passages first.” He stood, brushing crumbs from his breastplate. “Princess—”

“Yes?”

“It may work. That will not make it easy to live with.”

“I know.”

Lysara and Xanthera went with him. Lyrian stayed over the map.

• • •

Toward night the air cooled. Malisohak units drew back to consolidate the ground they held. Fire still lit the smoke, but the fighting at the barricades thinned to scattered exchanges.

Anya sat in the storehouse with Elara asleep in her lap. A cloth cut from a flour sack covered the child's mouth. Other families waited nearby. Each distant impact made someone turn toward the door.

Pale roots had spread across the floor. One curled around the leg of a bench. Another had begun climbing the wall. Anya watched it tighten and loosen against the plaster.

She had measured the flour for morning. The dough would be rising now. She held Elara and counted the intervals between the sounds outside.

• • •

Late that night, Elyra still had her hands against the western roots. The glow was dimmer, but it held. With fewer fresh shocks from the fighting, she could follow the recurring waves for longer before their timing slipped.

The dead patches were still spreading. Flow came toward her from the citadel's foundations and met the waves returning from the damaged junctions. She caught one meeting, then the next. Farther out, a pulse rose too sharply. She waited for the cry that had followed the one at junction seven.

It did not come. She drew breath and tried again. A few more hours. Perhaps until dawn.

Every path she saved took up work from another that had failed. She could feel the extra strain arrive.

The sappers would need her to mark the roots they must spare. She had to keep those roots alive long enough for the work to matter.

She leaned her forehead against the root and corrected the next pulse. The light flickered, then held.

• • •

Firing continued through the night.

At dawn, the defenders still held the inner wall. Malisohak positions filled the northern and eastern districts. Gavric had made a line from what remained of four companies, none still led by its original commander.

The western shield glowed faintly above them.

At the bakery, the fifteen-year-old boy waited for Anya's first loaves. He had been turned away from the fighting. Now he took the bread toward the barricades with both arms full.

Lyrian stood on the inner wall. Grief weighed at her shoulders. Cold tightened beneath it, then eased. She looked toward the streets above the passages they intended to bring down.

Soldiers changed places at the barricades. Those coming off the line sat where they could and reached for the bread.

She watched the next group go forward.

Gavric brought the report on the tunnel preparations and a piece of flatbread.

"Eat," he said.

"I am not hungry."

"When did you last eat?"

She could not remember. Each time the armor tightened, food became something to think about after the next threat had passed. The next threat kept coming.

“Eat,” he said again. “The armor does not need feeding. You do.”

She took it. The bread was dense and slightly gritty, with smoke in the crust. She kept eating while Gavric opened the report.

The siege continued.

CHAPTER 18

Shadows of the Past

By late morning the root tunnels had been brought down. Elyra's marked feeds still carried enough to hold a shield above the lower terraces. Beyond it, roofs had sunk into the passages the sappers destroyed. Families waited in the square with the things they had been able to carry out before the charges were set.

Keeper and Drayven came through the river barricade as the dust was settling. Snowmelt had stiffened their packs; their boots were worn through at the edges. Gavric took Drayven by the forearm and held him there.

"You came back."

Drayven looked toward Lyrian. "I know you looked for me."

She wanted him to say what had happened. He seemed to be waiting for her to tell him what his return meant. Behind him a sapper called for hands to carry someone clear of the fallen masonry.

"Stay," she said. "We will talk."

He set down his pack and went to the sapper. Keeper remained beside her, searching the ruined slopes above them. In the ground within their remaining perimeter, the trees were putting out new growth.

Princess Lyrian stood at the edge of the clearing. Three days of fighting had taught her to wait before trusting what the Vel'thari made her feel. Now the armor was quiet and heavy. The vibration beneath her breastplate was so low that she could scarcely distinguish it from the ache of breathing.

Before the barrage, interlocking branches had broken the sunlight into green and gold. *Thal'essen*, the Sylvaren called it: "the forest's conversation with the sun." Now the stumps stood open to the smoke. Some were charred black; others had the grey rigidity she had seen spread from the Malisohak devices.

The surviving branches bent toward those stumps. Young leaves crowded their undersides, away from the light. New trunks pushed out sideways and forked into tight spirals. Lyrian knew that twisting grain. Shadow-knots, forming in wood still soft enough to bend.

She had watched the same pale growth force its way through the city streets. Elyra had explained how new connections could worsen the broken rhythm. Here there were whole trees bending toward the dead ground. How many junctions could one mage hold?

She could not see where it would stop.

"They are trying to replace the lost paths," Keeper said behind her. He stood with his staff planted among the roots, silver hair greyed by the smoke. "Most of the primary connections beneath this clearing are gone. The surviving trees follow what remains of the Thal'as, but the signal—"

"Incoherent," Lyrian said.

Keeper knelt beside a branch growing almost level with the ground. “A signal can turn back from a dead path and meet itself here. The fibers follow it. They grow toward the echo, into the very place that can no longer carry them.” He touched the branch’s downward tip. “Following a ghost.”

He broke off a section of the new growth. The wood was soft and pale. A thick sweetness rose from it, and clear fluid gathered on the broken end.

“I do not know what this is.” Keeper held the broken end away from his robes. “The old accounts describe growth like this after a lightning strike, or roots torn out by a flood. A few damaged trees. I have found no account of so many paths dying at once.”

• • •

The clearing was the only open ground within their contracted perimeter that offered a little shelter from the Malisohak probes. The tunnels were blocked, but the attackers still held the outer districts. Gavric had brought a map and Rael’s supply ledger. They needed to know what could still be defended.

Sir Gavric sat on a charred stump, cleaning his sword. A crack ran across his left pauldron, packed with wadding from a bandage. Three days’ dents and scorches covered the rest. The forge stood in the occupied northern district.

“The root system beneath the market square is still doing that thing,” he offered, unprompted.

“What thing?” Elyra sat with her back against a tree, eyes closed and hands in her lap. She had slept four hours after the tunnel collapses. When she opened her eyes, she still had to blink before focusing on whoever spoke.

“The pale roots have reached the storehouse’s second floor. They are in Anya’s bakery too, around the proving baskets. Her morning batch rose faster than usual.” He paused. “Tastes sweeter. She does not consider that an improvement.”

“The same growth as here,” Elyra said. “Following the wrong signals. Every connection it makes can disturb another.”

“Yes. Even I can see it is growing in wrong directions. What I want to know is whether it is dangerous.”

Elyra opened one eye. “Define dangerous.”

“Will it eat people.”

“It will not eat people.”

“Well, that narrows it down. Will it do anything else unpleasant?”

“Roots can pull a building apart. We do not know what is making that smell, or what breathing it does. And every new connection changes the flow I am trying to read. I can lose a warning among the false signals.” She closed her eye again. “Those would concern me first.”

“Reassuring,” Gavric said, and went back to his sword.

• • •

Keeper waited until Gavric had closed the supply ledger.

“You asked about the Aetheri,” he said to Lyrian. “What they knew, and why it matters now.”

“I asked what went wrong.” A tremor passed through the armor. She rested her hands on her knees until it subsided.

Keeper settled against a root mass. “I can tell you some of it. The Purge destroyed people and records together. What survived was hidden in haste, often by people who could not stop to study

it. I have spent years trying to put those pieces back in order. The chamber Drayven and I found in the Wood preserved more, but it did not answer everything.”

He waited for Elyra to sit forward.

“The descriptions suggest a people with bodies and a civilization. Whether all those called Aetheri belonged to one species, I cannot tell. They understood the Thal’as far beyond our surviving teachings. We learn to draw from it. They studied what carried the signal through a tree, a body, an entire forest.”

“What could they do with that?” Gavric asked.

“Grow a bridge from the roots beneath a river. Shape rooms in living wood. There are accounts of devices that seem to have calculated for them. Of healers changing the flow around a damaged body so that it could repair itself.” Keeper paused. “And there are descriptions of junctions that may help us understand what the K’hara is doing here. Those are harder to translate.”

“Try,” Lyrian said.

“The word I can translate is ‘junction.’ The texts describe a place where local paths meet a signal reaching across Citoren. They call it ‘the place where the conversation becomes audible.’ I think they mean that a listener there could perceive what passes through the whole network.”

“And the Malisohak want this because —” Gavric began.

“Because power passing through one junction can be directed there,” Keeper said. “If the texts are right about its reach, no one holding it would need to conquer each grove separately.”

Elyra looked down at Lyrian’s armor. “And the alloy? Is that another way into the same connection?”

“Yes. Star-metal responds to living signals. Celestium steadies its response to the Thal’as. The Aetheri records describe ways of setting Celestium that resemble the buffer we now place around star-metal. Their work may help us understand what that buffer needs.”

“An interface,” Elyra said. “Between the star-metal and our Thal’as.”

“That is how I read it. Vel’thari is the Malisohak classification we adopted for the armor. Their name tells us what they made of it, not who first learned to join the materials.”

Lyrian turned her hands over. The inlays caught a little light. “And between me and the roots.”

“Yes. Celestium steadies what reaches you, until the strain exceeds what it can hold.”

“Then the raw signal gets through.” She remembered the cold tightening while the shields dimmed. “At the wall, was I feeling the junctions die?”

“Your reports agreed with what Elyra was reading. You felt real failures. But I cannot tell how much of that cold came from the failing roots and how much from your fear of losing them. One sensation fed the other.”

“An unreliable narrator,” Gavric said. “A costly one.”

“One whose account we have to compare with others,” Keeper said.

Gavric sheathed his sword. “Then we keep a mage beside her when we can. Someone who can tell us what the roots are doing while the armor tells her how to feel about it.”

“Yes,” Lyrian said. “When we can spare one.”

Gavric looked toward Elyra, who had closed her eyes again.

“The Aetheri tried to improve the buffering,” Keeper said. “Some passages describe a steadier connection. I cannot yet tell whether they are recording a result or setting out what they hoped to make.”

No one spoke for a while. The sweet smell strengthened. Somewhere behind Elyra, a new twig scraped over dead bark.

• • •

Lyrian shifted under the breastplate and straightened her back.

“Tell me about King Kaelindryth,” she said.

Keeper looked at her. “What do you want to know?”

“I was taught that he was a good king driven mad by fear of the Aetheri. That he burned their temples and killed the enchanters in a fit of paranoia.” She held his gaze. “Is that what happened?”

“The accounts differ. Some were written by survivors, some much later, after the court had settled on a version it could bear to repeat. They agree more closely on the orders than on the man who gave them.”

Keeper turned the broken twig between his fingers.

“He feared losing control of the Sylvaren to people who understood the Thal’as better than he did. His orders follow that fear. Destroy the places where they taught. Remove the people who could teach. A pattern like that tells us what he intended. It does not tell us whether he was mad, and it does not excuse what he did.”

Gavric leaned forward. “What did he actually do? Beyond burning temples.”

“He had enchanters executed or exiled for practicing the advanced techniques. He destroyed the teaching groves. He ordered Celestium taken out of public use: weapons, buildings, the works that carried water and sustained the city. He could not unmake what the Aetheri had taught. He tried to make using it impossible.”

“But he could not sever the Thal’as itself,” Elyra said. “The network is biological. It exists independently of whether anyone uses it.”

“Yes. Trees kept growing after the people who tended the paths were killed or driven away. Other people preserved what they could. A way of strengthening a root. A warning about a certain kind of knot. But without the records, they could not always tell when a familiar remedy would do harm.”

“We knew how to raise the shields,” Lyrian said. “We did not know how to keep them standing when the junctions were killed in that order.”

“Elyra understood the failure as it reached her. She could not be at every point to stop it.” Keeper looked toward the smoke above the inner wall. “The Malisohak came with weapons made for those points. Someone had studied where to strike. We do not know how long they had been preparing.”

Gavric looked at the ruined grove. “He left us without the knowledge we needed.”

“He destroyed knowledge that might have helped us. The people he killed were more than the help we have lost.”



In the eastern Whisperwood, beyond the defenders' perimeter, pale roots had grown around a dead trunk and left a hollow beneath it. Two Malisohak observers sheltered there. Neither army held this stretch of damaged forest for long.

They spoke in low Malisohak, the clipped dialect soldiers used away from their officers.

The leaner one ran a claw along the hollow's ceiling. Fatigue had dimmed his eyes to amber. "It is growing into the damage. I have seen this before."

"Where?" His companion's chitin bore old scars.

"Kel'vash. The third extraction. The plants grew into the ground we had sterilized. Different wood, different chemistry. The xenobotanists called it a stress response."

"What happened?"

"It settled eventually." The lean one watched his claw move through the pale fibers. "A long time afterward. I do not know it in this world's years. Things could live there again, but it was a different place."

The scarred observer grunted. "The Archivists say our ancestors mapped such places before we learned to strip them. Studied what kept them alive."

"And then we learned to break them instead."

"Breaking is faster."

The lean observer pulled his hand away. A luminous smear clung to the chitin. He wiped it off. "I wonder what the Archivists think when they read those accounts. Then ours."

"Careful." His companion glanced toward the opening. "They think what Xal'tor tells them to think. And he thinks about the K'hara. Everything else is terrain."

The lean observer left his hand in his lap. Above it, the fibers he had disturbed were drawing together again.

• • •

Back in the clearing, Lyrian drew off one gauntlet and set it on a charred stump. Its inlays dimmed. The breastplate still pressed against her ribs, humming faintly as she reached for the tree.

The bark was warm against her palm. Too warm. A pulse fluttered beneath it, faltered, then came twice in quick succession.

“If the Aetheri understood the Thal’as so well,” she said, “would they have known what to do with this?”

“They knew more kinds of failure than we do. I cannot tell whether they had seen this one.”

“If their enchanters had survived, if the records had survived, would we be able to heal it?”

The new branches rustled overhead. Keeper watched them move long after the older leaves beside them had gone still.

“I do not know, Princess. Their records include questions they had not answered. Diagrams corrected by another hand. Warnings with no remedy beside them. Better knowledge would have given us somewhere to begin. It would not have promised a cure.”

“So even the Aetheri might not have been able to fix this.”

“Perhaps. But we might know why a repair failed, and what to try next.”

Elyra lifted her head. “The texts hidden beneath the old groves. How much is left to work with?”

“Some survived. I have located enough to know how much is missing. A passage about a failing junction, with the diagram gone. Instructions that refer to a technique described in another text. Even the fuller records from the Wood leave gaps. Elyra and I will need to compare them with what she has felt in the roots.”

“What have you learned?”

“That the Aetheri traced signals from living tissue into the larger root systems. That their Celestium arrangements limited what a listener received at a junction.” Keeper looked toward Lyrian’s breastplate. “The K’hara now reaches those same paths. I am comparing their work with what it does here. I have no account of them holding the object beneath our citadel.”

“What does the filtering protect the listener from?”

“The signal can carry more than one mind can bear. Celestium limits what reaches you, but it has limits of its own. One phrase recurs in the records: ‘the weight of all living things.’ I think it describes what reaches the junction before the filter narrows it. The Aetheri were trying to learn how much a person could receive and still remain themselves.”

Lyrian looked at the gauntlet. A narrow beam had found the stump through the smoke. The inlays shone coldly in it.

“When the fear is worse than what I can see,” she asked, “is that what reaches me? The weight of all living things?”

“A fraction, I believe. Distance changes it. Celestium changes it. Then it reaches you, and you change it too. I cannot promise that what gets through is safe merely because you can bear it now.”

“It is enough.” She put the gauntlet on again. Cold gathered across her fingers. The low vibration in her sternum had never quite stopped; now she noticed it with every breath. She could not separate her sorrow from what the armor carried out of the forest.

• • •

The smoke darkened as the light failed. Pale branches lit the undersides of the older leaves. Their shadows fell across one another on the charred ground.

Gavric stood and put away his sword-cleaning cloth. “So.”

“They still want what is below the citadel. The tunnels may delay them. Meanwhile, our surviving roots are pulling the city apart. Have I missed anything?”

“The bread is getting sweeter,” Elyra offered.

“The bread is getting sweeter. What do we do?”

He looked at Lyrian.

A pale fiber had reached the stump beside her. It pressed against the charred wood and bent, still growing.

“We keep working with what survives,” she said. “But if a new connection makes the damage worse, we have to recognize it. We cannot call every change a recovery.”

“And how will we tell?” Gavric asked.

She glanced at Elyra’s hands. “We ask the people who can feel what the new paths are doing. We listen when they say they do not know.”

Keeper rose, brushing bark from his robes. “Elyra and I will begin with the passages on stabilizing damaged paths. What she has felt may help us put the fragments in order. I cannot promise an answer in time.”

“Then begin,” Gavric said. “I will take the answers when you have them.”

Gavric rolled the map around Rael’s ledger. Elyra took the waterskin. There was a little bread left; no one discarded it.

Drayven waited beside the inner wall. Gavric unrolled the map again and put a finger on a wooded pass beyond the warehouses.

“Xylar’s column is moving to cut the eastern road. We need time to set the fallback beyond it. Nessa knows this ground. Take her and nine others. Delay them; do not try to win the pass.”

“And if I lose track of that?” Drayven asked.

Gavric looked at him. “Nessa has the same orders. Hers stand if you stop answering.”

Drayven watched the marked bend, then nodded.

Lyrian would go ahead with Keeper, Elyra and Gavric to the eastern works. Lysara and Xanthera stayed to coordinate the river wards and the movement of civilians. The citadel's defenders still had a wall to hold; the road beyond it was the way their supplies and wounded would have to pass.

At the clearing's edge, Lyrian looked back. Pale wood had covered part of a blackened stump while they talked. The roots beneath it were still dead.

She adjusted the gauntlet at her wrist. Beneath the metal, the tree's uneven pulse lingered against her palm.

She followed the others toward the inner wall. The passages below were blocked with stone and living roots on her orders. Ahead, the surviving trees were growing fast enough to pull houses apart. She would have to decide what to cut again.

Behind her, the branches reached farther into the dead ground.

One touched a stump and kept growing.

CHAPTER 19

Betrayal Never Dies

The next afternoon, Nessa brought four archers, Tovan and Ryll, and three more sword-bearers to the warehouse gate. With her and Drayven, eleven. She checked their water before leading them toward the pass.

Gavric's orders were still clear in his mind. Buy time for the eastern works. Leave before the road closed. He repeated them to Nessa as they walked, so she would know what he had been told.

The pass was wrong for an ambush. Drayven had known that the moment he'd seen it, and he'd chosen it anyway.

The canopy hung perhaps four meters above the trail. Low enough to obstruct the drones, he hoped, and keep most fire close to the ground. Forty meters into the pass, the trail bent sharply. His archers would have a few seconds with the vanguard before the main column came around the curve. Eight, he estimated. He wanted a dozen enemies down before then.

He looked along the bend again. Eight seconds would not be enough.

The scouts had counted between sixty and eighty Malisohak. For a while he had worked with sixty. It made little difference to the ten people waiting for his orders.

“Tovan,” he said, keeping his voice low. “You see that root system, the exposed one at the bend?”

Tovan peered through the undergrowth. Nineteen, and still eager to be useful. “The big one? Looks like a spider made of wood.”

“You and Ryll take cover behind it. When their first bolt hits, count to three, then come at them from the side. Stay hidden until then. If they see you before you reach them, they will have time to aim.”

Tovan nodded. Drayven looked toward Nessa, measuring the ground she would have to cross to reach him.

She had already taken a position beside a fallen log. She could see along the straight stretch from there. Three years ago she had fought in the border skirmishes; she settled behind the wood with her sword across her knees.

“The moss on those stones,” Nessa observed, testing her footing. “It’s slick. If they charge through here at speed, their forward ranks will lose traction on the curve.”

“That will help.” Drayven studied the broken light along the trail. “They have missed more often in shade like this. If it affects their sights—” He stopped. Two engagements. He was building a plan around something he had noticed twice.

“It may help,” he said.

“Inspiring,” Ryll said. The branches rattled as he fitted them into a barrier. He had been the first to volunteer.

“Keep building.”

“You are sure about this place?”

“I am sure where the column is going. If we let it through, it reaches the eastern settlements.”

He crouched behind a root and checked the positions. Eleven, counting himself. Four archers on the rise where roots had lifted the ground; Nessa and three others at the choke point; Tovan and Ryll behind the exposed roots. He held the center. From there he could reach either side when it began to give.

A metallic smell lay beneath the wet moss. The Thal'as felt thin here. Nearby trunks leaned at odd angles, their bark shining faintly when he moved his head. Something had damaged this part of the Wood. He could not tell what.

He rolled his left shoulder. A prickling sensation moved beneath the collarbone.

He rubbed it through the cloth.

For three days the points of cold had seemed to shift beneath his skin. Sometimes they itched. Sometimes a pressure gathered at the edge of his sight and became a patch of warmth, though nothing stood where he was looking.

Last night he had felt one of those warm patches behind him. He turned and found Nessa about twelve meters away. He had not heard her approach.

He had told no one.

He could smell copper when he sweated. He did not know whether his sweat had changed or whether his nose had. Nessa had looked at him once, then away. He had no wish to ask what she had noticed.

He flexed his hand. The fingers closed almost before he felt himself decide to move them.

"Movement," Nessa hissed.

He felt the steps through the ground. A heavy, regular beat, then the quieter scuff of many feet settling behind it. He tried to separate them and lost the pattern.

Seventy, he thought. Somewhere between the scouts' estimates. He could not tell whether he had counted anything or merely settled on a number.

"Weapons tight," he murmured. "Nobody moves until the vanguard hits the bend."

Paired ranks emerged through the mist. Scouts moved beside them. Light caught on chitin and made his eyes ache. The weapons hung low, blades ready at their sides. A hum reached him through his teeth.

Xylar, the field commander directing the column for Xal'tor, moved near the front. His armor was less worn than the others', and in Drayven's altered sight its glow seemed brighter. Drayven held him in view until the mist closed between them.

Drayven gripped his sword. A vibration climbed his wrist and met the prickling beneath his collarbone. Yesterday he had felt the blade answer his hand. Now he could scarcely tell which had begun it.

He tightened his grip. If it made the cut stronger, he would use it. There was no room here to test what else it might do.

The vanguard reached the bend.

"Loose," he said.

• • •

For perhaps a minute and a half, they made the column stop. After that, the fighting moved around them.

The first shafts struck before the vanguard turned toward the rise. Two soldiers fell. A third staggered, its field flickering around a Celestium-tipped arrow. The fourth shot glanced off a shoulder plate and buried itself in a tree. Eight seconds gone.

The ranks behind them turned together.

Three bolts struck the berm. One archer rolled too late. Drayven saw the leg fold beneath the body and heard the cry. He could not see who it was.

Tovan and Ryll broke from cover. Tovan had waited for the third count; Ryll was already a step ahead of him. At the curve, a scout skidded on the moss. Its torso turned as it tried to recover, and Tovan found the gap between its plates.

More troops came around the bend. The fallen bodies slowed them for a moment, then they stepped over.

Drayven met the first warrior in the center of the pass. His sword struck its shield hard enough to jar his shoulder. Heat followed the shock up his arm. The next blade seemed to come at him slowly; he turned it from his throat and cut through the weapon arm at the elbow.

The warrior shifted its weight and struck with the other arm. Drayven had expected a cry, a hesitation. He nearly let the blow through.

Nessa gave ground one short step at a time. She brought down two attackers, then caught a wounded fighter by the collar and pulled him behind the log.

Ryll shouted with every stroke. Most of his blows hit armor, but his opponent had to keep turning toward him. Tovan had room to move.

He had brought down four. He had counted them without meaning to. Each fall left a brief warmth in him, cleaner and stronger than anything he had felt while arranging his own fighters along the bend.

He wanted the warmth again. He caught the thought and had to turn to meet another blade.

A bolt cut across the undergrowth behind him. His fighters drew closer to the roots, into less space. The Malisohak kept advancing into what they left.

“Fall back to the second line!” Drayven shouted. “Nessa, get Tovan out of there!”

A heavier warrior broke through. One defender lay motionless at its feet. The other crawled toward the roots, dragging a leg that would not follow.

He reached the sub-commander at a run. Their blades collided. Heat flared beneath his collarbone, and his cut gouged the chest plate. He was drawing back when a discharge struck his side, through the armor below his ribs.

For a moment it was only a small, fierce heat. Then pain ran from his hip to his shoulder. His hand opened. He could not make it close.

He fell to his knees and the sword struck the ground. Blood spread between his fingers when he pressed his side. Too much. He tried to call Nessa and could not draw enough breath.

Something crawled beneath the edges of the wound. He felt it gather where the pain was strongest, drawing tight. He could not see what was moving. He did not know whether to keep pressing or pull his hand away.

“Drayven!” Nessa caught him as he tipped sideways. She dragged him behind a root, laid him down and pressed her hands over his. “Hold still.”

“I am on the ground.” He tried to draw another breath. “Where would I go?”

“Do not joke.”

He could not manage a reply.

Tovan came with a healing vial. It slipped in his bloody fingers. “Here. Please—”

Nessa took the vial and held it to his lips. Pine sap and something bitter burned down his throat. The tightness in his side eased, then caught again. He could feel two rhythms there, one quick and one slow. He could not tell what the potion was doing to either.

Bolts struck above the root. Through gaps in the smoke he could see his fighters falling back, one by one, into the little cover left.

A commander came toward them through the smoke. Not Xylar. This one paused to look along the roots before advancing again.

He tried to rise. His legs answered too quickly. Pain caught him below the ribs and left him on one knee, shaking, one hand braced against the root.

“Stay down,” Nessa ordered.

“He’s coming.”

“I know he’s coming. Stay down anyway.”

Nessa stepped between him and the approaching commander. Ryll dropped Drayven’s sword beside the root, then joined her, pale and gripping his own with both hands. Beyond them, the commander stopped to wait for the troops gathering behind him.

Their backs filled his view. Nessa had set her feet as though she meant to stay there.

He had meant to slow the column long enough for the eastern settlements to empty. Make it regroup. Make it lose time searching the trees. He had known the pass could not hold them for long. Now Nessa was standing over him, and the way out lay back through the roots, to his left.

He needed her to turn around. He needed to be able to follow.

Twelve kilometers east, the defenders were strengthening the fall-back works beyond the city's river wards. Princess Lyrian stood with a Kareth scout, reviewing the positions still held.

Cold spread through the inlays before she had finished speaking. Her breath caught. The Celestium channels dimmed toward grey.

She stopped listening to the scout. The sensation had come too suddenly to follow anything he had said.

Pressure closed around her ribs. She knew this part: the thin, brittle feeling of the armor, the impulse to draw her shoulders in. Fear. She planted her feet and tried to find what had started it.

But whose fear?

She could not separate the incoming sensation from what she added to it. Each frightened breath made the next harder. The dim channels gave her nothing to steady herself against.

She looked for Keeper.

He stood three steps behind her. He had stopped too, his staff planted in the earth.

"The ambush?" she asked.

"The resonance has changed," Keeper said. "Something is reaching the armor from beyond this position. It may be answering someone whose response to the metal is close to yours."

"Drayven."

"It may be him. Your armor responds to the same material that troubles him. But the Celestium is dimming. Whatever is reaching you is driving the connection harder than it can hold."

"I can feel that." Heat edged her answer. She heard it and stopped speaking.

She unclasped the left gauntlet. Air touched her wrist where the metal had been. The breastplate still hummed, but she had one sensation she could place: cool air against bare skin.

“What can I do from here?”

“Very little, at this distance. The signal is reaching you through damaged paths. I cannot tell how much the armor is supplying where parts of it are missing.”

“Then I cannot trust what I am hearing.” She refastened the gauntlet. Cold closed over her hand again. “Could I send something back through the same connection?”

“Across twelve kilometers of this network? You might send nothing he could distinguish. You might break your own buffer trying.”

“And if we send help from here, it will take time he may not have.”

“Yes. But I cannot tell you that he is dying. Only that something has changed.”

She turned back to the Kareth scout. “Go as far as you can along the road. If you meet them retreating, bring them through. Do not wait for another signal from me.”

He left at a run.

The weight settled over her shoulders. She knew the heaviness too well. Knowing that she might be grieving something which had not happened did not make it easier to stand.

“Find me something I can do.”

“The eastern clearing has stronger living paths,” Keeper said. “Farther from him, but the connection may hold better there. We can try to find the signal before you force anything into it.”

She was moving before he had finished.

The inlays flickered as she moved. Cold gave way for a moment, then seized her again. She kept her left hand open, remembering the air against her wrist.

Drayven might be wounded. He might already be beyond anything she could do. The sensation weakened as she walked, and she could not tell whether that meant he was worse or only farther away.

She walked faster.

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Back in the pass, the survivors held a patch of ground perhaps eight meters across.

Nessa stood before Drayven, Ryll to her left. Blood ran down Tovan's forearm and over his hand. He kept shifting his grip so the sword would not slip.

The Malisohak were bringing up heavier weapons. The delay let his fighters breathe and draw the wounded behind the roots. He watched an emplacement turn toward them. Soon it would have a clear line.

The crawling sensation in his side had stopped. Blood no longer ran so freely between his fingers. He did not know whether the potion had helped, or the other thing had tightened enough to hold the wound closed. He kept his hand pressed there.

Through the smoke he could pick out warm shapes where he could scarcely see bodies. Once, a shape moved before the soldier beside it did. He blinked and lost track of which he had been following.

His birthright. Keeper had given it a name. That had not told him how to stop it.

"Drayven." Nessa did not turn. "He is moving again."

The commander advanced between two heavy troopers. Behind them, soldiers were forming ranks across the path.

He thought of Lyrian wearing the alloy, trying to decide which sensations to trust. If she could feel this through the same metal that troubled him, what would reach her? The pain, or that brief warmth each time someone fell?

He did not want to be sending her that.

“Fall back to the tree line,” he said. “We have held them here as long as we can. Now we get out.”

Nessa looked from his face to the hand pressed against his side.

“I can move,” he said. He would have to make it true.

A mechanical roar came from the far end of the pass. More units. He saw their weight in the bending branches before their shapes resolved through the smoke.

Tovan glanced toward their retreat path. Drayven turned far enough to see the narrow opening to his left. Still clear.

“On my word,” he said. “Through there. Keep together.”

The commander halted about twenty meters away. Drayven watched his hands. He could make nothing of the face above them.

Burning wood stung his nose. Blood had dried along his wrist. Through the canopy’s torn places, the first stars showed.

Drayven found the sword beside the root and closed his hand around its grip. He waited for the next movement from the commander. He needed a moment to get Nessa behind the root before the heavy weapons turned toward the opening.

The sword hummed against his palm. He let it. With his other hand he held the wound closed and tried to put weight on his feet.

To his left, the opening was still clear.

“Now.”

Nessa went first. Ryll caught Drayven under the uninjured arm and hauled him through the opening. Behind them Tovan shouted to someone still among the roots. Drayven tried to turn; Ryll nearly fell with him.

“Keep moving.”

Branches struck his face. The next discharge passed through the place where they had been. He could hear feet behind them, but could not count the people by them.

Well into the night, a Kareth scout found them below the road. He knew the way to the clearing beyond the eastern works. Drayven asked who had sent him.

“Lyrian.”

He held to that name while they lifted him again.

CHAPTER 20

Confrontation and Sacrifice (Part 1)

Yellow-grey light entered through the shattered canopy. Smoke held it above the clearing. Where branches had fallen during the night's fighting, the ground lay bare.

Princess Lyrian walked the edge of the damage. She kept looking down, placing each step before taking it.

Nessa had reached them with Drayven two hours before dawn. Ryll and Tovan came in behind her; both went back to the road after the healers took his weight. Fighters were still arriving in ones and twos. Lyrian had names to ask for and too few answers.

She had felt something ease during the night and wanted it to mean she had helped him. The people carrying him had done work she could see. She kept the two apart.

Three blackened patches spread across the earth. Beyond them, sap ran from split trunks and smelled of copper. The armor's low hum faded when she passed the dead trees, then returned beside a living root. She began to anticipate the gaps and disliked that more than the sound.

The shard from her pendant pulsed against her sternum, still held in the frame Keeper had fitted into the breastplate. The K'hara itself lay buried beneath the citadel. This piece answered it through the damaged ground.

During the night, its rhythm had begun to skip. At first she waited for the missed beat. Now the next arrived too soon or too late, and every few pulses a cold pressure reached past the Celestium.

Her palms were wet inside the gauntlets. Nothing had moved beyond the clearing, yet she kept turning toward it.

She waited through another pulse, trying to separate the dread from what she could see. She had done this often enough to know that waiting would not always give her an answer.

Gavric stood to her right with his Celestium blade drawn. Deep gouges crossed it. Elyra had sealed a burn along his left forearm, but he still held that arm away from his side. Dried blood darkened the cut above his eye.

"The perimeter is holding," he said. "For now."

"How is it holding?" The words came out sharp. She heard herself and loosened her grip on the cradle.

"Debris blocks the east. The western trees give us cover, but they give it to the enemy too. Thirty seconds' warning, perhaps. North is open." He looked that way. "I do not like the north."

"They may use it to draw us out." Drayven stood on her left, one hand near his wounded side. He had reached the clearing two hours before dawn. The bleeding had slowed, but each turn still cost him a breath. "If they hold our attention there, a force in the western trees could get close before we see it."

Gavric looked toward the open ground. "Or they take the route we leave weak because we expect a feint."

"Then keep it watched. But do not put everyone where they can see us."

Lyrian looked between the two approaches. There were too few defenders for either argument to be reassuring.

“They are still trying to reach the mass below the citadel,” Lyrian said. “Now one of its fragments is answering them out here.”

She touched the cradle. It was growing warmer. “Keeper. What is happening to it?”

Keeper took his hand from a living trunk. He watched her through two uneven pulses before answering.

“The buffer is losing coherence.” Keeper watched the Celestium channels. “Each time the star-metal pulls out of rhythm, less of the lattice follows it back. More of the signal escapes the pattern that steadies it.”

“Into me,” Lyrian said.

“Into you, and outward through the armor. I can feel it in the living roots. Others may be receiving it too.”

Elyra looked up from the ward-glyphs she was laying along the perimeter. “How far?”

“Two hundred meters that I can follow. There may be paths carrying it farther.”

“Far enough to follow it here,” Drayven said.

“They may already be following it,” Keeper said. “We should assume they can.”

Gavric looked from the cradle to the gaps in the trees.

“I can put fire along the outer ring,” Elyra said. “The heat will make it harder to aim through. Ice inside it, to catch what gets past. But I will have to hold the two apart as well as keep them standing.” Her fingertips were lit with ward-glyphs. “I am already tired.”

“How long can you hold it?” Lyrian asked.

“An hour against a probe. A full assault? Minutes.”

“Then give us those minutes.” Lyrian felt another pulse through the cradle. She had begun waiting for each one with her breath held.

“I want to try to reach them. Put something they can recognize into the signal.”

Keeper moved closer. “While it is failing?”

“If they can hear the signal, perhaps they can hear something I choose to send.”

“The risk—”

“The buffer could fail. I know.” She glanced at Gavric, then at the fighters behind him. “What would keep it from failing while I try?”

“Keep the signal small. If the Celestium dims further, stop. Before you lose the ability to stop.”

“We cannot hold them here for long. I would rather try while I can still choose what reaches them.”

Gavric looked at her hands. “If it breaks loose, I cannot stand between you and it. This blade will not stop that.”

“I know.”

“I will be here.”

She looked at his burned forearm and the cut above his eye. He had made no promise that the blade could save her. He was standing there anyway. For a few beats the pressure in her breastplate eased and the two rhythms drew closer.

The next beat slipped.

Drayven turned toward the western trees. “I will take a few fighters. Wires, deadfalls, whatever we can set in time. Make them enter where we can see them.” He paused, one hand pressed to his side. “As long as I can hold them.”

“Don’t die doing it,” she said.

“One thing at a time.” He went to gather the fighters.

She laid both hands against the artifact. Heat came through the gauntlets. The Celestium lines brightened near her fingers, then dimmed before the next pulse arrived.

The clearing seemed to press inward.

Beneath her feet, the roots stuttered. Beside her, something beat almost in time with Gavric’s breathing. Elyra’s wards pulled against each other at the perimeter. A warmth receded toward the western trees where Drayven had gone.

Beyond those familiar presences, something gathered.

A regular pressure grew beneath those broken rhythms. She had felt something like it before an attack: pulses close together, then a pause, then more. She tried to count the distance along the paths that still answered.

Closer than the scouts had reported.

“Keeper. Inside two hundred meters, I think.” Her voice sounded thin in her own ears.

Keeper turned toward the trees. “Yes. I can feel them. Minutes, perhaps less.”

Heat shimmered around the clearing as Elyra raised the outer ward. Through it the broken trunks wavered.

Gavric raised the blade he had been holding. Celestium rang above the uneven pulsing. “Formation.”

Lyrian closed her eyes. Heat pressed against her palms. Beneath it, the two rhythms pulled apart.

She began.

She let the pulse catch her breathing and tried to give it a pattern. The return was stronger than what she had sent. She waited, then tried again, holding the thought of the burning city through the next beat.

Her breath shortened. The thought of the city returned as the certainty that it would burn. The boy's death became every death she had failed to prevent. She tried to narrow the signal again, to one thing she had seen.

The Celestium light trembled against her closed eyelids.

She held to what she could remember clearly. Burning wood. The boy's shoulder turning before the blade went in. Bread gritty between her teeth. She tried to send those things without adding the terror of what might happen next.

Then the returning pulse changed.

Something met it. A pressure with a shape she could not follow, holding against her own. She had expected her pulse to return. This moved across it.

She tried to hold her pattern against it.

The answering pressure struck harder. Her body jerked. Heat raced through the inlays as the Celestium dimmed. She wanted to hit back, to force the presence away. The wish arrived so fiercely that she could not tell how much of it had been hers before the contact.

She could not find a place to withdraw to.

"Lyrian." Keeper's voice came from far away. "Less. You must send less."

She tried to draw back. Fear rushed into the space she left, and the next pulse returned harder. She tried again. The channels were almost dark.

She had waited too long.

A sharp vibration tore through the breastplate. The Celestium light broke into separate points. For an instant she felt the pattern pulling together; then it parted, and the next pulse passed through her without anything to soften it.

Sound filled her head.

Grief struck with the force of rage. Fear came with the memory of hands she had wanted to keep holding. She could not follow one feeling before another drove through it. Her muscles locked. White light erased the clearing.

When she could see again, Gavric was three meters to her right. His blade flared white. Light spread from it across his armor, and for a moment she could see every scar in the metal.

His knees bent. He fell before she could speak.

The trees at the clearing's edge lit next. Light ran along the surviving roots and into the trunks beyond them. The broken paths she had felt beneath her feet vanished under one hard note.

Bark split. Steam burst from the exposed wood. Trunks bent away from the clearing and broke, one after another, farther out than she could see.

She hit the ground shoulder first, then hip. A root pressed into her arm. She felt its ridge through the pain and kept her attention there, on the small hard thing beneath her.

The ridge stayed beneath her arm through the next pulse.

The hard note weakened. Here and there, Celestium lines flickered together again. The pulses were still fast, still uneven, but they no longer struck all at once. She lay still and let another pass.

Through dust she saw Gavric on his back. Elyra was already beside him. The western trees had disappeared into the smoke. She could not see Drayven.

“Gavric.” Too little air came with the word. She swallowed and tried again.

“Alive.” Elyra bent over him. “He is breathing.” Her hands moved beneath his scorched armor. “Keep them away from him. I need time.”

Beyond the settling debris, weapons began to hum. Whatever her signal had reached, it had not stopped the soldiers. Now the trees that might have hidden the clearing were down.

They were coming.

She pushed herself upright. Her hand gripped the root too hard; when she tried to ease it, her fingers opened altogether. She waited until she could hold without crushing, then rose. The scattered light in the Celestium had not joined into a steady line.

Ozone caught at the back of her tongue. Beyond the trees, the regular pressure kept moving closer. Elyra’s wards flickered. Beneath her feet, a living root answered the pulse and fell out of time.

She looked at Gavric. Another blast might kill him.

Before the blast, something had answered. She held on to that, though she could no longer be sure whose attention she had caught. The response had hurt her. It had also come from somewhere beyond her own repeating fear.

She needed to reach it again without doing this to the clearing.

“Keeper. Can you repair the buffer? Now?”

“That would require an external Celestium source of sufficient purity to—”

“Gavric’s blade.”

Keeper looked at the fallen sword. A faint light remained in it. “I would have to take apart the structure that makes it a blade. It would never hold an edge again.”

“I know. Can it be done?”

“I think so. The material is the same; the arrangement is different. I can try to join it to what remains of your buffer. It may hold for an hour. Under strain, much less.”

From the ground, Gavric’s voice, rough and strained: “Take it.”

His eyes were open. She crouched beside him.

“It is a sword,” he said. “Take it.”

“That’s not—”

“Your Highness. Please.”

She lifted the sword. Its warmth surprised her. She shifted her hands to balance it and passed it to Keeper.

He took it in both hands. “Several minutes. While I open the damaged lattice, even what little is holding now will be gone.”

“I’ll hold still.”

“You can be still and terrified. The metal will answer the terror.”

“Then what do I hold on to?”

“Any feeling can grow beyond what you can bear. You know the steadier state. Let the feeling come without driving the next pulse harder. I need you to keep finding that while I work.”

Behind Keeper, Elyra bent over Gavric. Outside the ward, wood cracked beneath approaching feet.

The pulse caught in Lyrian’s chest. She wanted to look toward every sound at once.

She unclasped the left gauntlet again and slipped her hand free. Air touched her wrist. She put her feet flat against the earth and attended to the pressure beneath them. The fear remained. She tried to let one breath end before reaching for the next.

The oscillation slowed a little. She waited through a beat that did not become stronger than the one before it.

Keeper began to work.

A sharp crack came from the western trees. Then another. Drayven's traps, she hoped. Closer in, weapons began their high whine.

Keeper bent over the open lattice. She kept her bare hand against her knee and let the next breath come.

She breathed. Fear rose with the next pulse. She felt the earth beneath her feet and tried again.

CHAPTER 21

Confrontation and Sacrifice (Part 2)

Keeper worked for four minutes and thirty-seven seconds. Lyrian lost count before he finished. Beyond his hands, the outer ward wavered under scattered shots. Defenders called to one another along the edge. Once, a trap cracked in the western trees and the firing paused.

Each returning sensation seemed separate from the last. Heat at her sternum. Earth beneath one boot, then the other. She kept finding her own hand against her knee and staying with it until the next pulse passed.

She breathed through the heat. The second rhythm kept catching her pulse, then slipping away. She let it go and waited for her next breath.

The Celestium graft took.

The noise drew back. She could hear Keeper move his hands across the cradle without the sound filling her head. The pulses settled into a rhythm she could follow.

An hour, Keeper had said. Less under strain. She could not know how much of it the next attempt would use.

She turned toward the trees.

Keeper stepped back. He rested a hand on his staff before speaking. "It holds for now. The graft has not stopped the drift. When it gives way, we will have no blade left to try again."

"I want to try again." She touched the artifact. Still hot, but she could leave her hands against it.

"You may get the same response."

"Something answered. It did more than throw my own signal back at me."

"That does not mean it will listen."

"No. But I felt something through the anger. Fear, perhaps. I want to know whose it was." She looked toward Gavric, lying beside Elyra. "And I want them to know what it is costing us to keep trying."

"If they learn what it costs, they may use that against you."

"They are already hurting us." She put her hands against the cradle. "I will try."

She closed her eyes and waited for the pulse.

• • •

Aboard *The Devourer*, the second signal reached the bridge.

Kra'goth lowered the gain on his receiver. The trace still climbed beyond the display. He lowered it again and called to the command platform.

"Commander Xal'tor. Another transmission. The same carrier, but there is a repeated pattern in it."

Xal'tor stood before the command display. Rings spread from the marked Sylvaren position. The receiver could trace the pattern across them, but the meaning fields remained empty.

“Our countermeasure stopped the first one. What has changed?”

“The pattern is steadier. Less scattered across the carrier.” Kra’goth brought up the earlier trace beside it. “The operator may have better control.”

“Or they’ve modified the device.”

“Possibly. The Celestium response has changed too. There may be a second structure supporting it. I cannot tell from here how it was joined.”

Xal’tor watched the two traces. K’hara: the Devouring Light. They had records of what it could do to a user, and of what remained afterward. The steadier line offered him no assurance that the Sylvaren knew how to stop it.

“Strike the position,” Threx said. “We have the location. End the signal and retrieve the fragment.”

“And drive another discharge through the forest beneath it?” Xal’tor asked. “The fragment may survive. We still have to enter what is left to retrieve it. And the K’hara beneath the citadel is connected to it.”

“Better debris than defenders.”

“Not if the debris is still killing your retrieval teams.” The Shaman stepped away from the bridge’s dark edge.

Crystalline threads shone in his robes. They brightened with each arrival of the signal.

“I have studied the offensive patterns for forty cycles. This does not match them.”

“A trick,” Threx said.

“Then let me examine it.” The Shaman faced Xal’tor. “It is repeating a shaped pattern, not simply growing stronger. I have not heard a living operator hold one like this. There may be something in its use we have missed.”

Xal’tor let three seconds pass.

“What is the content of the communication?”

The Shaman closed his eyes. Threads in his robes brightened. “Pain. Loss. A wish for this to stop.” He drew a breath. “There are particular memories in it. I believe the operator is young. Afraid. The fear changes when we answer.”

“An enemy asking us to stop,” Threx said. “Hardly surprising.”

“Someone is holding a connection to the K’hara under fire,” the Shaman said. “I suggest we learn what they want before we make that connection break.”

Xal’tor looked along the stations. One officer had taken a hand from the controls and pressed it against his chest. Another stared at a display that was waiting for an order. A crystalline panel hummed overhead. The signal had reached more than the receivers.

“Keep the connection open,” Xal’tor said. “No orbital strike.” He turned to Threx. “We will listen before we decide.”

• • •

In the clearing, Lyrian waited for the answer to hurt.

The hard returning pressure did not strike again. Something held against her pulse, then eased as she sent the next one. She could not tell whether it was listening or merely waiting.

She sent the weight of the armor. The taste of ash. Friends breathing in the dark before they rose to fight. Each memory brought its own fear with it. She tried to hold the memory steady without making it louder.

The graft strained beneath her hands. She could still feel the two rhythms drawing together after each pulse.

The response changed.

She almost let it pass, expecting another blow.

Longing reached her through the anger. A place that should have been there and was gone. She knew that absence before she could see any shape around it.

For three or four seconds, the clearing lay against another place: cold light, enclosed space, no leaves moving above it. Then the absence opened beneath both. She could not tell how much had come from the sender and how much her mind had supplied.

Her knees bent. The graft flickered and heat spread across her ribs. She pressed her feet against the earth and waited until she could place herself in the clearing again.

A question formed in the returning pressure. What she made of it was: *Who are you?*

She tried to answer with herself. The fear was easy to send. Harder was the wish to lower her hands without leaving the people behind her undefended. She held that through the next pulse.

The pulse crossed hers and returned.

And then the Malisohak assault hit the perimeter.

• • •

The first full barrage struck Elyra's outer ward. Heat rippled inward. She pushed it back toward the trees, and another volley struck before the surface steadied.

Elyra's arms began to shake. Thirty-eight seconds into the barrage, the fire dimmed and went out.

The inner ice caught the next volleys. Cracks branched away from each impact. Elyra held her hands apart, trying to close one break before another reached it.

With the fire gone, she could give what remained to the ice. Light ran from her fingertips into a fracture and stopped halfway across. She tried again. The edge closed, but another piece fell beside it.

The far edge of the ring blurred. She blinked hard and raised her hands.

A section of ice broke open between two roots. Gavric reached it with a plain steel longsword. He had risen while Elyra was holding the ward; she could see the effort of each breath before he set his feet in the gap.

He caught the first trooper at the weapon-arm joint and drove it against the root. The body obstructed the next attacker long enough for Gavric to bring the sword up again.

“The ward won’t hold!” Elyra’s voice, strained to breaking.

“Then it’ll fall,” Gavric said, “and we’ll hold the ground behind it.”

Three concussions came from the western trees. A log crashed through the undergrowth, followed by the glare of a flash-charge. Drayven emerged with one hand pressed to his side and his sword in the other.

“They are coming through one gap,” Drayven said. “It will not stay that way long.”

Behind them, Lyrian held the connection. She could hear Gavric’s rough breathing between the impacts. Elyra’s ward flickered against her eyelids. Warmth moved near the western edge, but she could no longer follow it without losing the answering pulse.

The answering presence remained. Each impact seemed to shake it farther away.

She tried to keep it close.

The answer was steadier than her own signal now. Someone kept returning to meet her, holding a shape she could recognize through the fear. When it wavered she tried to follow, hoping that the effort was reaching more than one listener.

“Stay.” She leaned into the next pulse. A sharp tremor ran through the graft. For a moment the borrowed Celestium lit in separate lines.

She could feel how little still joined them.

The ice shattered. Elyra stumbled backward with her hands still raised, then let them fall.

The Malisohak poured through the gap.

For the next minute and a half, the defenders gave ground around her.

A blow rang against Gavric’s armor. Lyrian flinched and nearly lost the signal. Another struck while she was trying to recover it. Cold tightened her chest; heat followed so closely that she could not separate the two. The Celestium lines kept breaking apart.

Terror came back along the channel. She could not tell whose it had been first. She held the pressure of her bare hand against her knee and waited for the part of the answer she recognized.

When it returned, she answered. The next blow sounded nearer.

Then the graft failed.

A tremor passed through the borrowed lattice and the light went out. Heat drove up her arms. There was no quieter beat after it.

The world went white.

Her muscles locked and her back arched. Light struck through her closed eyes. In the connection, something pressed back with a force she understood as *enough*.

The blast threw her down. When she could see again, defenders were struggling up around her. Malisohak troops had fallen at the breach too. A weapon flashed twice and went dark.

She heard nothing for a moment.

Then a faint answering pulse. The connection had survived.

Something returned along it, small and distinct. She understood it as an acknowledgment: *we hear you*.

She lay on the scorched earth while the armor tightened, warmed, grew heavy, eased. Each change arrived before she could settle into the last. Her fingers would not stay open.

At the breach, soldiers were drawing back. She heard Gavric call to the defenders to hold where they were. Through the fallen ward, she could still see enemy weapons among the trees.

No one lowered a weapon.

She could do nothing but wait through the changes. Between the weight and the next surge of heat, something eased.

For one breath, she noticed only the dirt against her cheek and the sound of someone breathing nearby. She did not know why the other sensations had receded, or when they would return.

Then the cold reached her again.

CHAPTER 22

Confrontation and Sacrifice (Part 3)

For eleven minutes, neither line advanced.

Weapons stayed lit among the trees. No one on either side put a blade away.

Gavric pulled himself upright against a broken trunk. His left arm hung close to his side. He studied the enemy positions while he waited for his breathing to ease.

“Thirty meters back,” Gavric said. “They are making another line. Heavier units behind it.”

Drayven called from the western trees. “Here too. They are waiting.”

“Orders, perhaps.” Keeper sat with his staff across his knees. “Someone answered us. They may be waiting to hear what came of it.”

“And if the decision is to resume the assault?” Gavric asked.

Keeper looked at the fallen ward. “We have very little left to hold them with.”

The artifact pulsed against Lyrian’s sternum. The graft was spent. Each beat reached her without the softening she had briefly regained, tightening her chest before she could draw a full breath.

The answering thread remained. She searched it for the acknowledgment she had felt before. Something still met her there, though it gave her no assurance about the soldiers waiting beyond the clearing.

She could not stop watching the weapons.

A tone sounded from the Malisohak line. She felt it in her teeth. The answering pressure eased, and a figure stepped forward without a weapon.

“They may want to speak.”

“Then let them,” Gavric said. “From there.”

She did not ask him to lower his sword.

He rested its point against a root, keeping the hilt in his good hand.

Crystalline threads caught the light in the approaching figure’s robes. As he approached, the thread Lyrian had been following grew clearer. He stopped twenty meters from the clearing, hands open. Their Shaman, she thought. The one who had been answering.

She tried to send back the same restraint. The cold at her ribs lessened. She watched his hands rather than trusting the relief.

“Keeper,” Lyrian said. “Can you translate?”

“Perhaps.” Keeper watched the approaching figure. “Intent and feeling. Not words. Tell me what reaches you, and I will try.”

They began with what each could recognize. A place lost. A place being destroyed. When Keeper supplied words, he stopped to ask whether Lyrian had felt what he thought she had.

Through the Shaman came the need for ground on which his people could live. Xylos was gone; Lyrian knew its ruin from the cavern record. Now she felt the fear of having nowhere after it.

Keeper understood the next part as a hope that the K'hara could reshape Citoren to sustain them. The hope was fierce. It did not tell her whether the artifact could do what they wanted.

She answered with roots torn from the city walls and the gaps that had opened in the Thal'as. A forest remade for someone else could leave the Sylvaren with no place to live either. She sent the memory of the blast, Gavric falling beside her, and the artifact still hot against her hands.

The reply carried another failure, older than this battle. Lyrian could not follow its details. She felt the Shaman draw back from it, then return to the same warning. Whatever his people had tried, it had cost them users too.

The Devouring Light. She had felt enough of it to understand the name.

She looked at the Shaman's open hands. His soldiers were still behind him.

• • •

The Malisohak assault resumed forty minutes later.

A few units came forward, testing the broken line. Lyrian could not tell whether the order had come from Xal'tor or from someone unwilling to wait for him.

Three shock troops broke through the tree line. Gavric stepped into their path.

Gavric's left hand would not close properly. He held the borrowed steel sword in his right and let the first attacker come near the root before he moved.

His first thrust found the gap beneath a plate. The trooper fell against him. Behind it, the second weapon flashed.

The bolt struck the left side of his chest. Light flared in the damaged Celestium and went out. The plate split. His left arm dropped, and he twisted as though trying to pull breath into that side of his body.

His mouth opened. Lyrian heard no cry.

He cut across the second trooper's throat as he fell. The third slowed beside the bodies, and Drayven reached it before it could turn its weapon.

Gavric fell on his right side. Elyra was beside him before Lyrian reached the root.

Elyra opened the split plate. Her hands stopped for a moment over the burned flesh. Then she pressed them against him and called for cloth. "Help me keep him breathing."

Light gathered beneath her palms, faltered, gathered again. Gavric drew a shallow breath. She waited for the next one before moving her hands.

Lyrian knelt beside him. The weight at her shoulders pulled her down until she had to brace a hand on the ground. "Gavric. Stay—"

"The artifact." He stopped for a breath. "Finish it."

"I'm not leaving you—"

"You are doing what I held the ground for." He coughed. "Princess. Let it be worth something."

Elyra looked up. "I need room." She bent over Gavric again. The light held while he drew another breath.

Lyrian stood slowly. The armor pulled at her shoulders. She let the grief enter the connection without trying to name all of it.

The answering presence did not withdraw. She sent Gavric's broken breath, the effort of waiting for another. She could not know what the listener would make of it.

Keeper watched the next pulse.

He put his staff aside and came to Lyrian.

"The intervals are shortening again," he said. "I do not think we have an hour. Another discharge could travel farther than either of the first two. Into paths we cannot reach from here."

"Another graft—"

"I cannot make another lattice that will hold this drift. The first pulse tore yours apart. The next spent the blade." He kept his eyes on hers. "I can give it a living path. One that changes with it."

"How?"

"Through me, into the Thal'as. I can guide it along the surviving paths, divide it before any one root has to carry too much. I would have to keep changing with the flow."

"You would be the path."

"I know these paths well enough to begin. I know how to let the Thal'as carry me."

"What happens to you?"

He kept looking at her. She wished he would look away.

"I go with it. What I know of the roots, how to hold a pulse, where to let it pass. The work would remain in the network." He paused. "I would not remain here to do it."

"You would be gone."

"It will leave you time."

His fingers touched the artifact. The next pulse drew through them and changed. Lyrian felt it leave her chest by a path that had not been there before.

His fingers began to shake.

Light showed beneath his skin. It spread along his arms and down through his body into the earth. Roots lit beneath the scorched surface, fine branches appearing where Lyrian had thought everything dead.

The shaking reached his shoulders. She reached for him, then stopped with her hand near his sleeve. She could see light through the cloth, through the place where his arm should have hidden it.

Ozone filled her nose. His white hair brightened until she could scarcely look at it. Beneath his hands, the artifact's pulses drew farther apart.

Light ran from him into the roots. The outline of his body thinned where it met those branching paths. Lyrian watched his hands lose their edges and could no longer tell where his fingers ended.

His face was the last part she could follow. The effort had tightened his mouth. He held her gaze until she could no longer see his eyes.

The light subsided. Warm earth lay where he had stood. Beneath it, a slower note joined the Thal'as, spreading along the roots that still lived.

The artifact answered that note. One pulse, then another at the same interval. She waited for the next to strike harder. It did not.

The pressure of the armor eased until she could scarcely feel its weight. She knew that lightness. This time Keeper was not there to ask her what else she felt.

She lowered the hand she had meant to touch him with.

• • •

Elyra had raised the wall before Keeper vanished.

Gavric was breathing more evenly when she took her hands away. She guided a defender's hands onto the folded cloth at his chest, then turned toward the trees. She had nothing left for paired wards. She drew fire across the opening and held it there.

The new attack had begun while Keeper's hands were still visible. Forty seconds from his first touch to the last light leaving him; long enough for another wave to reach the tree line.

Blue-white heat filled the opening. An armored figure approached and drew back. The air above the wall bent the shapes of the trees until Elyra could no longer see how many waited there.

She kept her hands raised. If she lowered them, the opening would be clear.

For ninety seconds, the attackers stayed beyond the heat. Bolts flashed through it. The defenders kept low, and no troops crossed into the clearing.

In the next second, her knees folded. The wall went out.

Drayven caught her beneath the arms. Pain bent him over his wounded side, but he lowered her clear of the stones. Her breathing was shallow. He found a pulse at her wrist and kept his fingers there.

"She is breathing," he said. "Help me."

The wall was gone. The Malisohak remained beyond it.

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Then an order came.

A voice carried from the Malisohak line. The words meant nothing to Lyrian. Along the still-open connection came a pressure she understood as *stop*.

She waited to see whether they would obey.

The nearest troops halted. Their weapons stayed lit, but the barrels lowered. Voices answered farther along the line.

Drayven stayed beside Elyra. Gavric lay where he had fallen, drawing breaths too far apart. Keeper was gone. Lyrian looked from one to the other and waited for the firing to begin again.

She stood in the center of the ruined clearing with the steady pulse against her chest. She had wanted that steadiness. Now she could feel the space around each breath she took.

The artifact remained steady. Her feelings did not disappear, but the next pulse no longer drove them higher. She could feel her own breath end.

No further shot came.

The answering presence changed again. Keeper was no longer there to help her make sense of it. She thought she felt reluctance, and a decision held against it. Xal'tor's, perhaps. She watched the soldiers for confirmation.

She sent nothing more. The connection remained open, with the grief and hesitation still moving through it.

The troops stayed beyond the clearing. For now, what had passed along the channel was enough to keep them there.

She knelt beside Gavric again.

• • •

For weeks, the work was keeping people alive and finding places for them to sleep.

Talks began three days after the ceasefire. Neither side would accept the other's chosen ground, so they met in the ruined clearing.

Elyra woke on the second day. By the fifth she could move without help and took charge of the Sylvaren delegation. She could argue the artifact's behavior with the Malisohak scientists, compare observations, ask what their measurements meant. Drayven went with her. His return had not undone the changes in him. Sometimes a question passed him by and he had to ask for it again. Lyrian still caught him turning toward places where she could see no one. He stayed at the table, checking what he had heard before answering.

The Malisohak asked for the K'hara beneath the citadel and the fragment Lyrian carried. The Sylvaren refused to surrender either. They argued over ground, access to the research, who could decide what was done with the metal. Some meetings ended with an empty chair and no promise to return.

By the end of those weeks they had agreed to a council. Representatives would keep meeting; study of the K'hara and its fragments would be shared, and their use would require joint agreement. Custody would remain with the Sylvaren and Kareth. Malisohak personnel would stay on Citoren as envoys. The wording kept weapons out of their formal role. It did little to settle who would enforce that limit.

"It gives us somewhere to keep arguing," Elyra told Lyrian after one of the meetings. She looked too tired to call that a victory.

Gavric survived. The burns left a broad scar across his chest, and his left arm would never move as it had. Three weeks after the fighting, Lyrian found him sitting up in the healers' ward, eating with his right hand and looking at the ceiling.

"Greenwood," he said, pointing with his spoon. "They used it in those crossbeams. Look. It is warping already."

"You were dead three weeks ago, Gavric."

"Nearly. The ceiling is still wrong."

Lyrian looked up at the crossbeams. One had begun to bow. A small warmth spread through the armor, and she found herself almost smiling. Gavric pointed his spoon at the bend until she agreed to have someone examine it.

• • •

After the ceasefire, the Malisohak withdrew from the upper palace ruins. It took weeks to shore the broken stairs and clear a way down to the sanctum beneath the oldest Eldrin. The main mass lay where Elerion had placed it. Fallen stone lay around it; beneath the rubble, its light still changed.

On a morning in late autumn, they brought Lyrian's fragment back beneath those roots. No one made a speech.

At the head of the stair, Lyrian released the little frame from her breastplate. The empty mount was warm under her fingers. She carried the fragment down the stone steps. Its pulse kept time with the deeper note in the Thal'as. Cool air gathered beneath the roots. Celestium caught the faint light along the sanctum walls.

The Shamans had prepared a cradle of root and Celestium apart from the main mass. She lowered the fragment into it, still within the little frame that had once hung from a chain. A hum passed through the chamber and into her hands; when she released it, the roots continued to answer.

Then she began to remove the Vel'thari.

She worked at the clasps one by one. They were made to open under shaking hands, but hers kept returning to fasten what she had just undone. She made herself leave the next clasp open.

When the breastplate came away, the vibration left her sternum. She waited for another beat against her ribs. The artifact was still pulsing in the cradle, but the armor no longer carried it through her chest.

She set the plate down, then removed the pauldrons and gauntlets. Piece by piece, she worked through the rest of the clasps.

In her underarmor, she could hear her own heartbeat. It seemed too small to account for the effort of standing there. The room had not changed. Root-light still lay across the floor, and a draft moved along the steps.

She waited for the room to reach her more strongly.

Cool air touched her wrists. She held her hands open in it, waiting for the cold to become something she had to answer. It remained cool air.

She closed her fingers. They seemed slow, though she could not tell whether they were slow or whether she had forgotten how an ordinary movement felt. She tried again.

She was sad. Keeper was gone. Gavric could not lift his left arm as far as he wanted. There were streets where the roots would have to be cut out before anyone could rebuild. She knew those things, but they no longer struck together with every pulse. She could think of one, and then another.

She stood beside the empty armor until she stopped waiting for it to answer.

She could still feel the Thal'as beneath the chamber, faint and continuous as it had been before she wore the armor. She listened for Keeper in it. There was no separate voice, no presence she could turn toward. The work he had left in the roots was there. She could not find the person.

Her throat tightened. She let it.

She climbed into the autumn air. Behind her, the artifact remained in the cradle. Ahead, the Eldrin's surviving branches moved above the broken roofs. The deeper note ran through them, but it gave her no answer.

The council would meet again. There were boundaries still contested and uses of the artifact no one had agreed to permit. She had seen what could happen between a pause in firing and an order to begin again.

Later, on the repaired rampart, she watched people carrying wood through the city. A saw rasped below her. Someone argued over a length of timber; farther down the street, a child cried until a tired voice answered.

She waited for the armor to give each sound its weight. Nothing tightened around her ribs. The argument continued below her, words carried off by the wind before she could make them out.

She heard the saw catch in the wood, stop, and start again. The child quieted. A hammer took up its uneven beat.

She stayed a while to listen.

About the Author



M.L. Sebastian writes science fantasy that treats magic as a system worth reverse-engineering. When he's not building fictional worlds with obsessive internal logic, he's exploring the real one with the same analytical curiosity his characters bring to theirs.

Soran'esh is his debut novel.



The forest remembers.

When invaders silence the living network that sustains her people, Princess Lyrian escapes her falling palace in armor she barely understands.

The Vel'thari lets her sense currents hidden in root and stone. It also turns fear into force, until she can no longer be certain where a warning ends and her own panic begins.

Searching for answers, Lyrian descends beneath the ancient trees. The caverns hold fragments of her enemies' history, preserved far from the world where it happened. What she finds may change how she fights them.

But each attempt to use the armor puts her companions at risk. To save her home, Lyrian must learn to work with a power she cannot afford to trust blindly.